
Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དབའི་སྣོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སློལ་

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. The *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited will suffice for our motivation. We need to bear in mind that the purpose of taking refuge is to protect us from following a wrong path, while generating bodhicitta protects us from following the lesser path. That will ensure that our practice is a Great Vehicle, or Mahayana practice. [meditation]

As we have just attempted to do in our short session, it would be really beneficial to adopt a regular meditation practice in everyday life. The positive result of that would be that our love and compassion for others will be established and further increased.

In order to further increase a genuine sense of happiness within ourselves we need to work on establishing and further developing our love and compassion, which naturally brings about a genuine sense of peace. The *tong len* meditation practice will ensure that we establish a peaceful state of mind not, along with ensuring that what has already been established becomes firmer and steadier so that it does not decline, and that which has been firmly established to further increase. This is how the meditation practice will help us to obtain a peaceful state of mind, that we all naturally wish for.

So in this way we can see that the conditions for our happiness and wellbeing do not lie entirely with external circumstances, but in developing our inner qualities. The more attention we pay to further developing our inner qualities, the greater our genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness will be. When our mind is in a happy state, it will definitely have a positive effect on our physical health as well; a happy mind naturally brings about a healthy body. That is something that we need to consider.

As mentioned previously, it is essential for us to secure a positive motivation for engaging in the teachings. The optimum positive motivation can be generated by thinking along these lines: In order to benefit all sentient beings, by liberating them from all suffering and establishing them in supreme happiness, I need to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment first. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings based on the explanation of this text composed by the great master Shantideva, and put it into practice well.

The four main sections of the text are the meaning of the title; the translator's prostration; the meaning of the text and the meaning of the conclusion.

1. MEANING OF THE TITLE

In our last session we explained the meaning of the Sanskrit title of the text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, by breaking it up into its parts. *Bodhi* means enlightenment;

sattva means brave or courageous one; *charya* means action; and *avatara* means introduction.

As explained in our last session, it is really worthwhile to contemplate each of these components of the title. For example, *bodhi* or buddha relates the state of enlightenment. So what does that state of enlightenment, or buddhahood actually refer to? By contemplating the meaning of each part of the Tibetan word for it, *jang chub*, we understand that the state of enlightenment encompasses having overcome all adversities and negativities and accomplished all qualities.

Whenever we hear the name Buddha, or relate to the Buddha when engaging in practices of making offerings, paying homage and so forth; it is good to remember that the Buddha refers to a being who had first generated bodhicitta to become a courageous one (*sattva*), and thereby achieved enlightenment, a state in which all defilements have been abandoned and all supreme qualities fully established. He did that for the sole purpose of benefitting all sentient beings.

The practical benefit of contemplating the meaning of even just one word such as 'buddha' is that when we aspire to achieve enlightenment, (as we did with the motivation that we generated earlier) we gain a true sense of what it is that we are aspiring to achieve. When aiming to achieve enlightenment, we are aspiring to achieve a state where we have removed all faults and defilements, and acquired all possible qualities.

Defilements fall into two main categories — deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience. Deluded obscurations i.e. the delusions themselves, are obscurations to achieving self-liberation, whereas the imprints of the delusions are the obscurations to omniscience.

For as long as we have the imprints of the delusions in our mind, in particular the mode of mistaken dualistic appearances, to that extent the obscurations that prevent us from reaching the fully omniscient state of enlightenment, will always be present.

Understanding that the Buddha was an enlightened being, endowed with the characteristics of having overcome all defilements and accomplished all supreme qualities, means that when we do prostrations or make offerings or request blessings from the buddhas, we do so with that understanding. This will help us to purify the negativities of our own three doors of body, speech and mind, whilst receiving the blessings of the Buddha's holy body, speech and mind. That is a very meaningful way of relating to the Buddha. Of course, we could go into more detail here—however let us proceed with the text.

It is essential that we have a proper understanding, right from the beginning, as to what enlightenment really means. Then, when we relate that to our own practice, we will have the understanding that we are aspiring to achieve a state where all adversities or defilements have been completely abandoned and all positive qualities have been completely accomplished.

It is also really important to understand that the state of enlightenment is not obtained instantaneously. Rather, our commitment to avoid each and every tiny non-virtue, while acquiring each every good quality, becomes the

basis for creating the causes for achieving enlightenment. This gradual process will eventually add up to the point where we reach the state of overcoming all faults and acquiring all good qualities. It is essential that we have this understanding.

This is a very pungent instruction for our own personal practice. Whenever we find ourselves intentionally avoiding some negativity or non-virtue, and voluntarily adopting good virtue, we can rejoice and feel encouraged by the fact that we are creating the basic causes for enlightenment. This is no trivial achievement but a very significant one that can be a source of tremendous encouragement for our daily practice.

Every time we make sincere attempts to overcome faults, and acquire positive qualities, we are getting closer and closer to enlightenment; meanwhile creating the causes for a genuinely calmer and more peaceful state of mind. When we sincerely adopt this practice in our everyday life we will find that our mind gradually becomes a little bit more settled and peaceful. In this way we can see how engaging in these practices on a daily basis is really worthwhile as we experience the benefits right now. It is not as if we have to wait until enlightenment to experience positive results from our practice. In fact the positive results we experience now will lead onto obtaining more significant qualities in the future.

Other texts explain that one benefit of presenting the title in Sanskrit is that it is the language used by the buddhas of the three times when they turned the wheel of Dharma. Presenting the title of the text in its original form blesses our mind with the blessed language of the buddhas. Using the original Sanskrit title also leaves a good imprint on our minds to be able to master this language so that we can listen and teach in Sanskrit ourselves. In addition the Sanskrit title indicates the authenticity of the text, showing that it originates from the source of great Indian treatises.

If the title is presented in Sanskrit for these reasons, we might well wonder why it is also presented in Tibetan. The purpose for doing that is said to be to remember the kindness of the Tibetan translators. Without the great lengths that the Tibetan translators went through to translate the text, it would be very difficult for us to access these great treatises now. Only a few scholars in Tibet were able to translate the original Sanskrit into Tibetan, but through their efforts many, many more Tibetans have been able to study those texts, and put their instructions into practice.

The great Tibetan masters have studied, meditated on and practised the instructions on *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* in unbroken succession. They were able to do so because of the translation of this and other Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. Without the translations they would not have been able to study these texts. In my own case, I attempted to study some Sanskrit, but I wasn't able to master it to a point of being able to confidently read and study the Sanskrit versions. I have only been able to make attempts to understand these classic texts because of the availability of the texts in Tibetan.

In fact many of the classic Indian texts don't seem to exist in their original Sanskrit form, but they are all available in

Tibetan and therefore are available for translation into other languages. So the English translations of these texts are based on the Tibetan translations. Therefore it is quite appropriate for us to remember and celebrate the work of the great Tibetan translators; without their work we would not have the English translations that we use today. Apparently some of the classic texts have been translated into Japanese, and perhaps some into Chinese. I have heard that it is not very easy to translate them into Japanese, as one also needs to be a master of classic Chinese. So in this way we can see the significance of remembering the kindness of the Tibetan translators.

On the right of the altar there are over one hundred volumes of Tibetan translations of all of the Buddha's words, which are called the *Kangyur* in Tibetan. On the left we can see the *Tengyur*, the two hundred or so volumes of commentaries by the great Indian masters called, also translated into Tibetan, and hence available to this day.

THE FIRST BUNDLE

Although not presented in the English translation, in the Tibetan text, right after the title there is mention of the *First Bampo*. This relates to the system of applying separate sections in the original text. The word *bampo* comes from the Tibetan word used, for example to describe the bundling of hay into a haystack, or a bunch of flowers when you bundle together individual flower stems. Similarly when parts of the text are bundled together as one section, the collection is called a *bampo*. There is also the term *bamdrol* which refers to a sub-section of a *bampo*, which contain specific number of verses—three hundred verses in some cases and five hundred in another text. The *Heart Sutra*, a short text containing only twenty-five verses, has only one *bampo*.

2. TRANSLATOR'S PROSTRATION

I prostrate to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

There is no literal explanation of this line in Gyalsab Je's commentary, as its meaning is quite clear. However Gyalsab Je does, however, explain the purpose of the prostration as follows:

The purpose of the translator's prostration is to pacify the obstacles to the translation and to identify this text as a commentary belonging mainly to the sutra basket of teachings, although in general it is a commentary on all the baskets of teachings.

Here the word *basket* refers to the collections of the Buddha's teachings.

Pacifying the obstacles to the translation includes the obstacles to the completion of the composition. Thus, the prostration to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas is done as a way to receive their blessing during the translation, in order for the translator to complete the composition successfully.

Because *all buddhas and bodhisattvas* encompasses all supreme beings, paying respect to them is the optimum means to accumulate extensive amounts of merit. It is due to the merit that one possesses that one will have success in whatever one does. Here in the west people talk about luck or fortune. I am not really sure what that means, but

from the Buddhist point of view we need to have a sufficient amount of merit to accomplish anything that we wish to accomplish.

The second part of the commentary explains that prostrating to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas also implies that this text belongs to the *sutra basket* of the Buddha's *teachings*. This is in accordance with a decree by an early king of Tibet that all translations had to begin with a salutation to indicate to the readers the collection of the Buddha's teaching that the text belongs to. For texts that relate to the *sutra basket*, as is the case here, the salutation is to all buddhas and bodhisattvas. The texts that belong to the *abhidharma* collection have a salutation to Manjushri, the deity of wisdom; while those belonging to the *vinaya basket* have a salutation to the Omniscient One meaning the Buddha.

So just from the prostration in the beginning of the text, we can immediately detect that this text belongs to the *sutra basket* of the Buddha's teachings. In addition to the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings, these salutations can also relate to the three trainings; the training of morality, the training of concentration and the training in wisdom. The *sutra basket* relates to the training of concentration, the *abhidharma* to the training of wisdom and the *vinaya basket* relates to the training of morality.

When these three trainings are related to the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings, as in this case, they are called higher trainings to indicate that the trainings surpass the practices of other traditions. Consequently a higher training surpasses other forms of training.

Even though they are presented as higher forms of training, we all have, to a certain degree, some level of morality, concentration and wisdom within ourselves right now. We all practise some form of morality in our present state, and to a certain degree we are all able to engage in meditation, and we all have a certain amount of intelligence or wisdom. So, these trainings are not unfamiliar or irrelevant to us. When we notice that we do have these trainings within ourselves to a certain degree, it encourages us to further develop them.

In fact all of the Buddha's teachings are said to be presented in a practical way, suitable for the capacities of the various dispositions of his disciples. It is said that even if we don't have the actual practice, we may have the seed of the practice, or the potential to practise, or even a similitude of that practice.

For example when we recited the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, that form of taking refuge complemented with bodhicitta is the means for us to adopt all three levels of practice. The very act of taking refuge encompasses some form of morality; when we take refuge very sincerely, with a contemplative mind and strong faith, it encompasses concentration; and our understanding of the benefits of taking refuge, encompasses wisdom. When it is complemented with bodhicitta then that act of taking refuge becomes the ultimate form of refuge which is the Mahayana refuge. Thus the practice of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta encompasses all three levels of practice, and that is why it can be considered a very significant and high form practice. This is how we can relate to the practice in a practical way.

3. MEANING OF THE TEXT

The commentary refers to the *First Bambo*. As that makes it clear that this is the first section of the text, there is no need for further explanation.

The text has two main sub-divisions:

3.1. The preparatory actions for explaining the stages of the Mahayana path

3.2. The actual explanation of the stages

As I have explained previously, the headings themselves can tell us what the actual contents of the text will be. They are presented in a very meticulous and logical manner. Initially the preparatory actions or preliminary actions of the Mahayana path are explained, which is then followed by the actual explanation of the stages of the path.

3.1. THE PREPARATORY ACTIONS FOR EXPLAINING THE STAGES OF THE MAHAYANA PATH

This section of the text has three subdivisions:

3.1.1. Homage

3.1.2. Pledge of composition

3.1.3. Humility and the reason for joyful composition

3.1.1. Homage

The homage has three subdivisions:

3.1.1.1. The purpose of paying homage

3.1.1.2. Summary

3.1.1.3. Meaning of the words

3.1.1.1. The purpose of paying homage

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the purpose of paying homage thus:

By expressing the qualities of special objects and going for refuge, one comes to be understood as a holy being, and the obstacles to the composition of the treatise are pacified. In the end, one attains definite goodness and other disciples will also follow this example. As a result, they too will achieve all accumulations of goodness.

It is good to understand the significance and relevance of this presentation. The statement *by expressing the qualities of special objects and going for refuge, one comes to be understood as a holy being*, contains a great truth. We all regard Shantideva as a great master and holy being, so it is clear that as a result of his respectfully paying homage to holy beings, he in turn came to be regarded as a holy being himself. Thus, when one takes sincere refuge in a holy object and practises the commitments of refuge, we can understand the positive outcome will be that one will attain the state of becoming a holy being oneself.

When *the obstacles to the composition of the treatise are pacified* then all obstacles during the composition will be removed, and *the end* result is that *one obtains definite goodness and other disciples will also follow this example*. And *as a result they too will achieve accumulation of goodness*. In short, paying homage encompasses a twofold benefit, i.e. benefit for oneself and benefit for others.

This is in accordance with the practice of all the great holy and noble beings. In whatever activity they undertake, they first take refuge in the Three Jewels and a particular deity they have strong faith in, such as Tara, or

Avalokiteshvara and so forth. It is customary for all holy beings to pay homage before they engage in any activity.

Recently I heard the national anthem of Sri Lanka and, if I am not mistaken I thought I heard the word *namo* at the beginning of the anthem. As I understand *namo* means salutation, and because Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country I assume that it is a salutation or prostration to the Buddha, which is quite significant to have in a national anthem.

3.1.1.2. Summary

1ab. To the tathagatas possessing the dharmakaya, their children

And to all who are suitable for homage I prostrate respectfully.

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Shantideva prostrates to the Triple Gem and all others worthy of homage.

3.1.1.3. Actual meaning of the words.

In Tibetan, the Sanskrit word *Sugata* is translated as *de sheg*. *Sugata* is comprised of two words, *su* meaning 'great bliss' and *gata* means 'gone or completely gone beyond'. So the meaning of *sugata* is that by relying on the blissful bodhisattva path, one obtains the result of the ultimate enlightened state, which is a state where one has gone completely beyond cyclic existence.

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on this section by stating:

The term *sugata* relates to abandonment and realisation.

Here, *realisation* particularly relates to *dharmakaya*, the truth body of a buddha.

Gyaltsab Je then presents the *three qualities of excellent abandonment* in the form of analogies.

- Similar to a person possessing a good body, if one has exhaustively abandoned the afflictive obscurations, then one has gone to the good or beautiful.

When one has exhaustively abandoned afflictive obscurations then one has gone to the good or beautiful stage of enlightenment.

- Similar to having completely purified a contagious disease, one has gone beyond falling into cyclic existence through the power of the afflictions.
- Similar to a well-filled vase, having gone to all and thus having gone to bliss, through having exhaustively abandoned the non-afflictive ignorance.

Next, Gyaltsab Rinpoche explains the meaning of the word *sugata* in relation to the Tibetan word *shegpa*.

[*Dewa* or] bliss is referred to as good, and [*shegpa* or] 'gone' means to have become the living example of that.

Then Gyaltsab Je states:

The three [qualities of excellent abandonments] respectively distinguish a non-Buddhist who is free from attachment, from a stream enterer [or once returner], and a Hinayana arhat.

That covers what are called the excellent abandonments.

In general there are three particular types of abandonments: newly abandoned; abandoned to the point where it never reoccurs again; and exhaustively abandoned.

Gyaltsab Je's explanation of the three types of *excellent realisation* reads:

Having gone to bliss because of 1) directly understanding the suchness of the two selflessnesses; 2) having stable understanding; and 3) understanding all. Respectively these distinguish the three kinds of persons as well.

Then the first two lines of the root text are discussed.

Earlier, the word *sugata* was explained in terms of the Tibetan word *de sheg*, meaning *bliss* and *gone* respectively. So when the verse reads *to the tathagatas*, it is referring to the qualities of a buddha or enlightened ones, who are endowed with excellent abandonments and excellent realisations.

Next the commentary refers to the words *possessing dharmakaya*. The first line of the verse refers to the Buddha Jewel.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

These lines show the praise to the Buddha Jewel.

Next, Gyaltsab Je's states that:

The dharmakaya is the naturally pure sphere free from all stains, which is the Dharma Jewel, and those possessing it are the ones gone to bliss.

The dharmakaya is the naturally pure state free from all stains which is Dharma Jewel. This refers to the truth of cessation within the Buddha's continuum. Having first presented the definition of the dharmakaya, i.e. that it is naturally pure from all stains which is the Dharma Jewel, Gyaltsab Je then goes on to explain that *those possessing it are the ones gone to bliss*. Thus the first line encompasses all three jewels, *tathagatas*—the Buddha jewel; *possessing the dharmakaya*—the Dharma jewel; and *their children*—the Sangha jewel.

As the commentary reads:

The first¹ and second² terms also contain the two form bodies of a buddha, and the second term also represents the truth of cessation and the truth of the path of a bodhisattva. Hence, all Buddha Jewels and Mahayana Dharma Jewels are the object of prostration.

Children refers to superior bodhisattvas; with their inclusion the Triple Gem is complete.

Here we need to explain why *bodhisattvas* are referred to as *children* or, more literally, the sons of the buddhas. This is in accordance to ancient royal system in India where the king's son, the crown prince, is recognised in the social hierarchy as the one who will be entrusted with the sovereignty of the kingdom as well as the key to the treasury. In other words, the king's son, who is of the lineage of the king himself, is the one who will be entrusted with the most valuable assets of the kingdom.

Using that analogy, the son or the children of the buddhas are the bodhisattvas who hold the complete

¹ Tathagatas

² Dharmakaya

lineage of the Buddha's doctrine. Just like being entrusted with the key to the treasure vault, through their realisations they hold the key to the knowledge of the Buddha's teaching, which leads to enlightenment. As the Buddha in his physical form has passed into nirvana, it is the bodhisattvas who are preserving and maintaining the Buddha's teaching, and causing it to further flourish.

Just like the crown prince holds the lineage of the king, the bodhisattvas hold the complete unmistakable doctrine of the Buddha. Just as the crown prince assumes and continues the work of his father when the king reaches old age or passes on, bodhisattvas establish the doctrine of the Buddha and cause it to flourish in the minds of other sentient beings.

Gyalsab Je concludes his commentary on *The Meaning Of The Words* with:

Shantideva prostrates respectfully with body, speech and mind to them, and to all others worthy of prostration, such as abbots, preceptors and so forth.

The commentary further explains, [this part is missing in the translation] that at the end of the second line in the first verse of the root text, there is the Tibetan letter *te*, a continuative particle which indicates that there is something else to follow. If we were to use a continuative particle such as 'having' in the English translation, then the verse could read, 'Having prostrated respectively to the tathagatas possessing the dharmakaya, their children, and all suitable for homage', that then would indicate that something else has to follow the prostration. It is similar to saying, 'Having washed, I will take my meal'. If you just say 'I have washed' then that in itself doesn't indicate another action to be followed. But if you say 'Having taken a shower...', then that indicates an action to be followed after the shower.

This Tibetan continuative particle *te* is also used in the offering prayer *Lama sang-gyā lama ch'ö, D'e-zhin la-ma ge-dün-te, Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-te*, which implies that something else is to follow that. However there is nothing that follows after the mention of lama. So that's why there are some teachers who say that rather than saying, *Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-te* it is better to say *Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-ny*. That is because the *nyi* has the connotation of referring to only the lama himself. Nevertheless the word *te* is used in the actual prayer.

The parts up to now in the text have been quite technical and perhaps a bit tedious. However, because the explanations are presented in the commentary, we need to cover it. It has its place and purpose, so it is good to have an understanding of it. Henceforth the explanations in the text will be more straightforward and easy to follow.

After this evening, you might, at the very least, have a better understanding of what the word Buddha refers to and what a bodhisattva actually means.

Another thing that may be relevant and practical is the significance of doing prostrations. The act of prostration to holy objects accumulates the merit to be able to successfully engage in whatever activity we choose.

As the great master Potawa mentioned in one of his works: Don't rely too much on humans, rather make

strong prayers to the enlightened beings and deities. I think he is making a great point there. The deity can be whatever enlightened deity one has a strong connection with.

Just recently someone mentioned to me how making strong prayers to Tara has been really helpful in their life in times of difficulty or problems. He is an older person who helps other elderly people. He told me how one of the people he was helping scolded him a lot, which was really very uncomfortable. It was hard to confront this elderly person to try to stop that abuse, so, he said, 'In desperation I started to pray to Tara, and recited some mantras, which actually started to help my own mind'. Apparently the old man who had been making comments such as, 'Don't come near me again', so he was just sitting in a corner. But a little while after the volunteer started reciting the Tara prayers the elderly man called out saying, 'So you are not coming towards me are you?' And he replied, 'well, if you want I could come near you again' If you are happy I will come', and the old man said, 'Please do come over'. So it seems that conflict was immediately appeased by praying to Tara and reciting those prayers.

Extracts from *Entrance for the Child of the Conquerors* used with the kind permission of Fedor Stracke

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