
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

28 May 2013

Based on the refuge and bodhicitta motivation that we generated earlier, we can now engage in the practice of meditation with a focused mind.

[meditation]

It is important to generate a proper motivation prior to receiving the teaching, such as: In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment myself.

So we generate the thought, from the depth of our hearts, of wishing to achieve enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings, and for that purpose, listening to the teachings and putting them into practice well.

Shantideva presented the unique exchanging self with other technique for developing bodhicitta, and a good preparation for engaging in this practice whole-heartedly is to engage in this practice at a meditation level.

2.3.2.2.3. Clearing away doubt

The first verse of the three verses relating to this heading is:

28. *Though having the wish to destroy suffering
They run directly to suffering alone;
Though desiring happiness, due to their
ignorance
They destroy their happiness like an enemy.*

It is good to really contemplate the very profound meaning of this verse.

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on this section with a rhetorical question:

Sentient beings wish for happiness, and do not wish for suffering, and by striving in this way they are able to achieve happiness and abandon suffering. Therefore are they not proficient in the practice of achieving happiness and abandoning suffering? Why should others strive for that purpose?

It is indeed true that we all like to believe that we are skilled in acquiring the means for our own wellbeing and in removing any unwanted problems or suffering. We all have the notion, 'Oh, I am quite skilled at that', and might well have the assumption that, because we are already well-equipped, we do not need any further advice. It is, of course, a fact that sentient beings wish for happiness and do not wish for suffering, and at a personal level we make every attempt to make this wish come true.

The doubt that is raised here is that, if individuals are already proficient in the practice of achieving happiness and abandoning suffering for themselves, then why should others strive to achieve their purpose. The answer, as stated by Gyaltsab Je, is:

One definitely needs to strive.

Then Gyaltsab Je goes on to explain the reason:

Although sentient beings have an intent to abandon suffering, through the power of the afflictions they only create the causes for suffering. Thus they run

infinitely in cyclic existence, especially towards the suffering of the lower realms.

This very meticulous presentation explains that while none of us wish to experience any suffering, it is as if we are intentionally running towards our own suffering. That is because we actually engage in accumulating the very causes of suffering. So it is as if we want to experience suffering. A very vivid analogy that illustrates this is with moths, which, being attracted to light, fly into a flame or a lamp. We can see so many moths perish in the flame of a candle or get trapped in a light fitting and perish because of the heat. Our predicament is exactly like that: we run towards the very sources that cause us so much suffering.

The causes of suffering are, for example, engaging in the ten non-virtues. Rather than abandoning these ten non-virtues, sentient beings intentionally create negativities such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harmful speech, gossip, and the three of the mind; covetousness, harmful intent and wrong view. So, sentient beings engage in the very deeds or actions that are the causes of suffering. Rather than abandoning or refraining from engaging in these causes of their suffering, they are attracted to and engage in the very causes of suffering. That is how sentient beings inevitably end up experiencing suffering.

As explained in many other teachings as well, if we don't wish to experience suffering, we need to overcome the causes of suffering; the only way to eliminate suffering is to abandon the causes of suffering. Other commentaries explain the lines *having the wish to destroy suffering, they run directly to suffering alone*, to mean that if we intentionally adopt the causes of suffering, then it is inevitable that we will experience suffering. If we adopt the causes rather than abandoning them, then the outcome is that we will definitely experience the consequence, which is suffering.

As I have mentioned previously in other sessions, we need to consider this predicament carefully. We need to be really mindful of our actions. There are often cases where, when we are not able to engage in some negative action, rather than feel a sense of loss, we feel glad about it. We might even claim, 'Oh, I have missed a great opportunity'. How many times have we been in a state where we intentionally strive to engage in some negative action and if we are unable to do so we feel sad about that? For as long as we hold onto such an attitude, we will not be abandoning the causes of suffering. If we intentionally create the causes of suffering and feel sad and distraught when we are not able to do so, then how are we ever going to overcome suffering?

Having considered and contemplated our own predicament first, we can then relate it to others who are totally ignorant about the causes of suffering. What chance do they have when they are completely ignorant about what the causes of suffering are? They are completely ignorant of the fact that they are repeatedly creating the causes of suffering that lead them to perpetually experience great sufferings. It is said that when we think about the predicament of other sentient beings in this manner, then we will develop a much more profound and deeper level of compassion towards them.

This level of compassion is called uncommon compassion, which is unlike the common form that arises in relation to witnessing the obvious suffering of others. The uncommon compassion arises when one understands and sees how beings intentionally strive in creating the very causes of suffering. From our own experience we know very well how difficult it is to avoid creating some of the causes of

suffering, even though we know that they are causes of suffering. Beings who are completely ignorant and who do not have that understanding are in a much more pitiful situation.

These profound lines from Shantideva are very poignant, and it would be really good to memorise them.

*Though having the wish to destroy suffering,
They run directly towards suffering alone
Though desiring happiness, due to ignorance,
Destroy their own happiness like an enemy.*

It would be good to reflect on the meaning of this verse on a daily basis: 'Am I running towards suffering by creating the causes for suffering? Am I holding onto the very causes of suffering? Could I be destroying the causes of my own happiness?' It is really important to consider these points. By memorising these lines you can remember their meaning on a daily basis, which will be very helpful.

Based on the understanding of what is being presented here we can slowly get a sense of the value of the mind training practices, where we train the mind to be happy when we experience suffering, and unhappy when we have pleasurable experiences. Being happy when we experience suffering arises from understanding that whenever we experience suffering we are experiencing the result of previously created negative karma. So the experience of suffering means that previously created negative karma has ripened, and as we are experiencing suffering we are actually exhausting that negative karma. So we should be glad that the negative karma is ripening now, so that we won't have to experience it in the future. Willingly accepting any difficulties that we might be experiencing now will enhance our practice.

The reason why this practice serves as an antidote to overcome worldly concerns is because training our mind to think in this way helps to overcome the delusions. If we don't embrace this practice of being happy when we experience suffering, then because we are not happy about it, our mind will begin to feel agitated and slowly become angry. So if we don't endure suffering when we experience it, we will inevitably start to feel angry, and create negativity from that anger.

It is the same with being unhappy with pleasurable experiences. When we have fleeting pleasurable experiences, we are using up our good karma. If we are attached to the pleasurable experience then it is just a waste of our good karma, which is not something to be happy about. Furthermore, if you don't embrace this attitude of feeling unhappy when experiencing pleasant situations, then your happiness will slowly turn into attachment to that pleasurable experience, and thus we create negativity.

So embracing these points of practice is essential if we are to overcome the delusions, in particular anger and attachment. As such, they are a supreme means to overcome the eight worldly concerns.

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Though they wish for happiness they are confused about the methods for happiness, and out of ignorance they destroy their happiness, as if it were their enemy.

When one does not adopt the causes for happiness and actually intentionally abandons those causes, then it is as if one is destroying the very causes of the happiness one longs for.

As explained in the teachings on karma, if one wishes to abandon suffering, one needs to abandon the causes of suffering. The causes of happiness are refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions, so if one intentionally adopts these non-virtuous actions then one is destroying the causes of happiness. Yet so often we seem to intentionally adopt non-virtuous actions, such as taking life, stealing and so forth. There are many who take great pleasure in engaging in non-virtuous actions such as killing!

Whenever we experience suffering, we should think, 'This suffering is the consequence of engaging in negativity in the past. As I do not like this experience of suffering, and do not want to experience it again, I should therefore avoid adopting the causes of suffering'. Every time we remember to think in this way, the suffering becomes worthwhile, because it encourages us to refrain from further adopting the causes of suffering. In fact the teachings mention five qualities of suffering from which we derive benefit.

Likewise when one experiences a happy situation, then rather than being attached to that happy state, we should remember, 'Since this is a happy state that I wish to experience, and as it is a result of engaging in the positive causes for happiness, may I strive to further adopt the causes for true happiness'. That is how we need to exhort and encourage ourselves to adopt these practices.

Gyaltsab Je concludes his commentary on verse 28 with these words:

In this way, they engage mistakenly in the methods for achieving happiness and avoiding suffering.

As so meticulously explained earlier, this is exactly the predicament of sentient beings.

Since we unavoidably experience suffering, the advice for our personal practice whenever we experience any kind of suffering or uncomfortable situation, we should take that as a message from the Buddha reminding us to avoid engaging in negativity. Whenever we experience a pleasant situation, that is also a message from the Buddha reminding us to adopt virtue. Whenever we experience an unpleasant situation, we need to consider it as a personal message from the Buddha, and remember, 'Since it is an uncomfortable situation I should avoid the causes of suffering, which is all negativity'. Likewise whenever we experience happiness, we should regard it as a message from the Buddha to adopt virtue.

When we actually put these points into practice then we will be able to adapt to any kind of situation that we may encounter, and it won't disturb us to any great extent. When we experience suffering, then rather than becoming agitated and wary and feeling despondent about it, we can think, 'OK, this is a reminder for me to further engage in virtue and avoid negativity, and to engage in practices to purify the causes of suffering'. If we adopt this way of thinking then when we experience suffering we can make that suffering part of our practice. Then, rather than being in a situation that causes us distress, making us feel despondent and completely overwhelmed, it will actually become a means to further enhance our practice.

Whenever we experience a pleasant situation, rather than relaxing, taking it for granted and becoming lazy, we should think, 'Well this is the result of good karma that I have created previously. So, now I can use this opportunity to further enhance my practice. I should not become attached to these good conditions, but rather create more virtue and causes for happiness'. Thus, we incorporate both pleasant

and unpleasant situations into our practice. In that way our practice becomes steady, rather than constantly fluctuating.

It is in this way that we can use whatever circumstances we find ourselves in to engage in the practice of adopting what needs to be adopted, and abandoning what needs to be abandoned. We need to constantly be mindful of this practice.

If we don't know how to transform our suffering to encourage ourselves to engage in further practice, then we will really miss out; we can become completely lost and immersed in our own suffering. Thus, transforming suffering into the path is an essential method to enhance our practice.

The next lines from the root text are:

29. *Those who are destitute of happiness
And who have many sufferings,
I shall satisfy them with every happiness and
Remove all their sufferings.*

30ab. *I shall also eliminate their ignorance
What other virtue could equal that?*

With regard to first two lines Gyalsab Je explains:

For that reason, what virtue is equal to the mind that wants to satisfy sentient beings, who are confused about the methods of happiness and suffering, and who lack happiness and have many sufferings?

What greater virtue could there be than wanting to satisfy sentient beings who are confused about the methods of happiness and suffering, and who lack happiness and have so much suffering? This rhetorical question implies that there is no greater virtue. Again we are being presented with the optimum method for developing profound and deep compassion for sentient beings.

The second two lines *I shall satisfy them with every happiness and remove all their suffering*, relates to the bodhicitta attitude.

Here Gyalsab Je's commentary explains:

What virtue, with all the happiness of higher status and definite goodness, wants to cut the continuity of all suffering and clear the ignorance that is confused with regard to what is to be practiced and what is to be abandoned?

This refers to another doubt: Why should one strive for the purpose of others? The answer is that, although wishing to avoid suffering sentient beings create the very causes for their own suffering because of their ignorance, and although wishing for happiness, they destroy the causes of their own happiness, because of their ignorance. Therefore there is no *equal or higher virtue to the mind that wants to satisfy sentient beings who are confused about the methods of happiness and suffering, and who lack happiness and have many sufferings.*

Here, wishing them to have all the *happiness of higher status and definite goodness* refers to enjoying all forms of happiness, and removing all forms of suffering from the temporal happiness of high status all the way up to ultimate happiness of definite goodness, liberation and enlightenment.

The aspect of **love** within the bodhisattva's mind is wishing all beings to experience the happiness of high status all the way up to definite goodness; the aspect of **compassion** in the bodhisattva's mind is wishing all beings to be free from all sufferings; the aspect of **wisdom** within the bodhisattva's mind is that which wishes to clear away the ignorance of sentient beings, i.e. that is confused with regard to what is to be practised and what is to be abandoned. This is the main

point that is being presented. Bodhisattvas strive to help beings who wish for happiness and who do not wish to experience any suffering, but who completely lack the knowledge to attain their wishes. These beings are confused about what is to be practised and what is to be abandoned, so the bodhisattvas intend to lead them to that state of understanding, by removing their ignorance of the causes of suffering and happiness. Thus, the answer as to why it is essential to strive to work towards providing happiness and removing the suffering of other beings, is that because of their ignorance sentient beings lack the optimum means to do it themselves.

In relation to this particular point, Shantideva says: *I shall also eliminate their ignorance. Thus: what other virtue could equal that?*

It is bodhicitta that enables bodhisattvas to work towards eliminating the suffering of sentient beings, and endowing them with a state of happiness. The question Shantideva poses: *What other virtue could equal that?* is a rhetorical question, implying that bodhicitta is indeed the highest virtue. As such there is no power equal to the power of bodhicitta.

Although the commentary explains the meaning of the verses, it is good to remember the verse itself and then use the commentary to elucidate its meaning. Verses are easier to recite and to reflect upon because of their concise nature, and because of the profound meaning, they are optimum means to instil love and compassion within us.

The last two lines of verse in this section are:

30cd *Where else is such a friend?
Where else is such merit?*

As Gyalsab Je's commentary explains:

What other friend is there who establishes all happiness and rescues from all suffering? What other merit is there that shows correctly what has to be practised and what has to be abandoned? There is none. That is why one should strive to generate the mind of enlightenment.

What other friend is there who establishes happiness and rescues us from suffering, implies there is no superior friend than that mind of enlightenment, and that there is no intent superior than that wish to benefit others.

This is exactly what I have been saying to you over and over again in my teachings. The wish to benefit others, and the love and compassion within your heart is your best friend. How do we define a best friend? It is someone who only thinks of benefiting us and who does not wish us any harm. The bodhicitta attitude, based as it is on love and compassion, is an attitude that can only benefit us. There is no harm in holding this attitude, there is only benefit; there are only advantages and no disadvantage. Therefore we need to strive to cultivate that state of love and compassion in our heart. I am just trying to re-emphasise what the great master Shantideva presented in this very special teaching.

The way we need to take this to heart is to really think again and again about the unmatched value of love and compassion and ultimately, of course, bodhicitta, which is all condensed into the whole-hearted wish and resolve to benefit others. We develop it from the depth of our heart, by thinking again and again about the great benefits of developing love and compassion. The more we contemplate the value, benefits and great advantages of developing such an attitude, the more we will be inclined to really develop it. When it is well established in our minds, the wish to benefit

others will be cultivated from the depth of our heart. We need to be inspired to develop and establish bodhicitta, just as indicated in the dedication verse we recite regularly.

May the supreme jewel bodhicitta
That has not arisen, arise and grow,
And may that which has arisen never diminish,
But increase more and more.

This one verse encapsulates the presentation of the entire *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*. As mentioned previously, the first three chapters of *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* focus on developing the bodhicitta that has not yet been developed. The subject of the next three chapters is increasing the bodhicitta that has already been developed. Then chapters seven to nine show how to firmly establish bodhicitta so that it never declines, and the last chapter is the dedication.

By relating to the text in this way, we can be encouraged to develop bodhicitta within ourselves.

2.4. Praising the person who has generated such a mind

Thus far we have covered the benefits of bodhicitta, and now we come to the noble being who has generated bodhicitta.

It is inner qualities we see in someone that determine whether they are considered as praiseworthy. Even in a conventional sense we praise people for their character and their good qualities, not just their physical body. Here, when we contemplate the unequalled value of bodhicitta, we will naturally be able to see that anyone who has bodhicitta is praiseworthy.

There are three subdivisions in this category:

2.4.1. Suitable for praise because of helping out of compassion, without being asked

2.4.2. If even small benefit is praiseworthy then achieving all happiness and benefit is even more praiseworthy

2.4.3. Praiseworthy because of becoming the supreme field

2.4.1. Suitable for praise because of helping out of compassion, without being asked

We regard anyone who helps us when we are in difficulties, even if we have not asked for help, as being very kind. This section relates to that particular aspect of a bodhisattva.

The relevant verse is quite easy to understand:

31. *If any repaying of benefit
Is momentarily praiseworthy,
What need is there to mention the bodhisattva
Who does good without being asked to?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this verse begins with:

One should praise and eulogise bodhisattvas.

The reason that is presented is:

From a conventional point of view, someone who repays a kindness is praised, with the saying, 'That is a grateful person'.

We all agree that whenever someone benefits from the kindness of another, they will praise that kindness, and say they are very grateful for that. That is definitely the case at our conventional level.

I have related to you previously that I go to the St Kilda sea baths regularly. Last year there was a man who regularly brought his aged mother to the pool. He was very attentive to her, helping her into the pool, helping her while she was in the pool, and then helping her to get out. On one occasion I put my thumbs up, indicating that what he was doing was a really good thing. I haven't seen him with his mother again

this year, so maybe his mother's age is such that she finds it too difficult to come now.

There was also another lady who would come with her mother and help her. I once asked her, 'Is she your mother?' and she said, 'Yes'. I praised her saying, 'It is really very good that you are helping your mother, bringing her here, helping her out. Your kindness is quite incredible'. Later I met her at the pool again, when she said, 'Oh, my mother is not able to come now, but she would really like to see you again'. When I see the younger generation taking care of the older generation, particularly their parents, it moves my mind and is praiseworthy.

I used to see some definitely older people in the baths and they seemed to be happy to see me, but I haven't seen them for a while. Maybe they are not able to come any more. There were also young children who used come to the pool as well, but they don't come any more. Maybe they have to go to school now. These toddlers were very happy and glad to see me when I was there.

We need to take these examples of people who are serving the elderly to heart, and to try to implement it as part of one's practice, particularly if one has aged parents. I consider caring for aged parents as one of the highest virtues. And in fact that is not just my personal view. The Buddha himself mentioned in his teachings that caring for the sick and the elderly and one's parents creates great virtue and is very meritorious. As the Buddha indicated, when one's parents are aged and not very well, then all of the conditions to create merit are met in caring for them.

My practical advice, which I have shared with others in the past, is that when caring for your parents, try to not even think about the past. There might be uncomfortable memories, but at present that is all irrelevant. Just think, 'These are my parents and I am their child, and it is fitting for me to be helping them now'. Just focusing on that, and helping and serving one's father or mother is a really great deed. Having shared this practical advice, some have confided in me that they have really benefited from that advice, which encouraged them to take the initiative to actually care for their parents. They thanked me, saying they would never forget that advice. If we can take this to heart it will really be a practical and great way to accumulate virtue.

A more specific account is the exchange that I once had with Toby Gilles. It must have been several years ago, as his mother passed away about two years ago. So it was some time ago when I asked after his mother, and his response was, 'Oh, Mum is quite frail and unable to go out much, but her mind seems to be quite happy'. He went on to explain that his sister was really caring for her, making tea, cooking and nursing her, and my immediate response to that was, 'That is incredibly good. She is really practising the Dharma'.

Then I went on to say, 'I can't say for certain that sitting down, doing your prayers, and meditating is practising Dharma, but I can definitely confirm that your sister's care for her mother is Dharma practice'. He was a bit taken back and said, 'Do you really mean it? I said, 'Yes, I can definitely confirm that your sister is practising Dharma, but whether your sitting down and saying prayers and meditating is Dharma or not, I cannot say for sure'. Then I explained that my reason was based on one definition of Dharma, which is that benefiting others is practising Dharma. In this case, Toby's sister was definitely benefiting their mother by helping and caring for her, and so there was no question about whether or not that virtue was Dharma, whereas, the

virtue of reciting prayers and meditating depends on one's motivation, and as such, one can't say for sure whether that the action itself is a Dharma practice or not.

I was able to speak in that very frank way with Toby because he was quite fond of me. We had a good rapport. Whenever I used to go to Geshe Loden's centre in the past, he would always take it upon himself to make tea or coffee for me and make sure that I was comfortable. He even went to the extent of saying, 'If you were come to live here, I would definitely take care of all your needs', but changes have taken place and he is not living there any longer.

It has been a while since I last saw Toby, but the last time we met I mentioned to him there is a nice venue at Bacchus Marsh where we used to go for Easter courses and it might be good for him to arrange for some Dharma talks there, and that people who are interested might come to the talks. I was encouraging him to share his knowledge of the Dharma in that way. I haven't met him since then. I was invited to his birthday some time after our last meeting, but I was not able to go.

To continue with Gyaltsab Je's commentary, if, in worldly terms, someone who repays a kindness is praised, then:

What need is there to mention that bodhisattvas, who achieve all happiness and benefit out of compassion without being asked, are worthy of praise by gods and humans?

From the conventional point of view we are grateful to someone who helps us and praise them for their kindness. So what need is there to mention being grateful to bodhisattvas who, out of great compassion, extend their help to all beings, without even being asked, benefiting others to achieve the ultimate state of happiness. Without any doubt, such bodhisattvas are worthy of praise, not only by humans but also by gods.

As you are aware, the next session is the discussion session and following that is the exam. As I mention regularly it is good to engage in the discussion as well as the exam with a good attitude, in a spirit of sharing and further developing your understanding.

More importantly it is good to keep these points in mind in our regular daily life. We need to really understand these points and try to put them into practice as much as we can. Our kind attitude should be based on love and compassion and kindness, and the practice that we engage in has to be the practice of adopting virtue and abandoning negativity. To the best of our ability, we need to take every opportunity to accumulate virtue or merit and to abandon and really minimise negativity.

That, in essence, is the practice that we need to adopt. The benefit from the virtue or the merits that we accumulate from that will travel with us to the end of this life and beyond. None of us are extending our life span. In fact we are all getting closer and closer to our next life. Whether young or old, we are all in the same predicament—we will come to the end of this life and go onto the next life. So it is good to be equipped for that journey, and to take something with us into the next existence.

The alternative to preparing ourselves in this way would be trying to hold onto whatever wealth we have accumulated. I have recently heard an account of someone who was always holding onto his pillow. When he died and they took his body away they found the pillow was filled with his money. This goes to show the extent of clinging that someone can have for their money.

There is another story of the Tibetan who passed away in Dharamsala. It was traditional to sell the possessions of the dead. He had a doona which, of course, was sold very cheaply. The person who bought it took it to the river to wash it and noticed that there was something unusual stuffed inside. The Tibetan had been using the doona to store his money.

Then there was the Tibetan in Dalhousie who was known to always carry his cushion with him wherever he went. Later it became known that he did so because it was his safe for storing his gold. In the early days of course he would not have had good accommodation, so he might not have really found a good place to keep his gold. So he was quite clever to put it in a cushion which was the last place people might think to look. He was never separated from this cushion, which was his safe.

This is just one account of how having wealth doesn't necessarily bring calm and peace, but can cause more worries. Of course, I have many other stories like that, but I will leave them for another time.

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

Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© **Tara Institute**