
Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

བྱང་ལྷོ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ་

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26 February 2013

We can now engage in our meditation practice. The motivation that we generated in the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited will suffice as our motivation for this practice.

The first two lines of this prayer identify the objects of refuge. In the Tibetan version the first line reads *To the Buddha, the Dharma and the highest assembly*; the **Buddha** relates to the supreme guide; and as this is a Mahayana refuge, the **Dharma** encompasses the truth of the Mahayana path and the Mahayana truth of cessation; while the **highest assembly** specifically indicates the Mahayana Sangha. It is because the Sangha is regarded as a highest or supreme assembly, that making offerings to them is considered to be a highly meritorious deed.

In the lam rim teachings, refuge is presented in four categories: identifying the objects of refuge; explaining the causes of going for refuge; the manner of going for refuge; and having taken refuge, the stages of training. These are really significant points to bring to mind whenever one takes refuge.

The second line of the verse in Tibetan, *I go for refuge until I am enlightened*, indicates the duration of going for refuge. As it is the Mahayana refuge, one goes for refuge until reaching the complete state of enlightenment. In the common refuge, such as when one takes the lay person's vows, it is going for refuge until the end of one's life. The *I* indicates the individual person who is going for refuge, and *go for refuge* indicates the objects of refuge and the manner of taking refuge, intact with the two causes for taking refuge.

Thus, going for refuge implies that the **two causes for taking refuge** are intact. The first cause is to have unbearable **fear** of taking rebirth in the lower realms in particular, and experiencing the sufferings of cyclic existence in general. Out of this fear arises the second cause, which is **wholehearted reliance** upon the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels.

The **manner of taking refuge** has four points outlined in the lam rim teachings are: recognising the qualities of the objects of refuge; recognising the differences between the objects of refuge; going for refuge with acceptance; and abandoning going for ultimate refuge in other objects. These points are implicitly indicated in the prayer as well.

The main point is that this one verse of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta encompasses a complete and really profound practice. Reciting this verse and contemplating its meaning is, in itself, a meditation practice. Treating it as a mere preliminary formality and assuming one is going onto some higher form of practice afterwards is completely missing the point. Without the basis of taking refuge wholeheartedly, with the complete understanding of what refuge and generating an altruistic mind involves, there is no real practice.

We need to consider the reason why this is such a profound practice. At an individual level we want to be free from the miseries of unfortunate rebirths and the shortcomings of

samsara in general. Without obtaining that freedom ourselves we cannot possibly benefit all other beings. So our primary concern must be adopting the best methods to free ourselves from the miseries and sufferings of the lower realms in particular, as well as the suffering of samsara in general. How we do that is solely dependent on taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Only these objects of refuge give us the methods to free ourselves from cyclic existence.

The second half of the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* indicates the generation of bodhicitta. In *from the virtuous merit that I collect*, the *I* indicates the individual person who is collecting the merit. The *merit* is the merit one accumulates specifically from generosity, morality and meditation. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has indicated on several occasions that using the Tibetan word *tsok-nam kyi* which includes both accumulations, rather than *sonam kyi*, which identifies only merit, would be much more meaningful as it encompasses both the collection of wisdom, as well as the collection of merit. That, as His Holiness explains, will encompass far more virtues, and also reminds us of the importance of engaging in both accumulations. The virtue that comes from both accumulations thus serves as a substance for generating the altruistic mind of bodhicitta. As you may recall, during initiations and so forth, it is customary to bring a small offering when taking the bodhisattva vows, to represent the bodhicitta substance. Here the virtue from the two accumulations serves as a supreme substance for generating bodhicitta.

In the last line, [here the English translation corresponds exactly to the Tibetan]— *to be able to benefit all sentient beings*, indicates the purpose for taking refuge which is to benefit other sentient beings. Those who are familiar with the definition bodhicitta will recall the two aspirations that are needed to qualify as bodhicitta — the aspiration to achieve enlightenment and the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings.

In the words *may I attain the state of Buddha to be able to benefit all sentient beings*, the *state of Buddha* identifies the aspiration to achieve enlightenment, while *to benefit all sentient beings* identifies the aspiration to benefit others. So the combination of these two aspirations qualifies bodhicitta as the supreme altruistic mind. The words *may I attain* indicates generating that specific aspiration in the form of a very strong wish. In one of the commentaries on Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, called *Clear Meaning*, it explains by quoting a sutra that bodhicitta is developed in the nature of generating a strong wish. Amongst the twenty-one commentaries on Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, the most supreme one is said to be *Clear Meaning*, composed by Indian master *Haribhadra*.

Thus the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* suffices for our motivation when it is based on having the full knowledge and understanding of what it encompasses. I'm exhorting you not to forget these points and keep them firmly in mind. The reason why I remind you of these points again and again is because taking refuge and generating bodhicitta is essential and crucial for any practice to become meaningful.

Now we can engage in the meditation practice. [*Meditation*]

In our last session we covered the homage, so what are the objects of the homage? They are the Three Jewels, and all others worthy of prostration, such as abbots, preceptors and so forth.

1.2. Pledge of composition

The pledge of composition has four sub-divisions:

- 1.2.1. Identifying the subject
- 1.2.2. Rejecting the fault of self-creation
- 1.2.3. Rejecting repetition
- 1.2.4. Identifying the purpose, essential purpose and relation

1.2.1. Identifying the subject

The relevant words of the root text are:

1c. ...to the discipline of the tathagatas' children

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

This is a compendium that contains all the stages of the path that cause one to achieve enlightenment, such as the practice of the perfection of generosity and so forth, that were engaged by the buddhas and bodhisattvas upon initially generating the mind of enlightenment.

The order of the lines in Tibetan is different from the English translation we are using. As the commentary explains, *tathagatas* indicates the buddhas, and *children* indicates the bodhisattvas. So *generating the mind of enlightenment* specifically indicates the bodhicitta that has to be developed. So developing bodhicitta and then engaging in the *practices of the perfections of generosity and so forth*, leads one to that ultimate state of buddhahood.

The word *discipline* refers to engaging in the practices such as the perfection of generosity and so forth after having generated the mind of enlightenment.

Here we need to understand that the *perfection of generosity and so forth* implies the practices of the six perfections such as morality, patience, joyous effort, enthusiasm, meditation and wisdom, which will be presented individually in later chapters. By engaging in these practices bodhisattvas reach the ultimate state of enlightenment. Even though the literal translation of *dom* is *discipline* or *vow*, as used in this translation of the root text, the word *dom* has the connotation of a *compendium* as used in the commentary.

Thus, Shantideva's text is a compendium that contains all the stages of the path that cause one to achieve enlightenment

1.2.2. Rejecting the fault of self-creation

This is covered in the words:

1cd. This introduction ... according to the teaching.

In explaining these words, Gyaltsab Je poses a hypothetical question to Shantideva:

Have you not made it up yourself? Who is supposed to believe in this?

As a response to that Gyaltsab Je goes on to say:

There is no fault of self-creation, this introduction to all the stages of the Mahayana path is according to the explanation of the scriptural teachings of the Buddha.

This is a rejection of the fault of self-creation.

1.2.3. Rejecting repetition

Again Gyaltsab Je raises a hypothetical question in his commentary:

Yes, one generates realisations in dependence on the scriptures, but to what end compose this text?

In other words: what reason is there to compose this text? The response is in these words in the root text:

1d. I shall formulate in brief...

Then, in accordance with the root text, Gyaltsab Je indicates Shantideva's response:

There is no fault of repetition because I explained the teachings in a condensed way so that the meaning of the scriptures can be easily realised.

These few lines contain a very significant point that indicates the great kindness of Shantideva. As indicated here there is no repetition of other texts as this composition is *formulated* in a *condensed* or *brief* form. We need to derive from this how incredibly kind Shantideva has been to compose a text that condenses all of the essential points of the Buddha's teachings.

As the opening hypothetical question indicates, *one generates realisations in dependence on the scriptures*. This, of course, is true. One can generate realisations in dependence on the scriptures, which, as the Buddha's own words, are stainless and faultless. However, the reality is that there are so many volumes of text of the Buddha's words that it would be virtually impossible to even find the time to read all of them. That is because we are living in degenerate times. Our life span is short, we lack a significant amount of wisdom and we lack enthusiasm or joyous effort, and on top of that, with our dull intellect we are quite lazy!

To re-emphasise that point, the reality is that we are living in degenerative times where our life span is short in general and not fixed, which means that death can occur at any time. We also lack wisdom, enthusiasm and on top of that we are lazy. This indicates that even if we were to find the time to read the Buddha's words, it would be hard for us to derive their entire meaning. Nor do we have the capacity to condense these words into a manual of practices that extracts the essential points. Thus Shantideva's kindness is limitless, as illustrated by his presentation of this text which contains the essential points of all of the Buddha's teachings in a condensed form.

As mentioned in the past, the teachings on the *Prajnaparamita* (which means the wisdom gone beyond) are contained in four thick volumes. It is virtually impossible for us to try to read and understand all of that, and then to condense it into a set of practices. Hence, the relevance of this compendium compiled by Shantideva. As indicated here, by relying on Shantideva's text we can easily realise the meaning of the scriptures.

1.2.4 Identifying the four, purpose and so forth

First Gyaltsab Je identifies the subject which is:

The Mahayana path and its result are the subject

Secondly, Gyaltsab Je mentions the purpose:

Then to ultimately attain enlightenment in dependence on this is the essential purpose.

The purpose can be divided into the initial purpose and the ultimate or essential purpose. The initial purpose is to understand the meaning of the text and the *essential purpose is to achieve enlightenment*.

The third point is the relationship between these two purposes, which is, as Gyaltsab Je explains:

...that the later does not come about with the earlier...

Here *the later* means that the later part of the text or subject is *dependent* on the *earlier* explanations.

The final point is the purpose of making the pledge, which is so that the composition will be carried all the way through to its conclusion.

It is customary for the great scholars to make a pledge to complete their composition. From this we can understand that once we make a promise it is important to keep that promise and fulfil it.

1.3 Humility and joy in composition

This section has three sub-divisions:

1.3.1. Humility and not written primarily for the purpose of others

1.3.2. The reason for joyful composition

1.3.3. Expressing that it becomes meaningful for others of the same fortune

1.3.1. Humility and not written primarily for the purpose of others

The Tibetan word for *humility* has the connotation of letting go of one's pride. This heading is indicating that the composition was not intended to instil pride but rather the opposite - letting go of one's pride.

The first two lines of verse two relate to this heading:

2. *I do not express anything that did not exist earlier
And I also do not possess poetic proficiency.*

As a way to explain these two lines Gyaltsab Je raises another hypothetical question:

If it was written according to the teachings of the Buddha, and one needs to attain realisations in dependence on the teachings of the Buddha, why then did you compose this text?

The answer to the hypothetical question is presented as if Shantideva himself was responding:

There are two reasons why I have not written this treatise for those who can easily realise the meaning of the subject matter by depending on the teachings of the Buddha:

This is indicating that the treatise was not intended for people who could easily realise the meaning of the subject matter by depending on the teachings.

The two reasons are:

This text does not express anything that is not already taught in the scriptures.

Here Shantideva is posited as saying 'I've not presented anything that has not been explained by the great masters such as Asanga and so forth, who composed great treatises on the Buddha's words'. Again, this is indicating his great humility.

The second reason is:

Although there is no difference in meaning, I also do not have the poetic proficiency to be able to make changes to the words according to their heaviness, lightness, increase and so forth.

Other treatises are written in very poetic ways, using elegant words with subtle meanings, as do some of the scriptures of the Buddha which have a lot of poetic analogies. Here Shantideva is implicitly indicating that he has overcome pride in two respects: pride in understanding the meaning of other sutras, which is saying, 'I have not presented any extra meaning here which has not been presented before'; and pride in relation to quality of his words, saying, *I do not have poetic proficiency*. These are the two reasons why the text was not written for the purpose of others.

There can also be another implication in the words *it was not written primarily for the purpose of others*, which is that this treatise is not intended for those who assume that they can

gain realisations without relying on authentic sources of the Buddha's words and the great masters of the past. There are those who feel attracted to treatises that are written in a very poetic way, regardless of their contents. Shantideva implicitly indicates that this is not the purpose of the treatise. That is my recollection of how His Holiness explained it. If you have a copy of the treatise of those teachings, you can refer to that, but that's how I remember it.

Then having mentioned the explicit and implicit reasons why the text was not written for the purpose of others, the next question is, 'If there is any purpose, then what is it?' This is covered in the next section.

1.3.2. The reason for joyful composition

In essence this is saying, 'It is not that I don't have any purpose for composing this text, as I do have great reasons for a being joyful about this composition'.

The root text states:

- 2cd. *Therefore my intent was not for the purpose of others.
I composed this to acquaint my own mind,*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary essentially indicates that Shantideva is saying:

There is a reason why I composed this treatise. It is for acquainting my mind, so that what I understood earlier does not decrease but increases.

This is a very significant point for us to consider, and it is a personal instruction for us as well. As Shantideva indicates, he composes this treatise *to acquaint* his *mind* with whatever he has *understood* from the Buddha's teachings in the past, so that it *does not decrease, but further increases*.

I try to remind students that it is essential to preserve the understanding we have already gained in the past, and reflect upon it again and again as a way to increase our knowledge. Sometimes people learn something and then put it aside, and go off to find something new, without utilising what they have gained from the earlier teachings. So we need to be mindful about avoiding this.

Another point of personal instruction is that the way to ensure one's understanding and knowledge do not to decrease, and to enable it to increase further is to acquaint one's mind with those teachings again and again. That is the only way to ensure our understanding does not decrease and further increases.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary goes on to explain that:

The reason for using the determiner *this* is to indicate either that the text is already complete in the master's mind, or that he is composing it, and that it is not yet complete.

Saying that *the text is already complete in the master's mind* describes the way in which Shantideva composed the text. We would write a few paragraphs, and then search for other material, and incorporate that and then go onto the next chapter and so on. We have to find the resources as we go along. In this case, however, Shantideva already had the full understanding and knowledge in his mind before commencing his composition.

More specifically, having that knowledge already in his mind definitely indicates that through his earlier studies and practices Shantideva had gained a full understanding of the Buddha's teachings. He was endowed with that understanding in his mind before engaging in the composition.

In relation to this, the qualities of a scholar are said to be three-fold: they are great masters of debate; they have great knowledge and they are masters of composition.

Being a **master of debate**, means that having removed all mistaken views, there are no faults in their understanding of the Buddha's words or teachings. Being a **master of knowledge** refers to having clear and unmistakable understanding of the Buddhadharmā. Being a **master of composition** means having the quality of ensuring that the doctrine, i.e. the Buddhist teachings, do not decline but remain for a long period of time. The teachings explain that of these three qualities the quality of composition is the most supreme, because it ensures that the knowledge does not decline but remains for a long time to benefit many.

I have often encouraged people to write down their experiences. If they want to write a book, I encourage them to do so. From a practical point of view others will appreciate what has been written and can learn from it. If someone with knowledge keeps it to themselves, then their knowledge will die with them, as there will be no record of their knowledge or experiences. So we can see that, even from a conventional point of view composing and writing books is a good deed; it survives the person and remains for others to appreciate in the future. Also there can be financial benefits from writing books, as many authors do.

With respect to Shantideva's composition, we can see that Shantideva definitely had that greater purpose and intention in mind. He composed this text as a way to benefit beings for many generations, just as we are now doing.

To explain a further point Gyaltsab Je poses another hypothetical question:

Shantideva composed the treatise for the purpose of self. If he did not understand it, then he was unsuitable to compose the treatise; if he understood it, then that in itself is enough to meditate on. So what need is there then to compose the text?

This is a reasonable question to ask even though it is a hypothetical one. It also indicates that without having understanding, there is nothing to meditate on! This hypothetical question is raised as an introduction to the next two lines of verse:

*3ab. To familiarise with virtue and the strength of my faith,
Initially this will increase them.*

Gyaltsab Je answers this question from Shantideva's perspective:

I composed the treatise to familiarise my mind in an uninterrupted manner with the extensive virtue that I entered into earlier. By putting it in the form of the treatise, it also increases this mind more and more.

Hence, by composing the treatise through the force of my faith, wisdom and compassion, all three of these will initially increase in my continuum.

So the reason for being joyful about having composed this treatise is that *my faith, wisdom and compassion, will initially increase in my continuum*. The word *initially* also has the connotation that:

... in dependence on that, others of equal fortune as me to see this treatise, will also understand it.

That is also implying that while it helps to increase the virtue in Shantideva's own mind through acquaintance with it, others who also have the fortune to see it will also understand this treatise.

1.3.3. Expressing that it becomes meaningful for others of the same fortune

This particular point is indicated in the next two lines:

*3cd. Should others of equal fortune to myself
See any of this, it will be meaningful for them.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

The purpose of others is also definitely accomplished, because when other Mahayana practitioners of fortune equal to mine see this text, it will become as meaningful to them as it is for me.

Here we can see the great extent of Shantideva's kindness and compassion and the consideration that he has for other beings. As we relate to the text we will begin to see the extent to which he has benefitted others. Of course, as all great masters of the past have agreed Shantideva was not only a great scholar and master, but a great, noble and compassionate being. The main point here is the humility and great joy with which Shantideva begins this composition.

There is a two-fold meaning in these lines: on one hand Shantideva adopts humility, which counteracts pride, and on the other hand, he finds great joy in composing the text. We need to reflect on these two points with respect to both our study and practice, and our everyday life. We need to be very mindful of protecting ourselves from the two extremes of pride on the one hand and despondency or low self-esteem on the other. These two are said to be the main obstacles that prevent one from gaining knowledge in the first place and then being able to maintain that knowledge and practice.

If one has great pride, then that will definitely prevent one from obtaining knowledge from authentic sources. The assumption that one knows everything and there's no-one better than me and so forth will prevent one from gaining more knowledge from others. Whereas the other extreme of being despondent, also prevents one from developing further. Feeling despondent is actually another form of laziness, in that that comes in the aspect of feeling 'I am not capable of doing that', which means that one does not engage in gaining knowledge. Adopting a sense of humility and having a great joyful mind overcomes these two extremes, because they encourage us to adopt the practices and study and so forth.

Overcoming pride and adopting humility and having a joyful mind aren't just related to the composition of the text. It is also a way to benefit others of equal fortune. This is specifically indicated in the text. Thus there is a two-fold benefit – for oneself and others.

We can often see these two extremes being displayed. There are times when one walks tall with an air of superiority: 'I know everything; I am the master of all'. Then there are other times when one curls up in a corner thinking, 'I don't know anything, I am worthless'. These are important points to reflect on during the course of our whole life. If we wish to lead a meaningful life, then we need to ensure that we protect ourselves from these two extreme attitudes.

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

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26 February 2013 week 3