
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ལྷན་མེས་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation generated during the recitation of the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in the practice of meditation.

[meditation]

Also, as for the motivation for receiving the teachings, it would be good to generate a motivation based on bodhicitta; such as the thought:

For the sake of all sentient beings, in order to liberate them from all suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teaching and put its meaning into practice well.

The main point is to try to generate a motivation that is not tainted by mere self-interest.

2.4. Praising the person who has generated such a mind (cont.)

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

This heading is covered in these two verses:

32. *Even giving scornfully just one instance
Of ordinary food, which lasts only half a
day, To a few migrators
Is praised by beings, saying:
'It is an act of virtue'.*
33. *What need is there to mention the continual
generosity
Of working to complete all mental
intentions,
The highest happiness of the tatagatas,
For countless sentient beings for a long time.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on these verses reads:

In worldly terms, someone who gives inferior ordinary food in an inferior manner, with scorn and no praise, to a small number of beings, (such as one hundred), enough for only half a day, will be regarded by the people as a great sponsor who practises virtue.

What need is there to mention then that someone who continually gives the superior object, the highest uncontaminated happiness of the tatagatas, with the special benefit that it satisfies each and every thought, in a respectful manner to the expansive field of innumerable sentient beings for as long as cyclic existence remains, is praiseworthy?

Therefore one should have single-pointed respect for the bodhisattvas who have this mind.

As explained in detail here, the benefit that bodhisattvas extend is definitely an object worthy of praise and

veneration, because this benefit is focused on all living beings, which is an incredibly expansive scope.

2.4.3. Praiseworthy because of becoming the supreme field

This section is subdivided into three:

2.4.3.1. The reason why it is unsuitable to be even a little disrespectful to a bodhisattva

2.4.3.2. The reason why it is suitable to meditate on faith

2.4.3.3. They are worthy of praise and going for refuge

As Gyaltsab Rinpoche clearly elucidates, the negativity incurred by criticising a bodhisattva is very grave. As we are not able to discern who is a bodhisattva and who is not, there is always the danger that we might be criticising or ridiculing someone who is in fact a bodhisattva. Therefore we need to be incredibly cautious about criticising others in general, because we would incur grave negativity if they are a bodhisattva. Thus Gyaltsab Rinpoche cautions us to be really mindful and careful about this point.

Can you give me a definition of a bodhisattva?

Student: A person of the Mahayana lineage who is intent on benefiting others by achieving enlightenment, accompanied by the deeds.

When an explanation of what a bodhisattva means is sought, it would be good to have a clear, concise and succinct explanation already in mind.

A bodhisattva is a being who has developed bodhicitta, which has two components *bodhi* and *citta*. The Tibetan word for *bodhi* is *jang chub*, which has two syllables and a separate connotation of each. It is good to contemplate what *bodhi* or *jang chub* implies. If you can remember, this was discussed at the very beginning of the text.

The title of the text is *Bodhicharyavatara*. The *charya* relates to the actions, which includes the basis, the path and the result or fruits; so all three aspects of the path are explained in that one word *charya*.

A bodhisattva is a being who has developed the bodhicitta mind. Thus a succinct explanation of a bodhisattva is a being who has developed the mind that aspires to enlightenment, and who engages in the actions of the six perfections.

As I have also explained previously, a buddha has bodhicitta in their mental continuum, however they are not referred to as bodhisattva. These are important points to keep in mind.

2.4.3.1. THE REASON WHY IT IS UNSUITABLE TO BE EVEN A LITTLE DISRESPECTFUL TO A BODHISATTVA

34. *If one generates negative minds towards
One bodhisattva patron like this, one needs
To remain in the hells for eons equalling
The number of negative minds, the Buddha
taught.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Should one criticise or generate a negative attitude towards those ultimate bodhisattva benefactors, who offer all benefit and happiness to any sentient being, then this negative attitude is the supreme among negativities. If one generates a negative

attitude, then it is taught in the *Sutra of Strong Peace Definitely Abiding Magical Emanation*:

Jampel, should a bodhisattva generate anger or a criticising mind towards another bodhisattva then it is said for that many eons he will remain in the hells. Therefore, wear your armour.

As taught here by the Able One, one will remain in the hells for as many eons as the number of moments one generates the negative mind. Therefore, one should be careful concerning this object.

From the *Sutra of the Seal Generating the Power of Faith*:

It generates much more countless negativity to generate a negative attitude and so forth towards a bodhisattva who aspires to the Mahayana, than to destroy or burn stupas equalling the number of sand grains in the Ganges.

As support it states that the buddhas are born from the bodhisattvas, and that to harm the cause of the buddhas is taught in many teachings and commentaries as supremely negative.

Gyaltsab Je's explanation is quite clear so there is no need for further elaboration.

2.4.3.2. THE REASON WHY IT IS SUITABLE TO MEDITATE ON FAITH

This is covered in these two lines:

*35ab. But, if one practices clear faith
Its result will increase even more,*

Gyaltsab Rinpoche's explanation is meticulous. First, it indicates that because bodhisattvas are working towards the ends of all sentient beings, it is a grave negativity to criticise, ridicule or disparage bodhisattvas. Then, because they are an object of faith, if one were to generate a moment of faith with a clear mind, one's virtue will increase incredibly. This is a very logical and meticulous presentation.

As his commentary reads:

However, if a person has clear faith in a bodhisattva, then the result of that virtue will increase more than the earlier explained result of negativity.

While the negativity incurred by disparaging and criticising a bodhisattva is very grave, vast virtue is accumulated from a clear mind of faith in a bodhisattva. Praising and having faith in a bodhisattva will accumulate an incredible amount of merit. So there is far more benefit in generating faith and veneration, and paying respect to a bodhisattva, than the negativity incurred from criticism.

This can also be understood in conjunction with the qualities of a bodhisattva. The benefits of developing the mind of bodhicitta and the qualities of someone who has developed bodhicitta have been explained extensively. These are directly related to the great virtue or merit that one accumulates by praising a bodhisattva.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

For however many moments of clear faith there are, for a much greater number of eons one will experience the special result.

This is explaining the great results from generating faith, for even just one moment. These explanations exhort us to develop that faith in the qualities of a bodhisattva.

Finally, Gyaltsab Je says:

This is taught in the Sutra of the Seal of the Definitive and Indefinite.

There is a quote from this sutra, but we will not go through that.

2.4.3.3. THEY ARE WORTHY OF PRAISE AND GOING FOR REFUGE

The next two lines of verse read:

*35cd. Even great force against the conqueror's
children
Will not raise negativity, it increases virtue
naturally.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Even if the great children of the conquerors are confronted with the intent to harm or cause suffering, they will not generate negative minds such as anger and so forth, and their virtue will naturally increase, even when faced with danger or loss of their lives.

As explained in the mind training teachings, adverse circumstances, or any kind of difficulties (such as lacking sufficient food, clothing, dwelling and so forth) will not daunt the person who is intent on practice. Those very difficulties can be transformed into the path. The Tibetan word *dogal* translated here as *great force* also has the connotation of the significant difficulties that one may face. As mentioned in the teachings, transforming difficulties in the path does not literally mean that negative circumstances will actually become the path. Rather, difficulties and so forth can complement one's practices on the path. That is the main meaning of transforming difficulties into the path. Rather than becoming a hindrance, difficulties and so forth become an aid for one's practice. In this way not only can suffering be more readily endured, but it can be transformed as an aid to complement one's practice.

The crucial point lies in the lines, *they will not generate negative minds such as anger and so forth*, but instead *their virtue will naturally increase, even when faced with danger and loss of their lives*. An ordinary mind responds to suffering and difficulties with anger, or at the very least some annoyance and agitation, and the moment that this happens there is no way for virtue to increase. From the very instant we generate anger and so forth we immediately incur and accumulate negativity.

As explained here, a bodhisattva, even when their life is at stake, will not allow any situation to become a cause for engaging in negativity or allow a negative mind to arise. Rather, they will use that situation as a way to further increase their virtue. We need to take this advice to heart and try to implement it in our own practice. If bodhisattvas do not allow even a moment of negativity to arise, even if their life is at stake, and only accumulate virtue, then that should be an example for us to try our best. When we face minor difficulties in life, we should not allow a negative mind to arise and we should try to maintain a virtuous mind. That is the main point.

When bodhisattvas are referred to in the teachings they are always referred to as being objects worthy of veneration and praise. If we really understand the practices of bodhisattvas then we will come to understand for ourselves why bodhisattvas are regarded as holy or noble beings.

The next verse comes under the same heading:

36. *This precious holy mind
Whoever has generated it, I prostrate to their
body.
Though harmed they remain connected with
happiness
I take refuge in this source of happiness.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of this verse thus:

For those reasons¹, I respectfully prostrate with my three doors to the body of the person who has generated such a precious holy mind.

I take refuge in the bodhisattvas, who are our source of happiness (as explained later on in the chapter on patience), who when harmed, not only refrain from retaliating, but only offer happiness, just as in the life story of the king Maitrabala who, despite the five yakshas drinking his blood, led them to the state of a superior being.

The crucial point being emphasised is that *when harmed, bodhisattvas not only refrain from retaliating, but only offer happiness*, unlike ordinary beings who retaliate by returning harm for harm. Instead of returning harm with harm, bodhisattvas only offer happiness to the one who has harmed them, and lead them to the state of ultimate happiness. This in itself is an unprecedented act of compassion. If we think of ourselves as an example, when someone utters uncompromising words, hurtful speech or inflicts any kind of harm on us, we immediately create a negative mind and wish to get back at them! For a bodhisattva, there is not even a hint of retaliating with harmful intentions, only the wish to lead them to the ultimate state of happiness. The connotation of *though harmed they remain connected with happiness* is that they connect those who harm them with ultimate happiness. Thus, *I take refuge and offer veneration to the source of happiness*.

Another important point to note here is that there may seem to be a discrepancy here between the earlier explanation, that if out of a negative mind one harms or criticises a bodhisattva, then that will incur the negativity of being reborn in the hell realms for many eons. Whereas here it is explained that if you harm a bodhisattva, they will hold you dear, and by not forsaking you, they will lead you to supreme happiness. So it may seem that there is a discrepancy or a contradiction between these two points.

The earlier point refers to the infallibility of the law of karma: if you create positive karma you will reap positive results, and if you create negative karma you will reap negative results. Thus it concerns one's own karma: if out of a negative mind one harms a bodhisattva, then one's own karmic consequences will be a negative result in the

form of unfortunate rebirths in the hell realms and so forth.

Here, however, the point concerns the qualities of a bodhisattva. Even if you harm a bodhisattva, they will hold you dear. Through their compassion they will never forsake you. From the bodhisattva's side, they will never give up on you and will guide you to the ultimate state of happiness. So these points need to be understood in their proper context.

Through their compassion, aspirational prayers and their skilful means, a bodhisattva leads others, even those who harm them, to the ultimate state of happiness.

Furthermore, as the commentary explains:

In short, regardless of whether one enters the tantric or perfection path, the door to the Mahayana is the generation of bodhicitta alone. Therefore, one needs to generate this mind by striving in many methods. As explained earlier, to generate it one must first develop strong, heartfelt enthusiasm for the benefits of meditating on this mind.

Basically, if one is to develop an attitude of bodhicitta a courageous mind is essential.

Then, as Gyalsab Je explains in his commentary:

That one needs the seven limbs with refuge is explained by this supreme commentary on the stages of the path of a bodhisattva, as well as in the *Compendium of Deeds*.

To generate the mind of bodhicitta one first meditates on its benefits again and again, which generates a strong inclination to develop that mind, and as an aid to develop that mind we need the seven limb practice. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently mentioned, if we add refuge to the usual seven limbs then it becomes eight limbs. I don't know if you recall it but I definitely remember hearing that. Sometimes there is reference to ten limbs of practice, which adds the limbs of faith and bodhicitta as well as the limb of refuge to the usual seven limbs. It is good to remember that so that you don't become confused. The importance of the seven (or eight) limb practice is explained in the *Bodhicharyavatara* as well as the *Compendium of Deeds*, which was also composed by Shantideva.

Gyalsab Je goes on to say:

If the aforementioned explained benefits are condensed, then there are two, which can be subsumed into temporary and ultimate benefits. The first again has two: not falling into the lower realms, and being reborn in a happy migration.

We went through these points in earlier verses, and His Holiness recently emphasised them in his teachings. He quoted the *Praise to Maitreya* which says that generating bodhicitta protects one from the lower realms, as well as leading one to a happy migration.

Then Gyalsab Je goes on to present his reasons:

If one generates this mind, then many earlier accumulated causes for the lower realms are purified, and the future accumulation of further causes is interrupted. The causes for a happy migration that one has already accumulated

¹ Referring back to how a bodhisattva is praiseworthy and so forth.

increase due to being held by that mind, and those to be accumulated will be inexhaustible because of arising from that mind.

This succinct explanation states that due to the bodhicitta state of mind, both the causes for unfortunate rebirths are purified, and further causes for unfortunate rebirths are interrupted; and the causes for a happy migration that one has already accumulated will increase, and further causes will be inexhaustible. For as long as the bodhicitta attitude is held in one's mind, one will continuously be accumulating virtue. The personal instruction is, as mentioned again and again in the teachings and by the teachers, that generating the bodhicitta attitude prior to engaging in any virtuous activity is extremely important. When one generates a bodhicitta attitude, it will ensure that whatever activity one engages in will become a means to accumulate the highest form of merit, thus becoming a cause for one's temporary and ultimate happiness.

Furthermore, Gyaltsab Je says,

Ultimately, one easily attains liberation and enlightenment in dependence on this mind, but first one needs to have the spontaneous aspiration to attain those temporary and ultimate benefits because, since these benefits arise from the generation of bodhicitta, one may say, "I shall generate the mind", but it will be mere words. If one analyses one's mind, this will be very clear.

As I mention again and again, it is important that we ensure that our deeds and our attitudes are not just mere words, but that we have actually developed that attitude. We need to really try to put some effort into generating and cultivating that bodhicitta attitude, otherwise, when we recite the text there is a danger that it will become mere words or lip service.

Then Gyaltsab Je further explains:

To generate the wish to attain the two benefits of higher status and definite goodness one needs to first train in the motivations of the small and middle capable being, and then meditate on the mind of enlightenment, which is rooted in love and compassion.

Here again the commentary is stating very clearly that in order to create the causes to obtain higher status, such as a good rebirth (i.e. as a human being) in the next lifetime, one needs to have a good understanding of karma as well as practising it. This is explained clearly in the small scope and the middle scope of the teachings. Without that basis of a profound understanding of the law of karma and abiding by that law, there is no way one can establish the causes to create a higher status.

Without developing an understanding of emptiness and realisation of emptiness, there is no way that one can obtain definite goodness or liberation. To gain a profound understanding and realisation of emptiness, one also needs to have a good basis of the practices of the small and medium scopes.

What this really means is that we need to develop renunciation, because without developing renunciation there is no way that one can gain the realisation of emptiness. Recently when I was among the other geshe

we were debating certain points, and I made the comment that there is no way for us who still seek pleasure in samsara to obtain the realisation of emptiness! How could we possibly realise emptiness if we don't give up the pleasures of samsara? Indeed the teachings say: without developing renunciation there is no way to gain the realisation of emptiness.

Even non-Buddhist practitioners such as the Tirthikas, who are classified as extremists, have actually renounced certain levels of suffering. They definitely have developed disgust for the sufferings of the desire realms. With disgust for the pleasures of the desire realm they develop a longing for the pleasures of the higher realms, such as the form and formless realms. Then, when they gain the absorption of the form realms while in a meditative state, they realise that even the pleasures there are mediocre relative to the higher realms. Thus they develop disgust for the pleasures of the form realms and long for the pleasures of the formless realms. Then they go further into meditative absorption to obtain the pleasurable state of the formless realms. So while they have developed a certain amount of renunciation in relation to the two sufferings (the suffering of suffering and the suffering of change) of the lower realms, they have still not overcome the third suffering, the all-pervasive compounded suffering, which is the primary form of suffering. For as long as one does not renounce that third level of suffering, one cannot develop renunciation of the pleasures of samsara. This is the crucial point that we need to understand.

Based on the training of the practices of the small and middle capable being, one meditates on the mind of enlightenment, based on love and compassion. We need to really understand and realise these practices and go through them in systematic stages, leading up to engaging in the higher practices of developing bodhicitta.

Then Gyaltsab Rinpoche, author of the commentary, sums up the meaning of the chapter in this verse:

Those who know they have attained a human body
with freedoms and endowments
Meditate with effort on the two bodhicittas.
This is the supreme taking the essence of the
freedoms and endowments.
Initially meditate on the benefits of that mind.

THE TITLE OF THE CHAPTER

This is the commentary on the first chapter called The Benefits of the Mind of Enlightenment from the commentary on the *Introduction to the Actions of Bodhisattvas*, called *The Entrance for the Children of the Conquerors*.

Having completed the first chapter we will begin the second chapter in our next session. The main subject matter of the second chapter is a detailed presentation of the practices of the seven limbs. You can prepare for this by reading relevant texts such as the lam rim teachings. I taught this chapter at one Easter course in conjunction with the seven limb practice from the lam rim, so you may refer to your notes from that.

At the recent teaching on the *Heart Sutra*, His Holiness discussed the very beginning of the sutra where it states

that the Buddha is absorbed in the meditative state called Profound Illumination. His Holiness explained that the words *profound* and *illumination* indicate that the Buddha is simultaneously in meditative as well as in post meditative equipoise. In other commentaries, the *profound* and *illumination* are said to refer to subject and object. His Holiness' explanation showed that the quality of the Buddha was such that he could be in these two states simultaneously, and this explanation brought tears to my eyes!

As he has done in the past, His Holiness mentioned in his teaching this time that the word *also* (from the line: *also looking perfectly and correctly at the emptiness of the inherent existence of the five aggregates*) has a profound implication. His Holiness offers a very profound explanation of this. Most commentaries explain that *also* means that not only the aggregates, but also the constituents are empty of inherent existence. However, as His Holiness explained, *also* implies that not only are the aggregates empty of inherent existence, but the person who is designated upon the five aggregates is also empty of inherent existence. This is a much more profound explanation of the word *also*, because it has the implication of presenting the lack of inherent existence of both persons as well as other phenomena. This explanation is not really found in other commentaries. Beginning with this explanation His Holiness then went on to explain the essence of the *Heart Sutra*.

On this recent visit I had many opportunities to be close to His Holiness, which was really good. His Holiness really showed clear signs of being really pleased. So if I don't now attempt to do some practice it would be really embarrassing!

When we were in New Zealand His Holiness approached me and asked how old I was and I offered that I was actually 78 years old, and then at the Quang Minh temple, after the teaching he came down and held my hand and said 'We are of the same age, so we are old buddies!' After the second session at Quang Minh, His Holiness came down and held my hand and said, 'Thank you for what you do'.

The event at Geshe Ngawang Dhargye's centre in Dunedin was really very good. His Holiness was scheduled to visit for only half an hour, but ended up spending about two hours there. When he saw the picture of the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye, His Holiness spent quite a long time looking at it and commented, "This picture must have been when Geshe-la was quite ill, because normally he was quite plump wasn't he?"

When His Holiness was interviewed soon after he arrived at the New Zealand airport, he explained that one of the main reasons for his visit was to come to the centre which was established by the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye, who was a great scholar and a practitioner and a great friend. Having been a great friend of His Holiness, he said, "It befalls upon me to take on the responsibility for looking after his centre now". Later I mentioned to the centre staff that if they were to listen to what His Holiness said, they would find great points there for them to consider. There wasn't time to receive His Holiness at Dunedin airport, so I waited at the centre for his arrival. As soon as His Holiness stepped out of the car he came

up towards me and held me in his arms for a while. This was definitely an auspicious occasion.

It is important to utilise the teachings to subdue one's mind and not to increase one's pride. As His Holiness himself mentions, if we use the teachings and the words of buddhas to subdue one's mind then it contributes to a happy mind. But if one remains pompous, with a sense of pride, it does not help to contribute to a joyful and happy mind. This is very practical advice presented by His Holiness.

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

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