
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation that we generated when we recited the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in our meditation practice, which encompasses the basis of love and compassion. [meditation]

That will be sufficient for now; if the meditation session is too long, there is the danger that the meditation turns into sleep.

The meditation practice that we have just engaged in is one that establishes, and further develops the basis of love and compassion within oneself. Indeed, this practice is an essential one, in that without a basis of love and compassion there is no way that we can truly benefit other beings. Love and compassion is our best companion and brings us great solace, because it protects our minds from negativities. We can safely conclude that the practice of love and compassion is essential throughout life and not restricted to meditation sessions. So we need to try to incorporate love and compassion into all aspects of our daily life.

It is not as if we lack the basis of love and compassion, or that we need to develop it afresh because the basis of love and compassion exists in all human beings. That is true regardless of whether we are religious or not. You can see how even animals express love and compassion, so it is should be more pronounced among humans. What we need to do is to further develop and cherish the love and compassion that we already have within ourselves.

Love and compassion are the fundamental basis of Dharma practice. To neglect developing love and compassion and engage in some other form of practice, while assuming that one is practising the Dharma is completely missing the point! In fact, such a person would be an object of the great compassion of the noble and enlightened beings. Neglecting to develop love and compassion shows they have not understood the essence of the Dharma. It is really important to understand that if we wish to engage in Dharma practice, we need to know the essential basis of Dharma practice, which is to cultivate love and compassion. We can sit rigidly through long hours of meditation and say many prayers, but we won't be actually practising the Dharma unless our practice is based on the cultivation of love and compassion. That is what we really need to keep in mind.

Out of love and compassion one will take the initiative to avoid intentionally causing harm to others. Non-violence is practised on the basis of love and compassion, and when further developed it will provide the impetus to extend that love and compassion to benefit all sentient beings. The practice of not harming, but benefiting others in every situation, is the very foundation of Dharma practice.

If, after many years of engagement in some form of Dharma practice, one finds that one is not becoming kinder and more gentle, then that is an indication that one is neglecting a very important element of the Dharma. If we have practised developing love and compassion as part of our Dharma practice, we will definitely see some improvement in our

conduct and behaviour. But if we find we still lack a gentle nature and a genuinely kind heart, then that shows that we have neglected to focus on developing love and compassion. This is a really important point to understand.

As Lama Tsong Khapa has so very kindly exhorted us to do, we need to put whatever teachings we have heard and validated by thinking and investigating it, into the practice of meditation. That is the approach we need to take if we are to engage in the practice of the Dharma. To merely acknowledge, 'Oh that makes sense' or 'that is a good point' but not actually applying it to our own life, would mean that the Dharma we have heard has not been of much benefit, and a deeper transformation will not take place.

An analogy to illustrate how the Dharma practice can help to transform one's mind is that just as a mirror reflects what's on our face, the Dharma can reflect what lies within our own mind. The mirror is serving its purpose when reflecting dirt on our face so that we can clean it up. Likewise, the Dharma reflects the faults in our own mind, which we would otherwise be unable to detect. Thus through the medium of the Dharma, we are able to clearly see the dirt-like defects in our own mind.

Having recognised these defects as faults, we then need to take the initiative to start clearing them away and thus work on transforming our mind. When we take the initiative and begin to apply the Dharma in our practice, we will begin to see a true transformation taking place as our minds naturally become kinder and calmer. If, however, one tries to practise the Dharma without first gaining a proper understanding, then at a certain point when one realises that a true sense of change and transformation has not taken place, then there is the great danger of criticising and forsaking the Dharma. One may end up thinking 'There is no real value in the Dharma as it doesn't work and it doesn't serve any purpose'. At that point there is the grave danger of entirely giving up the Dharma.

We need to take the initiative to analyse our own mind and investigate what is going on within, and try to differentiate between the positive and the negative states of mind. When we notice a negative mind, we need to actively engage in trying to overcome that negativity, while further increasing the positive states of mind. If one applies that measure on a regular basis, then a true transformation will gradually but definitely take place.

My meagre attempts to engage in Dharma practice have definitely benefited my own mind. I am not in any way claiming that I have done any great practice, but I have made genuine attempts to practise developing love and compassion, really thinking about how to strengthen and further develop love and compassion within myself. So at this stage in my life, I can safely say that I have experienced real benefits as a result of my meagre efforts—I have witnessed some transformation taking place in my mind.

If this has been true for my meagre attempts, then there is no question that there will be a great transformation and tremendous positive results for those who are able to engage in a serious practice of developing love and compassion, meditating on it extensively, and dedicating their whole life to developing love and compassion. My meagre practice has not only confirmed the benefits of this practice, but it has also given me great respect and reverence for those who have actually perfected love and compassion, such as the buddhas and the bodhisattvas. They are the objects of our faith and veneration and we can see why that is the case—they have completely perfected love and compassion to the

point that they are actually an embodiment of love and compassion. They have become enlightened beings and bodhisattvas because they have developed and increased their love and compassion. So they have become a great inspiration for us to follow their example, and that is the real reason why we pay respect and venerate the enlightened beings. Of course you must not misinterpret this to mean that I am claiming to have developed any great qualities. That is not the case at all!

The great master Atisha said that we need to hide any qualities that we may possess while proclaiming our own faults, and proclaim the qualities of others and hide their faults. This is very practical advice. If we fall into the normal pattern of focusing on others' faults, then the only their faults will appear to us. So others will always appear to us in a negative light as we are focussing only on their faults.

Regardless of whether or not others have faults, we need to make an attempt to acknowledge their qualities, and then they will appear to us in a positive light. That will, in turn benefit our own mind, helping it to maintain a positive outlook. This also relates to the recent findings of scientists who have claimed that when you see a fault in any object, for example when you are angry, only 5% of that fault lies in the object whereas the other 95% is a projection from one's own mind. That is definitely in accord with what the teachings present—when we see faults in others it is mostly our own projection. Understanding this point is extremely beneficial for our own mind. If we constantly focus on the faults of others then how will we be able to get along with them? We need to get along with so many other people, and focussing on their qualities is the most practical way to deal with the situation in a most effective manner.

Now we need to get on with the study of the material that we have in front of us.

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

In our last session there was a presentation of how a precious human life is very rare and difficult to obtain. This is explained here with an analogy which shows how the causes for obtaining the precious human life are so rare. A more detailed explanation of this will be presented in the fourth chapter.

The Difficulty of Achieving Freedoms and Endowments

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je introduces this heading and then quotes from Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*:

Like a golden yoke on a great ocean in motion
And a turtle meeting it; it is more difficult to be an
animal
And to become human even more difficult. Work
with the human power
To achieve this aim by practising the holy Dharma.

The analogy presented in this verse indicates the extreme unlikelihood of taking a fortunate rebirth. The yoke of an ox's harness has a hole in the middle where the ox's head goes in. In this analogy the yoke is drifting on the surface of an ocean. It is just about impossible for a blind turtle, which rises to the surface once in a hundred years, to meet the yoke and putting its head into the hole.

In the analogy the term *golden* is used to indicate something that is very precious. Thus, the *golden yoke* represents the Buddha's teachings, which are very precious.

The yoke not remaining in one place but *drifting* in different directions indicates that it is not certain that the Buddha's teachings will remain in the one place for too long.

The *turtle putting its head into the hole of the yoke* is an indication of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, which is considered a doorway to adopting the Buddha's teachings, and putting them into practice.

The turtle *surfacing every hundred years* indicates the rarity of obtaining a precious human rebirth. If it were to come to the surface regularly, it would have a greater chance of placing its head into the yoke. But surfacing every hundred years indicates the rarity of obtaining a precious human life with all the conditions—the eight freedoms and ten endowments—intact.

This analogy reminds us that it is a very rare coincidence to have met with the Buddha's teachings with all of the conditions intact. As we have actually achieved this rare state we must now seize this opportunity and utilise it to make it most meaningful, by putting the teachings we have received into practice, as it is very unlikely that these conditions will recur in the future. The main point is that we must seize the opportunity that we have now to derive the essence of this life.

We should not regard what is being presented here merely as a fancy narration. Rather we must take the meaning to heart and apply it to our own situation. We need to understand that we must seize the opportunity provided by these precious conditions and utilise them for our own practice. If one has no inclination to practise the Dharma, then of course all of this is irrelevant. But if we are inclined to practise the Dharma, then we need to see the relevance of what is being presented here and take it as a personal instruction. There will be no better opportunity to practise Dharma other than now, when we have all of these conditions intact.

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je follows his quotation from *Letter to a Friend* with this statement:

By abandoning the eight states of non-freedom one achieves freedom.

As explained previously, *freedom* or *leisure* refers to being free from certain adverse conditions.

Gyaltsab Je then continues:

[Nagarjuna's] *Letter to a Friend* states that the eight states of non-freedom are:

Holding wrong views and birth as animal,
Hungry ghost or hell being,
Without the conqueror's teachings and birth as
barbarian
In a border country and being deaf and dumb,
And birth as long life god, being born as any of
these,
Is called being born without freedom.
Having found freedom free from those,
Strive to become free from birth.

The specifics of the eight freedoms are clearly presented in other sources such as Lam Rim teachings. We can refer to those more extensive explanations to gain a clearer understanding of them. The essential point Nagarjuna is presenting here is that *having found freedom, free from those eight adverse conditions* (in which one would not have the opportunity to engage in the practice of Dharma), we must *strive to become free from birth*, which means to be free from being reborn with these adverse conditions. In accordance

with explanations given in the past we first need to contemplate the great sufferings that are experienced under those eight adverse conditions, such as the suffering of being born as an animal. Then we need to personalise that and consider how unbearable it would be if we were born in that situation. Out of the fear of being born in those suffering conditions, we take refuge in the Three Jewels. Then, based on our sincere reliance on the Three Jewels, we adopt the practice of avoiding non-virtue and accumulating virtues. This is how we strive to be free from being reborn in such uncomfortable and unfavourable situations in the future.

These eight adverse conditions can be subdivided into two main categories: four of which are non-human rebirths, such as being born an animal and so forth; and four adverse conditions while being born as a human, such as being born where the teachings have not occurred, as a barbarian, or as a deaf and mute. If we were reborn with any of these adverse conditions there would be no possibility for us to properly understand the Dharma. We can safely assume that our current freedom from these adversities is our great fortune. Not utilising these conditions would be a complete waste of a wonderful opportunity.

Having quoting Nagarjuna's text, Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

Because there is no freedom to practice the Dharma in these eight states they are called states of non-freedom.

As explained in the commentary, these eight states are called freedoms because they are the opposites of the adverse conditions of not having the freedom to practise the Dharma. At this point, one can ask, 'What are the good conditions needed to practise the Dharma'? The good conditions are referred to here as the ten endowments, which can be divided into two categories: five that are related to personal favourable conditions and five that relate to external favourable conditions.

Next, Gyaltsab Je states:

The Hearer's Grounds states that the ten endowments are:

The five endowments of self:
Human, central born, complete faculties,
Not having transgressed the limits of karma, faith in the source

Not having transgressed the limits of karma means not having committed or not having induced others to commit the immediate actions. Having faith in the source means to have faith in the three baskets of the teachings

The first endowment is to be born *human*. Unlike some other rebirths, the very fact of being human means that one has the capacity and intelligence to be able to understand what is being presented. Actually, the definition of a human is 'a being who is able to speak and understand'. This means being able to communicate whatever one feels and wishes to express, as well as being able to understand what others are expressing. Thus, being born as a human means that we have the capacity to understand the Dharma.

Being central born means being born in the central land, which is a land where the Buddha's teachings are prevalent.

Having *complete faculties* clearly means having all the sense faculties intact.

Not having transgressed the limits of karma (which will be explained in the text itself) basically means that one has not

committed any of the five heinous crimes, meaning the five actions of immediate retribution.

Faith in the source means having *faith in the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings*.

With respect to the last five endowments that relate to external conditions, Gyaltsab Je again quotes from *The Hearer's Grounds*:

A buddha has come and taught the holy Dharma; the teachings abide, and those following; there is affectionate compassion for others.

A buddha has come refers to the Buddha actually having come to this world.

And taught the holy Dharma refers to having given the teachings or turned the wheel of Dharma

Although we have not been born in the actual presence of the Buddha, we have been born at the time of the Buddha in a sense, because we live at a time when the Buddha's teachings are prevalent. That is due to the unbroken lineage which has been passed them down.

Teachings abide means that the teachings are being actively taught and practised.

Those following refers to the hearers, solitary realisers and the bodhisattvas who created the unbroken lineage of the teachings.

Affectionate compassion for others, indicates that there are affectionate and compassionate individuals who are willing to support us as we follow and practise the Dharma.

If the Buddha had not come to this world then, even though we have been born as a human, we would not have met all the necessary conditions that are conducive to ensuring a fortunate rebirth. So we meet the requirement of having been born at a time when *the Buddha has come*. Not only that, but he has *given the teachings*. If he had not given the teachings, we would not benefit from them. And the teachings have not only been presented, but they still *abide at this time*. *Those who follow the teachings* refers to the great practitioners such as the bodhisattvas, the great meditators and so forth. As they have gained significant realisations from having practised and followed the Dharma, they serve as a great inspiration for us. Even if all of the other conditions were intact, we still need others whose love and *compassion* will support us and encourage us to engage in the practice of the Dharma. And we are living at a time where there are those who actually support us in our practice and so forth. If one wholeheartedly dedicates one's life to practising the Dharma, there will be no need to worry about finding the means to support oneself, because there will definitely be others who will render that support. We can feel incredibly fortunate because we have met all the conditions mentioned here.

There is a saying in Tibet that initially when one sincerely begins to practice the Dharma, one's resources can be so meagre that it is as if the mouth can't find food! But later on, having practised and endured many hardships, one reaches a point where there is so much food around that it doesn't find enough mouths to feed! When we apply that example to our time, we can witness so much food going to waste, which is because it has not found adequate mouths to feed!

2.2. The method for taking the essence

This is the next of the meticulously presented headings. Having described the appropriate conditions to achieve a human rebirth with the eight freedoms and ten endowments

intact, and exhorting us to take the essence of that to make our life most meaningful, the question that then arises is, 'Well how does one actually take the essence of one's life to make it meaningful?'. Hence this heading, which has two main parts:

2.2.1. The general presentation

2.2.2. Explaining the individual meanings

2.2.1. The general presentation

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on this section thus:

This text [*Bodhisattvacharyavatara*] shows the complete stage of the path to enlightenment. It shows the training in the thoughts of the small and middling beings as preliminaries for the training in the thought of the great capable being. It shows that having generated the mind of supreme enlightenment, one then trains in the six perfections of generosity and so forth.

Then Gyaltsab Je goes on to summarise the contents of each of the chapters.

Initially, to generate the mind of supreme enlightenment, one needs to strongly increase joyful strength through contemplating its benefits well. This is described in the first chapter, which also shows the training in the thoughts of the small and middling being as auxiliary limbs for the generation of the mind of enlightenment.

In order to generate the mind of supreme enlightenment or bodhicitta, one first needs to develop a strong joyful strength by contemplating the benefits of bodhicitta. That is the main topic of the first chapter, which is a presentation of the benefits of the mind of supreme enlightenment or bodhicitta. The term *auxiliary limbs* means, that this chapter also presents the practices of the small and middling scopes.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

Then, to generate the mind of supreme enlightenment, which has the root of love and compassion, one must confess the opposing conditions, i.e. the negativities, and one must build up the conducive condition, i.e. accumulate merit.

This is done on the basis of having cleaned the place of practice, as if one is expecting a wheel-turning king to visit one's house. Then one needs to take the mind of enlightenment. The former is explained in chapter two and the latter in chapter three.

Thus chapter two describes how to purify the negativities, while chapter three presents the conducive conditions for the accumulating merit to develop the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta. As conducive conditions refers to the accumulation of merit chapter three is based on the means of accumulating merit.

Next, Gyaltsab Je's commentary describes the fourth chapter:

The fourth chapter demonstrates the need for conscientiousness, the factor that prevents the degeneration of virtues gained from training in generating the perfections.

Thus the subject matter of the fourth chapter is how to develop conscientiousness as a way to protect the mind gained from training in the perfections from declining.

Gyaltsab Je then concludes his commentary on this section:

The next chapters provide the way of training in the six perfections. The fifth chapter gives extensive instructions on the way of training in morality by way of protecting one's mind with mindfulness and

introspection. The way of training in patience, enthusiasm, mental stabilisation and wisdom are explained in the next four chapters.

The tenth chapter gives a comprehensive overview of the way of training in generosity, with extensive notes on how to train in the mind of giving by dedicating one's body, possessions and virtues to others. The training in generosity is also explained at the time of taking the mind of enlightenment and so forth. The resulting buddhahood is explained in the ninth chapter.

With this general presentation, the commentary clearly explains how the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* divides its subject matter—how to develop the awakening mind or the mind that aspires to achieve enlightenment—into different chapters.

In order to present a guide for developing bodhicitta, the benefits of the awakening mind or bodhicitta need to be understood, and that is the subject matter of the first chapter. In order to be able to develop bodhicitta, one needs to first purify one's own mind of negativities, which is the subject matter of the second chapter. The third chapter relates to establishing the conducive conditions for accumulating merit. Then, having developed the bodhicitta or the awakening mind we need to ensure that it doesn't decline, for which we need conscientiousness and mindfulness, and those are explained in the next two chapters. The six perfections are then presented in the remaining chapters. This is a concise summary of the subject matter of the whole text.

Thus, the concise presentation of the Mahayana path or the Great Vehicle is that it consists of a mind that is an awakening mind or a mind of bodhicitta, and the practice of the Great Vehicle is the six perfections. This is the subject matter of the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*.

We will now recite the *Eight Verses of Mind Training* and dedicate the merits of the recitation to Susan Coates' father, who has passed away.

I explained the visualisation when we did the *Eight Verses of Mind Training* in our last Easter course. As explained at that time, we visualise the Buddha Amitabha on the top of our crown. Then as we make requests to Buddha Amitabha, light emanating from his body descends into us and purifies the negativities of the deceased person. So we can base the visualisation on that.

I know Susan Coates to be very modest and good person, who is one of the older students of our study group. Personally, she has been very kind to me, and she always makes very nutritious and delicious food when she provides meals for me. Of course every time I receive a meal I also make strong prayers and dedications. Yesterday I happened to have a meal with her and when I asked 'How is your dad?', she said, 'Actually, he has passed away'. Last Thursday Llyse told me that Susan's father was critically ill, and I was already doing prayers. Susan told me that his passing away was very gentle and peaceful.

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

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Edited Version

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