

PRACTICING DHARMA IN DAILY LIFE

DISTILLING SHANTIDEVA'S *BODHICHARYAVATARA*

A GUIDE TO THE BODHISATTVA WAY OF LIFE



S“Shantideva’s text is one of the rare texts we have in English translation that is actually poetic,” said FPMT registered teacher and experienced meditator Ven. René Feusi about his newest book, *The Beautiful Way of Life: A Meditation on Shantideva’s Bodhisattva Path*. The book is a distillation of Shantideva’s masterful 8th-century text *Bodhicharyavatara*, also known as *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*.

Mandala spoke with Ven. René in September 2015 and learned how his book *The Beautiful Way of Life*, published by Wisdom Publications, came into existence; how to use it in one’s personal practice; and more about his relationship with the root text.

How did you come to create *The Beautiful Way of Life*?



VEN. RENÉ FEUSI, 2010

I was introduced to Shantideva in 1979 at Kopan Monastery’s November course with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. They would often quote Shantideva’s text – the *Bodhicharyavatara* – and tell the amazing story about his life. This monk that was sleeping a lot and doing not much else, ends up writing this wonderful text. He has always kind of intrigued me.

Then I heard Genden Lamrimpa give a commentary in Dharamsala when I was doing a Vajrasattva retreat in 1981. I also heard commentary on the text from His Holiness the Dalai Lama a few times. And there was the story that Patrul Rinpoche had received the commentary many, many times and wherever he would travel, he’d always teach on the *Bodhicharyavatara*. Also, Lama Zopa Rinpoche once said in Dharamsala that there was a monk that had memorized the *Bodhicharyavatara* and he was traveling around India like a sadhu with only that text in his head. That was his practice. All these things inspired me to be with this text.

In the 1990s, I went to Bodhgaya to do two months’ retreat. I had rented a cabin in Bodhgaya and one of the

texts I had with me with was *Bodhicharyavatara*. It was Stephen Batchelor's translation. While doing retreat there, they started to build a cabin just in front of mine. There were 20 or 30 Indians from early morning into late in the afternoon building and talking, and I started getting quite annoyed and angry. I was supposed to do retreat and was expecting quiet surroundings. I realized I could leave and try to find another place or try to make the best out of the situation. And that's when I remembered Shantideva's chapter on patience.

I read it again and again, and liked it very much, but found that the way it was written was so flowery that I had difficulty following the stream of reasoning. So I said to myself, "Let's attempt to write out what he actually says," taking away all the embellishments. What is his stream of ideas on how to remove anger? That's how I started. It was enjoyable work. I discovered Shantideva's text in a more intimate way. I worked on a few chapters there in Bodhgaya, and over the years, each time I would be in retreat, I would take it up again and do some more of the text.

I went over it many, many times because new translations of *Bodhicharyavatara* would come out. I used at least five different translations to write *The Beautiful Way of Life*, each time seeing if there were some words that would be more appropriate from here or there. I lived at Vajrapani Institute in California for seven years and once showed the director, Fabienne Pradelle, what I had done and she said, "Oh, that's great, you should finish it." Slowly, slowly over the years I finished it. She and another friend, Judith Kondo, went over the manuscript to polish up the English. We worked on it together.

***The Beautiful Way of Life* is an elegant distillation of the *Bodhicharyavatara*, but some people don't quite know how to use it. How might people find it helpful to integrate it into their practice?**

Many of the lam-rim texts we study are either transcripts of oral teachings or structured texts with many outlines. Shantideva's text is one of the rare texts we have in English translation that is actually poetic. It doesn't speak to your mind in the same way as other lam-rim texts. You see, it jumps a little bit all over the place – here and there – and each verse can be a subject of meditation. You can stop after one or two verses and actually reflect on them for quite a long time. It's another approach to the lam-rim; it speaks to another part of your mind.

You cannot really generalize, but what I've found useful is that it works well on its own. If one doesn't want to read a big lam-rim text or if the mind is tired of studying, the poeticism integrates more easily into the mind. I've found it affects the mind differently. It's easier access to the lam-rim than, for example, Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo* or Pabongkha Rinpoche's *Liberation in the Palm of*

Your Hand. If your mind is tired and you're not in the mood to study point by point, taking something lighter like *The Beautiful Way of Life* is kind of a different approach.

The Beautiful Way of Life is a little bit easier than the root text – the *Bodhicharyavatara* – because the translator's job is to stay as close as possible to the original words in the root text. The text was written in the 8th century and so the translations have the cultural outlook of that time. For example, there's *Bodhicharyavatara*'s perspectives on women. I think Shantideva was mostly speaking to monks, so of course in the monastic context he spoke about the ugliness of women's bodies in order to encourage monks to give up attachment to sexual desire. But that doesn't mean the basic idea of giving up sexual desire isn't meant for women as well. I held to the principle that *The Beautiful Way of Life* wouldn't be read *only* by monks. It would be read by males and females, lay and ordained. All of what Shantideva says is valid for everyone – it's not just for monks.

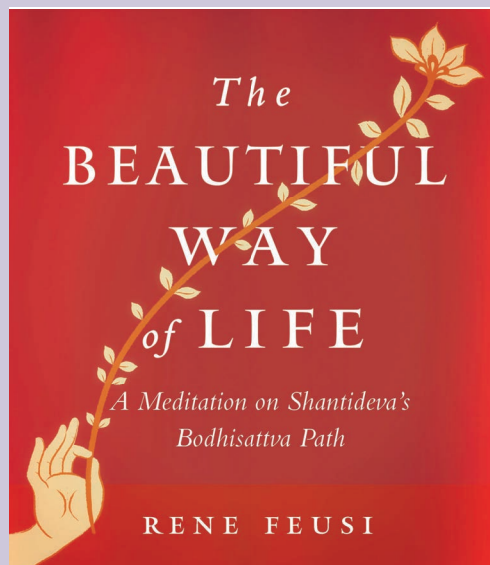
I had a friend who did a retreat on *Bodhicharyavatara*. What she liked to do was have the root text, *The Beautiful Way of Life* and a commentary. She'd go back and forth between these three texts and she found it very helpful because she found it that much more accessible.

I like to just open *The Beautiful Way of Life* and read a few verses from time to time and reflect on the meaning like some people do with the *Bible* or the *I Ching*. At other times, as it's an easier read than the root text, I'll read the whole book from beginning to end in a few hours. Sometimes I just use the first three chapters for my daily prayer, where Shantideva describes the advantage of generating bodhichitta, then leads us into a beautiful seven-limb prayer then makes us take the bodhisattva vows and rejoice in having done so – it's a fantastic way to start the day.

What kind of changes or benefits have you seen in yourself from having this relationship with the *Bodhicharyavatara*?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama every so often says that it might not always be most suitable for beginners to start lam-rim study with guru devotion, precious human rebirth, and impermanence and death. This is good in a Buddhist culture. He says for Westerners, for the smart ones, perhaps it's best to start with teachings on the two truths – conventional and ultimate truth. And then for the others, with teachings on the four noble truths. However, we are mostly trained in our FPMT tradition to start with the lam-rim.

As a lam-rim text, the *Bodhicharyavatara*'s originality is in how it is structured. After having explained the benefits of bodhichitta and cleansing our mind with prayers and making us take the bodhisattva vows, Shantideva intersperses all the lam-rim topics within the framework of the six perfections, and so it is very much a lam-rim text.



Verses from *The Beautiful Way of Life: A Meditation on Shantideva's Bodhisattva Path*

In this excerpt from chapter 1 – “The Excellence of Bodhichitta” – of *The Beautiful Way of Life*, verse numbers correspond to the verse numbers in the root text, Shantideva’s *Bodhicharyavatara*.

Topic: Why [bodhichitta is] beneficial

If wishing to relieve a mere headache of another person
brings immeasurable merit,

what then of wishing to eradicate suffering
and bring happiness to every being?

Do even our fathers or mothers
have such generous intentions?

Do the gods, sages, or even Brahma?

Even in their dreams,
such a wish for themselves cannot be found,
let alone for others!

This intention is an extraordinary jewel of mind
and its birth an unprecedented wonder.

It’s the cause of happiness for beings,
a remedy for their sufferings.
How can its qualities be measured?

If the mere *aspiration* to benefit
excels venerating the buddhas,
what then to say of *engaging* to make everyone happy?

Beings strive for happiness
but constantly create the causes of its opposite.

For those destitute of happiness 29

bodhichitta relieves them from countless sorrows
and fills them with bliss;

where else could such a precious friend be found? 30

Topic: Praising those who practice it

We praise one who repays kindness received; 31
what to say of one who gives freely?

If simply giving a meal is virtuous, 32
what then of bringing all beings to enlightenment? 33

Harboring negative thoughts 34
toward such a bodhisattva
will cause lengthy rebirths in unfortunate realms.

Positive thoughts, however, will create far greater merit, 35
for even in the most acute situations,
bodhisattvas never commit negative deeds
but only do good naturally.

I pay homage to those in whom 36
this sacred state of mind has risen
and who benefit even their enemies.

Excerpted from *The Beautiful Way of Life: A Meditation on Shantideva's Bodhisattva Path* by Ven. René Feusi, published by Wisdom Publications, 2015
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