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# Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྣོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

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As was extensively explained last week, the taking refuge and generating bodhicitta prayer can suffice as our motivation. Bringing to mind the meaning of that prayer is the best way to generate a positive motivation for the meditation practice. [meditation]

When a practice is preceded by the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* then it becomes a very profound practice indeed. In meditation one makes an attempt to keep a focused mind, not just with a single-pointed focus but with the residue of that understanding of having taken refuge and developing the altruistic mind of bodhicitta. Then our focus on the object of the meditation will be encompassed by the great virtues of that earlier practice.

The lam rim tells us that refuge is the entrance to the Buddha's doctrine while generating the altruistic mind of bodhicitta is the entrance to the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle practice and path. So we can see the importance of this practice.

## 2. THE ACTUAL EXPLANATION OF THE STAGES OF THE PATH

This is sub-divided into two categories:

- 2.1. Exhortation to take the essence of the basis with its freedoms and endowments
- 2.2. The method for taking the essence

### 2.1. Exhortation to take the essence of the basis with its freedoms and endowments

The relevant line from root text is:

*4a To find such freedoms and endowments is extremely rare.*

Here we need to recall the presentation of the precious human birth in the lam rim teachings. I would like to explain the topic of the precious human rebirth as presented in the lam rim, however that would take too much time. Nevertheless it would be good for those who have received the lam rim teachings in the past to apply your understanding here. Specifically the lam rim presentation has three main points: identifying the precious human rebirth; the rarity of the precious human rebirth, and the ease with which it can be lost. This line from the text relates to identifying the precious human rebirth and how it is extremely rare.

In the Tibetan word *dal-jor*, the first syllable *dal* has the connotation of being free from certain conditions, while the second syllable, *jor*, relates to conducive conditions, more specifically to the conducive conditions for practising the Dharma. Amongst the ten endowments, five are in relation to oneself and five are in relation to other factors. These will be presented later on.

So a precious human rebirth is identified as being a human rebirth that is free from certain adverse conditions and endowed with certain good conditions, and it is this combination of conditions that enables us to practise the

Dharma. When we relate to the precious human rebirth in this way, we can see that it has a more profound meaning than any ordinary human rebirth.

If we can immediately relate whatever teaching or practice that is being presented to the lam rim then, because of the extensive explanations presented in the lam rim, it becomes much more meaningful and profound. If something is mentioned in a few words in other texts, and we incorporate into it our understanding from the lam rim, we will be able to savour the real meaning of the words.

I'm in no way about to boast, but when I was studying in the monastery I made attempts to memorise the entire outline of the lam rim. Then I was able to read and familiarise myself with the subject matter while keeping in mind its place in the whole outline. If you were ask me to recite the outline now, my memory might fail me in my old age, however when I was capable of memorising it I took the opportunity to do so.

Having such a holistic approach to study, and then trying to implement it in my practice, means that even though I have not been able to acquire any profound realisations, I can safely say that as a result I have a happy mind wherever I go. Whatever the occasion, I seem to naturally be able to have a positive outlook and maintain a happy state of mind. I attribute that to the genuine attempts in studying and practising the Dharma in the earlier part of my life.

The main point that I am emphasising here is that as you now have all the conducive conditions and opportunities to practice, it is really worthwhile and meaningful to apply yourself, as much as possible, to incorporating whatever understanding you have gained from your study into some level of practice. If you wish to have a genuinely relaxed and happy positive state of mind in your old age then it is worthwhile to invest in that now, when you have the time and when you are capable of putting some energy into it.

Rather than treating the explanations in the teachings as a mere process of intellectual understanding, try to relate them to your own personal life and practice. At this point, we are identifying the precious rebirth which has conditions of the eight freedoms and ten endowments. Reflect on how we have all of these freedoms and good conditions right now, and how we have the perfect opportunity to make our life meaningful. In this way we can exhort ourselves to utilise the opportunities we have now, seeing them as an opportunity for personal practice, rather than as mere external conditions.

When Venerable Michael's mother met me recently, she told me about how when she first met the Dharma, she was one of the first Westerners who went to the Tibetan Library in Dharamsala when Geshe Dhargye was teaching there. She said that there were only five or six students attending the teachings at that time and 'except for me all of them have become scholars'. She recalled that Geshe Dhargye constantly exhorted the students, 'While study is important, make it more than just an intellectual understanding. The most important thing is to practise well'. As the great masters of past used to say, 'We are not deprived of knowledge or understanding but lack the practice'. So if you find that having understood the Dharma hasn't helped to subdue your mind then that is not a result of lacking knowledge, but a consequence of lacking the practice.

To return to the line from the root text, *To find such freedoms and endowments is extremely rare*, the lam rim teachings

present the rarity of finding a precious human rebirth in three points:

1. The causes required to find it are difficult to obtain.
2. An analogy illustrating the difficulty of finding a precious human rebirth
3. Contemplating the difficulty in terms of number; i.e. the number of human beings in general is much less compared to numberless other sentient beings

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on the line from the root text thus:

One needs to make certain that one practises the Dharma on this basis...

This is an exhortation to take the essence of the precious human rebirth. Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

... that possesses freedoms and endowments, because it is very difficult to find such a basis that possesses the eighteen dharmas ...

In relation to the lam rim outline on the difficulty of finding such a precious human rebirth, if one were to ask the question: *why is it be difficult to find such a basis that possesses the eighteen dharmas?*, then the answer is:

... due to it being very rare to establish the causes for it.

We can see how this very logical presentation is profound in itself, as it is also a presentation of the interdependent nature of cause and effect. Without a cause, there cannot be an effect, which means that if one wishes for a positive result or effect, one has to acquire the causes. The interdependent relationship between a cause and its effect is such that if one is lacking, the other cannot come about. Without acquiring the causes, one cannot experience the effect that one wishes for. That is the logic that is being presented here.

If the causes for such a rebirth are so rare, one may further ask, 'Why is it so rare? Why is it difficult to establish those causes?'

Here, Gyaltsab Je explains:

To attain a human body one needs to practise a single act of pure morality ...

Students who studied Chandrakirti's Middle Way text, the *Madhyamakavatara*, may recall that one of the verses says that there is no more supreme cause for obtaining high status and definite goodness other than morality. In other words, the supreme cause for obtaining high status is morality. What Gyaltsab Je is also saying here is that one cannot possibly obtain a human life, let alone a precious human life, without having observed a single aspect of morality in the past.

At this point we can ask, 'What else do we need to practise in order to obtain a precious human life endowed with the eight freedoms and the ten optimum conditions?'

To this Gyaltsab Je's commentary replies:

One needs to support it with the practice of generosity and so forth ...

Thus one needs to support morality with the practice of generosity, and so forth, which includes the rest of the practices of patience, joyful effort, meditation and wisdom.

Then the commentary further explains:

... and complete it with stainless prayer. This is exceedingly difficult to find.

*Stainless prayer* means that the prayer needs to be without the faulty stain of merely focusing on the benefits of this life. Thus, if one were to practise morality, for example, with the

intention of merely being appreciated by others or to become famous in this life and so forth, then that morality is tainted or stained with the intention of seeking benefit merely for this life. The meaning of prayer is aspiration, so if one's aspirations are mainly to obtain benefits in this life, then that is all one will achieve and one's practice of morality will not become a cause for obtaining a precious human rebirth in the next life, or any of the other forms of high status. To ensure that one's practice of morality becomes a cause for obtaining a good rebirth in the next lifetime (such as having high status), the practice of morality must be completed with an aspirational prayer that is focused on future lives beyond this one. Any aspiration that is focused beyond this lifetime will be a pure or stainless prayer.

A precious human life that possesses the eighteen dharmas is rare because the causes are so difficult to obtain. We need relate this to our own personal practice. Do we possess all the causes? Are the causes intact or not? How do we go about ensuring that we have the causes? Simply put, the basic cause is, as explained here, observing morality. Here we can think about each of the ten virtues and consider whether they are intact within us. Do we abide by the morality and ethics of not killing? If so, then one act of morality is observed and is thus intact, and we can rejoice about that. Do we refrain from stealing? If so, then that is another act of morality that one is observing. One can go through each of the remaining non-virtues: sexual misconduct; the four of speech, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech and gossip; and the three of mind, covetousness, harmful intent and wrong views. Check within yourselves? Ask, 'Am I abiding by these ethics or not?' If so, then we can rejoice about the fact that there is no question we have created the causes for a good rebirth in the next lifetime. If we focus on that and make aspirational prayers for that to occur then we will definitely have the basis for a fortunate rebirth, and so we can rejoice!

If, on the other hand, any of these virtues are lacking, we can still make a genuine attempt to try to incorporate that practice and to abide by the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtues. When it comes to understanding the teachings, looking outwards to see whether or not others have these causes doesn't help oneself. It is only by checking one's own mental continuum that the teachings become meaningful. Then all of these explanations become personally relevant.

There is the story from Tibet, where a lama was once giving a teaching on this very point of the difficulty and rarity of finding a precious human rebirth. Upon hearing this, someone attending the teaching said, 'Oh the lama must never have been to China, because China is full of people!' Clearly this individual did not have a real understanding of what a precious human rebirth meant, let alone relating it to himself.

Having explained how that precious human rebirth is very rare and difficult to obtain, the lam rim teachings go on to explain that such a rebirth is very meaningful. Thus having contemplated the rarity and difficulty of obtaining the precious human rebirth, and then determined that the causes are all present within oneself, one should then contemplate how meaningful that is and how it can be utilised for great purpose.

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## Contemplating the great meaning of the eight freedoms and ten endowments

The remaining lines from Verse 4 read:

*abcd If I do not do anything beneficial now  
To achieve the purpose of sentient beings  
How shall I subsequently attain it perfectly?*

The first two lines present the great benefit that can be derived from having a precious human rebirth, and the last line shows the rarity and the difficulty of finding it. In his commentary Gyalsab Je explains how to contemplate the meaning of the freedoms and endowments in accordance with the meaning of the verse:

On the basis of this possession of the freedoms and endowments one needs to accomplish the purpose of others, because one has attained the basis, in dependence on which one can realise the higher status and definite goodness of others, which is their purpose. Hence one should practice with great effort.

*Because one has obtained the freedoms and endowments*, one has responsibility for helping others to achieve their purposes as well. Everyone is determined to fulfil their own purposes. This can be seen even in a worldly context, where people run around trying to achieve so many things – study, work and so on. Without an intention to achieve some purpose no one would bother to do anything. The most beneficial purpose, even as a temporary goal, is to inspire others to obtain high status and definite goodness. The ultimate purpose of course is to help them to actually achieve enlightenment.

There's no need to mention that, if a mere worldly purpose relates to some temporary benefit in this life, then most people are more than capable of achieving such personal goals and benefits in this life. Here, however, the purpose extends beyond this life. It is a goal that is oriented towards achieving a purpose in a future life, which is a very noble purpose.

Gyalsab Je's commentary further explains:

Should one not accomplish the happiness of the next life and beyond, due to the idea of one's permanence and the like, ...

This is an exhortation to practise with great effort now, when we have all of the eight freedoms and ten optimum conditions intact. All too often we fall victim to grasping at permanence. Every morning when we wake up, we assume that we will live for a long time, and our day ahead is premised on existing well into future. We have this view that our life is permanent and durable and will last for a long time. That is where we fall short, because we don't contemplate the reality of how fragile our precious human rebirth is, and how it could end at any time. That is what is being explained here.

... then how shall one subsequently attain such a perfect base again?'

The stronger the notion 'I am not going to die', the stronger our attachment to this life's concerns becomes. If we have strong attachment to the pleasures of this life, then we have not contemplated the reality of how our life is impermanent and that we can perish at any time. Conversely, the best way to make life meaningful is to contemplate the impermanence of our life, knowing that it can end at any time. With such an understanding of the impermanence of one's life, strong attachment to this life's concerns and pleasures will definitely be reduced. In this way we can see the significance of the practice of contemplating impermanence and understanding that death can occur at any time.

If, on the other hand, we hold onto the notion that, 'I'm only 25 now, I am young and I have to work hard and save a lot because I am likely live to be 100!', then all one's time and energy will go into in acquiring as much wealth as possible to fund that long life! But the reality is that no matter how much wealth we accumulate out of our strong sense of attachment to this life's concerns, there will be no real sense of satisfaction. As the great Indian master Asvaghosa said, 'The lack of satisfaction is one of the strongest forms of suffering that one can experience'. Without that sense of inner satisfaction, then all the wealth in the world will not be adequate, and there will never be enough. That is the disease of dissatisfaction. We really need to contemplate how a sense of satisfaction comes from understanding how our life is very fragile and that there is no point in grasping too strongly at the affairs of this world.

As I often comment, if one is satisfied with having enough to survive on for one day, then each day can be a meaningful and happy one. If we can train our mind to be satisfied with what we have each day, and do the same the next day, and the next, then that will be sufficient to carry us through our life!

If, on the other hand, one holds on to the notion of definitely living to be 100 one then starts to calculate how much one would have to earn to last that long. Once one starts making those calculations, it can bring about lots of anxiety and fear, 'How am I going to be able accumulate enough money to last me for that long?' With all these unnecessary calculations and fears, one can actually become very anxious! But those fears are caused by nothing more than one's own fears and doubts, what we call the superstitious mind. It seems that many retired people start worrying about whether their savings will last them until the end of their life. They go over and over the calculations, thinking 'Will it be enough?' 'I am just spending and there's no money coming in'. Those sorts of fears and doubts end up making them quite miserable. It seems that some cannot even enjoy the food they are eating because they so preoccupied with such worries and anxieties.

The teachings on the meditations on death and impermanence tell us that death will definitely come. That is certain. Contemplating the certainty of death is really meaningful because the more one incorporates that understanding and actually puts it into practice the more the fears and anxieties about having to plan for the future naturally subside, and one becomes more relaxed and more flexible.

When we begin to understand the significance of this practice, we will begin to reap the benefits of that practice. As presented in the teachings, the first point is that death is certain. Yet while death is certain, the time of death is uncertain. So there is a certainty about death but there is no certainty about the time of death. The reality of that uncertainty about when death will occur is contemplated in two main points.

1. There is no certainty about the time death will occur. It can happen to the young as well as the old. Also death does not spare the rich; it happens regardless of whether one is rich or poor.
2. There are many more conditions for death than there are conducive conditions for survival. Even those very conditions that are usually conducive for survival can in fact become a cause for death. As we all know, there are many ways to perish after having a nice meal: it could be food poisoning; some die from over-eating; people choke on their

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food. There are many things that are normally conducive for our survival but which can be a very cause for death.

The point is that reflecting upon all of these realities will reduce our strong notion that our life is permanent. When that idea of a permanent life is overcome, then strong grasping at the necessities for survival or at the pleasures and attachments of this life will naturally be reduced. Then the mind will be much calmer and more relaxed.

Another important point is that reducing attachment does not necessarily mean getting rid of one's possessions. Divesting ourselves of possessions will not eradicate attachment to things. It's the grasping that one has to remove, not the possessions. One can still utilise one's possessions—the main thing is to reduce strong attachment to them. Then, at the time of death, one will be able to die very peacefully and because there is no attachment and clinging to possessions there will be nothing holding one back, and it will be a genuinely peaceful death.

The significance of these points is that while we may not be able to do anything to prevent our death, which is a reality, we can definitely do something to prevent fear and anxiety at the time of death.

Preparation for death has three main elements: 1) practice of morality, 2) supported by practices of generosity and so forth, and 3) completed with stainless or pure prayers.

We can choose to observe the morality of abiding by the ten virtues by refraining from killing and stealing and so forth. When we have voluntarily adopted an ethical way of living such as abiding by the ten virtues and refraining from the ten non-virtues, then that is the ultimate preparation and protection for us at the time of death.

As a result of one's preparation for death, one can actually feel great joy and happiness about experiencing death. That is definitely possible when one has adopted the practice of engaging in the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues, which serves to protect us from anxiety and fear at the time of death. We can be protected from those fears by the practices that we have engaged in during our life.

Of the three objects of refuge the Dharma Jewel is the actual refuge, and it is the Dharma, the practices we have done, which are the ultimate refuge and the ultimate protection at the time of death and beyond. So we can incorporate that understanding as well.

The word Dharma has the connotation of 'holding onto', which can also mean to protect. So when we incorporate the literal meaning of Dharma, we can derive the understanding that it is the practices one has established which will hold or protect one from the fear of unfortunate rebirths. We really need to understand how the practices that one has incorporated into one's life, is the actual Dharma refuge, the ultimate protection.

Of the Three Jewels, the Sangha will be unable to protect us from fear and anxiety at the time of death and the unfortunate rebirths beyond that, although there may be some blessings from their prayers. If the actual Buddha were present, he would be able to render some assistance. But the real protection comes from one's own practice, from one's own mind. What we can call uncommon or particular cause that protects one from the fears and anxiety at the time of death and beyond is the actual practice, the Dharma that one has incorporated within oneself. There is great solace in knowing that one has established the basis of Dharma within oneself, and has engaged in the practices to the best of one's ability. Then one will have confidence about facing death

without any fear and be able to joyfully and happily go beyond onto the next life. Real solace comes from one's own practice.

The actual definition of the word 'dharma' is 'that which holds its identity'. So the literal meaning of dharma incorporates all existence. Therefore all existence uses the term 'dharma', because everything that exists has that nature of holding its own identity.

We can apply that definition of dharma of holding its own nature or identity to this glass. The fact that this object is an object which holds its own identity or nature means that whoever relates to it will be able to relate to it as a glass. As long as its identity as a glass remains intact, it will always naturally retain that identity, and thus be able to function in that way. Thus we can always relate to it as a glass.

If it didn't have the ability to hold its own identity, then people would no longer relate to it as a glass, because it could change from one thing to another. It is good for us to have an understanding of that general definition of dharma, as well as the Dharma that is one of the Three Jewels.

The next session is the discussion evening. It is part of the study group discipline to participate in both the discussion and the following exam. The discussion is a meaningful commitment, and it is good to come to it with a joyful and happy mind as a way to further extend one's understanding.

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

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