
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation that we have just generated with the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in the meditation practice. In particular we generate this intention: In order to benefit all sentient beings by leading them to the ultimate state of happiness and freedom from all suffering, I will engage in the *tong len* meditation practice, which is based on the expression of love and compassion for all sentient beings.

[meditation]

The meditation that we have just done will suffice as our motivation for the teaching as well, as it has enhanced our original motivation. Every time we engage in the *tong len* practice, we are directly increasing the sense of love and compassion within our own heart, and that is something that we really need to work on developing, because it is as a result of our lack of love and compassion that we find ourselves engaging in so many negative actions. So there is not much point in putting the development of these essential qualities of love and compassion to one side, while focussing on some other practice.

As I regularly emphasise, love and compassion is the basis for whatever practice we do. So it is relevant that the subject matter of this very text that we are studying now is also based on love and compassion. It presents methods on how to generate the superior intention and the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta.

The text begins with a meticulous presentation of the benefits of bodhicitta, followed by the reasons for developing bodhicitta. As I emphasise again and again, we need to relate to this on a personal level, and daily develop the strong intention, 'I am going to do my utmost to benefit living beings and my utmost to not harm any living being' before engaging in any other activity. At the very least we can certainly manage to adopt that intention as a wish which, at our beginner's level, will suffice for a bodhicitta attitude. As we develop and increase that intention it becomes the basis for developing actual bodhicitta. I find this to be really useful and beneficial point to contemplate.

If we develop that mind as a basis for developing bodhicitta, that will in turn become the basis for developing the excellence of all good qualities, the ultimate state of enlightenment. What may otherwise seem like a simple intention is in fact the basis for developing all the qualities of a bodhisattva. The bodhicitta attitude encompasses benefitting other sentient beings in every possible way and avoiding even the slightest harm to any sentient being. As there are numberless sentient beings, there are numberless ways to benefit them, and equally, numberless ways to avoid harming sentient beings. By reflecting upon that, we can get an inkling of the extent of the bodhisattvas' deeds, which will then inspire us to develop bodhicitta ourselves.

When we relate to the benefits of developing bodhicitta in a logical way, we will definitely begin to see that there are so many benefits from developing the mind that aspires to

achieve enlightenment. As mentioned previously, there are numberless ways to benefit sentient beings and numberless ways to avoid harming sentient beings, simply because there is an infinite number of living beings. When we contemplate this fact, then we will begin to see why the mind aspiring to achieve enlightenment is so precious and invaluable.

Another point to keep in mind is that, as the past masters have said, without the wish for others to be happy and free from suffering, there is no way that the actual wish to benefit others will arise. So the wish to benefit others is based on these two essential elements—wishing others to be happy and wishing them to be free from suffering. When we understand this we will see why those who have developed an unceasing, spontaneous wish to benefit others and who are actually engaging in deeds to benefit numberless sentient beings and avoid harm, are indeed worthy objects of veneration. This is precisely why bodhisattvas are considered as holy beings. As we deepen our understanding of the actual benefits of the awakening mind, it becomes a personal inspiration for us to develop the awakening mind ourselves.

I cannot emphasise enough the great benefits that can be derived from every effort that we make to develop love and compassion in our hearts. The more we acquaint ourselves with genuine loving kindness, the more our own mind will become really calm and settled, and not easily disturbed by either excitement or depression. Rather than being judgmental and hostile or overly excited when we meet someone, we will be able to relate to them in a genuine calm manner. So we can see how having a calm mind changes the way how we relate to other sentient beings. Of course this will be explained in detail in the text itself.

2.2.1. Explanation of the Individual Meanings

CHAPTER 1: CONTEMPLATING THE BENEFITS OF THE MIND OF ENLIGHTENMENT¹

There is a significant reason why contemplating the benefits of the mind of enlightenment is presented first. In order to be inspired to develop the mind of enlightenment, one first needs to see the benefits of having that mind, which also includes the purpose for developing the mind of enlightenment.

There are two parts to the chapter:

1. Explaining the text of the chapter
2. The title of the chapter

1. EXPLAINING THE TEXT OF THE CHAPTER

The text of the chapter has two subdivisions:

1. The advice that is suitable to abandon negativity and to accomplish virtue
2. Contemplating extensively the benefits of bodhicitta

1.1. THE ADVICE THAT IS SUITABLE TO ABANDON NEGATIVITY AND TO ACCOMPLISH VIRTUE

The suitable basis for developing the awakening mind is two-fold: a good physical body and a pure mind. The suitable body needed to develop the awakening mind was presented earlier with the explanation of the eight freedoms and ten endowments. Gyaltsab Je's commentary now turns to the suitable mind needed as the basis for developing the awakening mind, which is a pure mind that abandons negativity and accomplishes virtue.

¹ To keep things manageable the numbering system will start again for each chapter.

As Gyalsab Rinpoche points out with the heading, the advice contained in this section of Shantideva's text is that it is suitable to abandon all negativity and to accomplish virtue.

It is always good to relate the topics presented in this text to the lam rim teachings as well. To use simple terms to understand the point being made here, we all have a natural inclination to strive for happiness and avoid any kind of suffering. Thus the reason we need to abandon negativity is because negativity is the cause leading us to experience the result of suffering. Conversely engaging in virtue is naturally the cause that leads us to experience the consequence of happiness. As such, when the lam rim teachings present karma in detail, they are explaining how the cause and effect process actually works.

The definition of **negativity** is that which brings about unpleasant results. The definition of **virtue** is that which brings about a happy result. So that is the basis of the advice for the need to accomplish virtue and shun negativity, which is explained in great detail in the lam rim. Gaining a sound understanding of karma is said to be the very foundation of Dharma practice. These are really significant points to keep in mind.

The reason why I emphasise this point is that understanding the profundity of the cause and effect sequence of karma is related to the understanding of interdependent origination, or dependent arising. The masters have indicated that it is only when one has gained a full understanding of interdependent origination that one begins to understand the correct view of emptiness. Without that sound basis of understanding interdependent origination, one cannot possibly gain a true understanding of emptiness. Although one may assume one is meditating on emptiness, it could only be some form of vacuity, where there is nothing to be realised.

Understanding that a particular type of cause brings about a particular type of effect means that it is crucial to understand the nature of causes. A negative cause needs to be shunned and eradicated; and a positive cause needs to be adopted and really cherished, just as a farmer cherishes his seeds. Although some seeds may appear to be small and insignificant, the farmer knows the good effects that each seed can produce. In a practical sense, we need to understand the relevance of karma in the same way.

The point that I derive as a personal instruction is that negativity is really much stronger than virtue. We don't have to think much about engaging in negativity, because it comes about spontaneously. Virtue, on the other hand is very weak. In fact it is so weak that we barely have any intention to engage in virtue, and even when we do, it doesn't have much strength and is only of short duration. So there is little opportunity to accumulate virtue. When we acknowledge that negativity is prevalent and strong, and virtue is very weak, it gives us the initiative to try to change them around. This is the point that I get from the following presentation.

Just to re-emphasise the point, negativity is that which brings about unpleasant results, things that we don't wish for and that we don't want to experience. Virtue is that which brings about pleasant experiences, the effect of which is happiness. As what is being presented here is abandoning or overcoming negativity and adopting virtue, it is good to understand from the very outset what negativity and virtue really mean.

The relevant lines from the text read:

5. *Just like a flash of lightning illuminates the Dark clouded night sky for a moment, Likewise sometimes, through the power of the Buddha, Worldly beings receive wisdom and merit occasionally.*

6a. *Hence, virtue is always meek*

Here Gyalsab Je's commentary reads:

Nowadays, when we are of little merit and our negativities are very strong, it is appropriate to meditate on the antidotes to the negativities.

Nowadays refers to our present degenerate times. In these few lines Gyalsab Je has derived the essence of the verse. As we don't have much *merit* and have *very strong negativities*, that in itself is the reason why it is appropriate for us *to meditate on the antidotes to the negativities*, and to engage in actions to purify those negativities.

The example presented in the verse is then explained in the commentary:

For example, just as one can see form very clearly for an instant when the dark clouded night sky is illuminated by a flash of lightning, ...

There are three significant elements in this analogy.

Night indicates it is night time when there is no illumination from the sun, which is analogous to the lack of the Buddha's omniscient wisdom radiating down to illuminate the minds of sentient beings.

Dark indicates a moonless night, which is analogous to the darkness of not knowing what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded.

Clouded indicates that even the stars are not being visible, which refers to the mind being clouded with the three poisons.

Gyalsab Je's commentary then explains that just as such a sky is illuminated by a flash of lightning:

... in the same way, for worldly beings the wisdom that establishes virtue thinking, 'I have to act meritoriously' arises only occasionally. Beings do not possess such thinking continually.

These points need to be seen as a personal instruction. Acting *meritoriously* or accumulating virtue *arises only very occasionally*. It is through the blessings of the enlightened beings, and maybe some small virtue or merit we have accumulated in the past, that the thought of engaging in meritorious deeds will arise briefly. So we can understand now why it is so hard to engage in accumulating merit or virtue.

Gyalsab Je's commentary then continues:

For that reason they always remain with little virtue, and similar to the dark clouded night sky, they have difficulty overcoming the strong negativities that cause rebirth in the lower realms.

The analogy of lightning on a dark night is a very vivid one. The illumination from the flash of lightning remains for only a few seconds, and when the lightning fades we are engulfed in darkness again. Similarly, it is incredibly difficult for the mind of virtue to arise in ignorant beings, and when it does arise, the duration is very short. What we need to really consider is how precious virtuous thoughts are, and how we need to look for every opportunity to develop a virtuous mind. At the same time we need to remind ourselves that we have accumulated some virtues, and rejoice in that. Then we

need to look for find further opportunities to engage in virtue, which is the most suitable way to strengthen whatever virtue we have. If we find that our mind is oppressed by negativities then that should encourage us to engage in some suitable purification practice. That is the personal instruction we need to derive from what is being explained here.

Gyaltsab Je's conclusion is:

Worldly beings take rebirth in very fearful places, which should be understood as very dreadful times, and therefore one should strive to accomplish virtue and abandon negativity. Hence, *virtue is always meek* is explained in relation to time. It can also be explained in relation to the occasion when virtues are of little power and negativities are very strong.

As some other commentaries have indicated, *Virtue is always meek*, can also relate to the occasions when *virtue has little power and negativities are very strong*. However the main point is that we are now in a time when virtue is meek, with little strength, and negativity is much more prevalent. What we need to take as a personal instruction is that one needs to cherish every moment when it is possible to accumulate virtue, and take every opportunity to abandon and purify negativities. We need to maintain whatever virtue we have and use that as a base on which to slowly begin to increase that virtue. That is the most practical approach. Otherwise we may end up in a situation where we feel that we have to do something extra, but in the process, give up what we already have! That would be a sad situation as we have completely missed the point.

Here I recall the very profound advice that the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye once gave to Jampa Ignen when he was a monk. Apparently he had sought some advice from Geshe Ngawang Dhargye about doing some extra study or practice, and Geshe Ngawang Dhargye's advice was, 'Well, that's quite good, but wouldn't it be more worthwhile to strive to protect the vows that you've already got and really work at that'. That apparently was very timely advice for Jampa Ignen. When others later heard of the advice to work on maintaining what you've already got they found it to be very profound advice.

The advice that we take here is that if negativity is prevalent, we need to apply the antidote. If for no apparent reason there are times when one feels melancholy and sad, or a little depressed, then that is a sign that negativity is prevalent. If we don't want that experience of feeling sad and unhappy, then we need to get rid of the cause of that, which is the negativity in one's own mind. That, as I have previously mentioned, is what we need to be focussing on. What I often find is that some people do the exact opposite, taking every opportunity to create negativity and feel sad and sorry if they miss an opportunity to create negativity! So when you are feeling sad about something, look into why you are feeling sad. It might well be related to not having had an opportunity to create some negativity.

Feeling sad about not being able to engage in negativity specifically implies being sad about not having had an opportunity to engage in activities that are driven by strong attachment or aversion, in particular attachment. There are things that we want to accomplish purely out of attachment, and when we are not able to do that, we feel sad. When we really think about it from a Dharma point of view, how could anyone possibly consider themselves as a Dharma practitioner if they are constantly looking for opportunities to engage in activities associated with attachment and then

feel sad when those opportunities don't arise? We often find people who claim they are doing something to help others, when in fact they are misleading themselves and in fact dragging them further into creating more negativity. That is not the act of a Dharma practitioner at all, is it?

Sometimes people complain about feeling lonely and say 'I feel lonely Geshe-la, I feel lonely!', and in a kind of naïve way I say, 'Well can't you find some people you can talk to. Don't you have some friends you can call up to chat with?' Then they respond by saying, 'Oh Geshe-la, you don't really understand the point; you don't understand what I am saying!' Then there are some who, even though they have a partner, say, 'Oh I feel lonely' and when I point out, 'You have a husband (or wife)', they reply, 'No Geshe-la, you don't understand!'

Apparently there was an occasion when His Holiness was meeting with a minister and Kevin Rudd, During their discussions apparently this the minister asked His Holiness, 'What is a secret happiness?' and His Holiness' responded, 'I don't know anything about that, I sleep all night!' This minister was also present during the recent annual event at the Loden Centre. When he was speaking to the gathering he quoted His Holiness the Dalai Lama and spoke highly about him. On that occasion I didn't get to speak with him, but he had come up and chatted to me on previous occasions.

2. CONTEMPLATING EXTENSIVELY THE BENEFITS OF BODHICITTA

This section is sub-divided into four categories:

- 2.1. Explaining the benefits of bodhicitta
- 2.2. Identifying the nature of bodhicitta
- 2.3. The reason why it has these benefits
- 2.4. Praising the person who meditates on bodhicitta

2.1. Explaining the benefits of bodhicitta

This has three sub-divisions:

- 2.1.1. It has the power to destroy all negativity and accomplish all virtues
- 2.1.2 One will become special in name and meaning
- 2.1.3 Explaining the benefits with example

2.1.1. It has the power to destroy all negativity and accomplish all virtues

This is further sub-divided into three:

- 2.1.1.1. Destroying great negativity
- 2.1.1.2. It can accomplish supreme virtue
- 2.1.1.3. It can accomplish one's wishes

2.1.1.1. DESTROYING GREAT NEGATIVITY

Having previously indicated that it is suitable to abandon negativity and to accomplish virtue, bodhicitta is explained here as being the best way to destroy great negativity. The remainder of verse six reads:

*6bcd. And powerful negativity dreadful
How can this be overcome by other virtue
That is not the mind of enlightenment?*

As well as sufficing for accumulating the greatest merit and bodhicitta also suffices for purifying the heaviest negative karmas.

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

It is appropriate to meditate on the two bodhicittas [aspiring bodhicitta and engaging bodhicitta], because how could this dreadful negativity, which is the cause of the lower realms, be overcome by any other virtue

that is not the mind striving for complete enlightenment? It cannot.

Nothing else can *overcome dreadful negativity* other than *the mind striving for complete enlightenment*. So the awakening mind is explained here as being the most supreme way to purify such heavy negative karmas as the five karmas of immediate retribution (or heinous crimes in some translations), which are an immediate cause to be born in the lower realms. Such unfortunate rebirths can be overcome by developing the bodhicitta.

Then Gyaltsab Je goes on to explain:

This does not relate primarily to the ultimate bodhicitta that can abandon the seed of the obscurations. Rather, it shows the benefit of conventional bodhicitta purifying the earlier accumulated causes for the lower realms, as well as cutting the continuity of later ones.

There may be room for some misunderstanding about how conventional bodhicitta could be a cause for purifying negative karma, when in fact it is ultimate bodhicitta that removes the seed of the obscurations. So Gyaltsab Je is stating that amongst other benefits, the benefit of conventional bodhicitta is that it also *purifies earlier accumulated causes* for rebirth in *the lower realms* as well as cutting the continuity of further ones.

The Tibetan term for purification has an additional connotation of training, which is also applied to the accumulation of virtue. Here engaging in the training of purifying negative karma means to engage in activities so that one does not have to experience the consequences of those negativities. The sign of purification is one that one does not experience the consequences of negativities. Whereas, training in virtue means to accumulate and further increase good deeds as causes for happiness.

At this point, it is good to remind ourselves that these points are not just some fancy presentation. Rather, we need take them to heart and apply them to our own practice, and thus adopt the essential points that are being presented here. They are not all that complex or profound, and their application is quite manageable.

2.1.1.2. IT CAN ACCOMPLISH SUPREME VIRTUE

We have just seen how the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta is a cause to destroy great negativity, specifically throwing karma, which is the karma that is a specific cause of rebirth in the lower realms, or unfortunate rebirths. Now we will see how familiarising ourselves with, and then developing bodhicitta, is the optimum way to accomplish the highest virtues.

It is good to relate to these points in a practical way. Simply put, we don't wish to experience any suffering and we wish for happiness. In particular we don't wish to experience the great suffering of unfortunate rebirths, and bodhicitta will overpower the accumulated causes for that. If one were to question, 'If generating bodhicitta prevents me from experiencing suffering, will it also help me to experience happiness?'. Generating bodhicitta is a means to accomplish supreme virtue, which as explained previously, is the optimum cause for happiness. We need to relate this logical, systematic presentation to our own experience, aspirations and even questions. If we really pay attention to the manner of this presentation, we will notice the meticulous detail of the explanations.

A practical approach to generating real conviction in this presentation is to relate it to our own experiences. If we truly

look into our own state of mind, we will all recognise that when we are in negative states of mind, we more readily engage in activities that will actually harm both ourselves and others. Even in everyday life, we see the truth of the law of cause and effect in relation to how non-virtuous or negative states of mind lead to undesirable consequences.

When we look into situations that are conducive for engagement with others or virtuous activity, we see that it is when we are in a positive state of mind that our relationships with others are good. Then we see the immediate cause and effect sequence between our state of mind or attitudes and the effects which are experienced. That is a good basis on which to begin to establish the possibility that the activities that we do now will definitely have an effect on our future lives.

If the altruistic attitude of love and compassion were to be developed then that would be the most powerful way to purify negativities that are the cause of our own suffering, as well as adopting the highest virtues that are the cause of our own happiness. When convinced of this, it becomes reasonable and necessary to develop bodhicitta.

Before we end the session let us now recite the long life prayer for Lama Zopa Rinpoche. I had some dreams of Rinpoche a few days ago and just yesterday I received a scarf and a gift from him, which is a bit of a coincidence. So he must have also been thinking about me. I took that as a sign that it would be good for us to do some prayers to remove obstacles to his health.

We recite the long life prayer and dedicate our merits so that every obstacle and hindrances to Rinpoche's long life will be completely removed, and for the flourishing of his virtuous Dharma activities. It would be rather narrow-minded just to think, 'I am doing this prayer because Lama Zopa Rinpoche is my guru' or because 'he is Tara Institute's spiritual guide and guru'. It is much more worthwhile to think, 'If Lama Zopa Rinpoche were to have a good health and a stable long life, his virtuous Dharma activities would proliferate and increase, which brings benefit to many sentient beings'. Making aspirational prays for Lama Zopa Rinpoche's long life so that he may continue to benefit many sentient beings is much more relevant and beneficial.

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

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