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# *Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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

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With the motivation generated with the bodhicitta prayer, we can now engage in the meditation practice.

*[meditation]*

It would be good to train our mind to the extent that, whenever we see any living beings, we feel a spontaneous wish for them to be happy and free from all suffering. That would be an incredible state of mind to develop. Right now, however, we find it hard to develop a mind of wishing even one sentient being to have happiness and be free from suffering. However it is possible to develop that wish if we further develop our mind.

Right now the only example we have in this world of someone who has spontaneous genuine concern for another being is the love and concern of a mother for her child. If we could develop a similar attitude of genuine love and compassion towards all living beings, then we would, as defined in the teachings, have developed great love and great compassion. It is called great love and great compassion because the wish is directed towards all living beings.

As explained in the teachings, the positive outcome of meditation is said to be the lessening of the delusions. So the more we familiarise our mind with developing this sort of wish for all beings to be happy and free from suffering, the more our delusions will definitely lessen, which will be of direct benefit for our mind. Stronger delusions can definitely be weakened and we can even overcome certain delusions. So if we sincerely practise any genuine form of meditation, the delusions will definitely lessen.

Training our mind in love and compassion means training our mind to be able to immediately respond to the plight of sentient beings. As soon as we see them we will immediately relate to the suffering that they are experiencing and develop a keen wish for them to be free from that suffering. This comes about when we really think about the experiences of sentient beings in cyclic existence.

We are already quite familiar with the teachings of the lower scope, which describe the suffering nature of all existence, and in particular the three types of suffering. Relating to the various levels of suffering in cyclic existence is also a way for us to be able to relate to any kind of sentient being. For as long as they are a sentient being, then, whatever their status, even if they are temporarily enjoying good conditions, they are still an object of our compassion.

Personally, when I see someone enjoying their wealth and opulent lifestyle I immediately feel, 'Ah, they look very happy – but only if they didn't have to die'. Indeed if they were immortal, then perhaps their wealth and luxuries would bring them some form of everlasting happiness. It often might be hard to recall my own mortality, however when I see the seemingly very joyful states that others are enjoying, I am reminded that in reality we all have to die some day and leave behind whatever seeming pleasures that we enjoy now. Underneath that seeming pleasure that others

are experiencing on the surface they are constantly experiencing the suffering of all-pervasive suffering. And of course, they may be experiencing the suffering of change, and the suffering of suffering. Of these, the dormant suffering is the all-pervasive compounded suffering.

This is because of the fact that sentient beings possess the appropriated contaminated aggregates. So the very fact of having the contaminated aggregates serves as the basis for the all-pervasive compounded suffering. This level of suffering is said to be very subtle and deep rooted. In fact it could be rightly said that we can only find the explanation on the subtleties of this form of suffering in the Buddhist teachings. So, to the extent that we relate to the subtler level of sufferings of sentient beings, the more profound our compassion for them becomes.

This is something that we really need to pay attention to, as it is the very basis of our practice. It would be quite presumptuous to eagerly want to practise higher levels of practices without first developing a strong foundation. We can see this with external examples, such as a building construction; if the foundations are not sound then the whole building collapses. That is a fact, isn't it? It is the same with our practice. We need to really train and pay attention to forming very strong foundations for our practice, based on the principles of love and compassion.

## **EXPLAINING THE TEXT OF THE CHAPTER**

### **2. PROSTRATION**

Having covered the section on the various types of offerings, how to present them and so forth, which the text and the commentary explain in great detail, we need to actually try to put the advice into practice. There are no other more profound sources with instructions for making offerings other than what has been presented here. If, after having been exposed to these explanations we still feel, 'Oh, I wonder how I should make an offering', then we have definitely missed the point! Thus, if we are keen to practice then we need to rely on the very detailed instructions that are presented in this text.

If we are not careful we might end up finding ourselves with books stacked up in the bookcases in front of us, but when it comes to our actual practice we might start wondering about, 'How do I actually make offerings? How do I do prostrations? and so forth'. Having access to these teachings and books and not being able to use them would be completely missing the point. That would be a great pity. Thus, having studied these texts and manuals of instruction, when it comes for us to do a certain practice, we need to be able to readily recall, 'OK, this teaching has a very good explanation on this point about this practice, and that teaching gives that explanation'. So in this way, we are able to access what we need for our practice. And of course, many of you have the transcripts, which serve as notes, so that is another reference for you.

A while ago someone who had come to some of my classes here was asked to lead a meditation in Auckland. He said that he initially thought, 'Oh, what should I talk about?' and felt a little bit apprehensive. Then, he said, he remembered that he had some notes from the meditation sessions that I had been giving, so he took them out and read them, and found that he was not short of material to present to others.

As explained earlier, the purpose of presenting offerings to the objects of refuge is so that we can amass great merit to further develop ourselves. So amongst the various types of offerings, as explained earlier, hearing the Dharma and

putting it into practice is the best offering. We need to really take this point to heart. As the great yogi and adept Milarepa said in one of his songs, 'I have no other offerings besides my practice that I offer to please my gurus'.

This section on prostrations is presented with two subdivisions:

### 2.1. Verbal praise

### 2.2. Physical homage

Here we can take note that that verbal praise is listed in this commentary as part of prostration, whereas other commentaries on *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* present verbal praise under the category of making offerings. As an offering, verbal praise takes the form of melodious hymns. Here, however, it is listed under the heading of prostrations. It can fit comfortably into either category.

#### Benefits of prostration

- As a practice, prostration is one of the supreme antidotes for overcoming pride.
- Another specific benefit is that one creates the amount of merit to be reborn as a wheel-turning king.
- A further benefit is that prostration is one of the greatest forms of purification practices. Thus, it is an optimum method for cleaning our mind to improve our mental health.
- Another practical benefit is that since it involves physical exertion, it is actually a very good form of physical exercise. So we derive some physical benefit from the practice as well.

If someone were to ask, 'Is there any form of practice in Buddhism that has physical benefits?' we can confidently say, 'Oh yes, prostrations'.

As explained in other teachings as well, along with physical prostration there is also verbal and mental prostration. When one engages in the practice of prostrations, it is important to recall the qualities of the objects of refuge, such as the enlightened beings. That is how we derive much greater benefit and merit from the practice. As many of you would already be aware, the physical prostration begins by putting your palms together with your thumbs tucked in between your palms.

Before prostrating onto the ground, we place our hands at either three points or four points on our body.

If it is *four points*, the first is above one's crown, which symbolises obtaining the crown protrusion of the Buddha, which is one of the qualities of the enlightened body. The second is at our forehead which symbolises obtaining the Buddha's spiral hair. Next is placing our hands at the throat, which is to acquire the merit of obtaining Buddha's holy enlightened speech, and fourth is at the heart, which signifies creating the causes to obtain the quality of a buddha's mind.

If it is *three points* then the first is above the crown, then at the throat and then the heart, which symbolise obtaining the qualities of the holy body, speech and mind respectively.

The Tibetan word for prostration is *chag-tsal*, which has two syllables. Each syllable carries a specific meaning which doesn't come across in the English word *prostration*. The first syllable, *chag* has the connotation of clearing away, which indicates clearing away the negativities and imperfections of our body, speech and mind. The syllable *tsal* has the connotation of acquiring, in this case the qualities of the holy body, speech and mind of the enlightened beings. It is good to bring this meaning to mind when one actually does the

prostration and really think about the qualities of the enlightened body, speech and mind. Then, as we do the prostration we can really feel that we are receiving the blessings of an enlightened body, speech and mind.

As with any other Mahayana practice, the motivation needs to be bodhicitta; so try to generate the bodhicitta attitude as best as possible. I have explained this many times, so bring to mind the bodhicitta attitude prior to engaging in the practice.

During the recitation of whatever prayers or praises you may be reciting during the prostration, remind yourself that you are clearing away and purifying the negativities of body, speech and mind that you have accumulated from beginningless times. At the same time think that the blessings of the enlightened body, speech and mind actually enter into your heart; keeping these points in mind while engaging in the practice will ensure that the practice becomes most meaningful and beneficial.

### 2.1. Verbal praise

Verbal praise refers to praising the qualities of the enlightened beings, which takes the form of a verbal salutation. The relevant verse reads:

23. *I eulogise an ocean of qualities  
With an ocean of melodious limbs of hymns;  
These clouds of melodious praises to hear,  
May they arise everywhere.*

Gyaltsab Je's explanation of this verse begins with:

This oceans of qualities of knowledge, such as love and so forth, I eulogise with limbs of melodious hymns that express infinite qualities.

The commentary explains that the Tibetan term *yang*, translated in the verse as *hymns*, refers to words or sound of the praise, while *yenlag* or *limbs* refers to the cause of the praises, and *ocean* has the connotation of *many*. These are good points to remember as they come in many other texts as well.

Then Gyaltsab Je further explains:

Thus, carry out the praise by visualising that each body has many heads and each head has many tongues.

This visualisation is also presented in *The King of Prayers*, which is a specific practice to gain extensive merit. One does this visualisation to multiply the praise that one is offering by imagining that one has many bodies, and that each body has many heads and each head has many tongues. Thus there are many manifestations of oneself offering the eulogy at the same time.

The final part of Gyaltsab Je's explanation of this verse reads:

Further, even if one does not actually sing the melodious hymns oneself to the great numbers of superiors, may infinite clouds definitely reach them in every place and at all times.

*Even if one is not actually singing melodious hymns oneself, hold in mind 'May the infinite clouds of praise and eulogies constantly be presented to the numberless superior beings in all places and at all times'. The last line of the verse should read, 'May they definitely arise everywhere'.*

### 2.2. Physical homage

This has three subdivisions.

#### 2.2.1. To the Triple Gem

#### 2.2.2. To the basis for generating bodhicitta

2.2.3. To abbots, preceptors and so forth

### 2.2.1. To the Triple Gem

The root text reads:

24. *I prostrate humbly with as many bodies  
As there are atoms in all the realms  
To all the buddhas gone in the three times,  
To the Dharma and the supreme assembly.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

I prostrate humbly to all the buddhas who have come and gone in the three times, to the scriptural and realised Dharma and to the supreme assembly of superior bodhisattvas ...

#### The objects of refuge

Of the three objects of refuge, the first is the prostration to the Buddha. Offering prostrations *to all the buddhas of the three times* refers to the buddhas who have come in the past, who are residing in the present and who will come in the future. Prostrating to all buddhas means that you are not just limited to one or two buddhas of the past and present and future. Rather, you are visualising all the buddhas who have come in the past, which is an infinite number of buddhas; all buddhas resident throughout the universe at this very time, which is also an infinite number of buddhas, and all the buddhas yet to come in the future, which is again an infinite number of buddhas. Thus one offers the prostration to an infinite number of enlightened beings.

The next prostration is *to the scriptural and realised Dharma*. Here, *scriptural* refers to the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings in general, and *realised Dharma* refers to, for example, the practices derived from the scriptures on three higher trainings.

When we refer to upholding the Dharma it is good to understand that the Dharma one is upholding has these two aspects of scriptural and realised Dharma. *Upholding the scriptural Dharma* means to study, listen, contemplate and think about the subject matter of the scriptures, such as the three baskets of the Buddha's teaching. *Upholding realised Dharma* refers to, having studied the scriptures to actually put the meaning of the scriptures into practice. This would be, for example, engaging in the three higher trainings of morality, concentration and wisdom; or actualising the truth of the path and the truth of cessation.

We can relate this distinction between scriptural and realised Dharma to the Buddha's doctrine; there is the doctrine that is the scriptures or speech of the Buddha and there is realised doctrine. The doctrine of the Buddha's speech or words is the three baskets of the Buddha's teaching, and the realised doctrine of the Buddha is putting the meaning of his scriptures (or words) into practice. More specifically, the Dharma here is Mahayana Dharma, which relates to the Mahayana truth of the path and the Mahayana truth of cessation.

This forges a direct link to the Sangha jewel which is identified here as *the supreme assembly of pure bodhisattvas* who are practising the Mahayana path and actualising the Mahayana cessation.

In summary, when prostrating to the first of the Three Jewels, the Buddha, one is prostrating to infinite numbers of buddhas. The Dharma relates to the scriptural and realised Dharma of the three baskets of teachings and the three higher trainings. More specifically, it refers here to the Mahayana Dharma, which is the Mahayana truth of the path and the Mahayana truth of cessation. Sangha, in general

terms, relates to any assembly of arya beings, and more specifically here to the supreme assembly of superior bodhisattvas, which is specifically identifying the Mahayana Sangha.

The next part of Gyaltsab Je's commentary is a response to a hypothetical question.

#### How does one prostrate?

... with bodies emanated as many as there are particles in all the buddha fields

That is how one prostrates.

The visualisation that one does during the prostration is to emanate one's body as many times *as there are particles in all the buddha fields*. As explained in *The King of Prayers*, there are numerous buddha fields within just one atom. From this we come to the conclusion that there are many more buddha fields than there are atoms. That is how we actually create the visualisation of prostrating with as many bodies as the infinite numbers of buddha fields, where the Buddha resides.

That covers the explanation of how to do physical prostrations to the Three Jewels.

#### Explanations in other teachings

According to explanations in other teachings such as *The King of Prayers*, in addition to visualising one's body manifesting as numerous bodies and offering prostrations to infinite numbers of enlightened beings, another way is to visualise oneself as being surrounded by other sentient beings, each of whom manifests numerous bodies. So one is prostrating to the entire universe filled with *infinite numbers of enlightened beings, manifesting infinitely*.

Here it is relevant to present the unique instruction that has been passed down from the earlier masters, which is that when one does the prostration, one visualises *manifesting one's body over the infinite lifetimes of the past*. Thus, one imagines each and every life that one has taken in the past in a human aspect, rather than in whatever form it might have been. Thus one is surrounding oneself with an infinite number of manifestations of oneself in human form.

#### Benefits

As one does the physical prostration one imagines all of these manifestations of oneself prostrating at the same time, thus purifying all the negative karma created in all those previous lifetimes. It is said that the uniqueness of this practice is that even doing just one prostration purifies heavy negative karmas one has created over beginningless lifetimes in the past. So we purify an incredible amount of negative karma because of our intention and visualisation. Likewise, because one is prostrating to an infinite number of enlightened beings at the same time, one accumulates an infinite amount of merit at the same time. So this is an incredibly powerful way to do the practice of prostration.

Prostrating in this way, with these visualisations and an appropriate motivation, is an incredible practice. During the practice itself our mind is really calm and peaceful, because we have a virtuous frame of mind as a consequence of focusing our minds on a virtuous object. In addition, as we are engaging in a real sense in true virtuous activity, we definitely purify negative karma and accumulate vast amounts of merit. That is a great benefit of this practice. It is really good to understand that this is a really beneficial practice and bring these points to mind when you actually do the practice.

## The action

Another point to mention here is that a *full physical prostration* involves touching the five limbs — which are the two hands, our head and our two knees—on the ground. If you are doing a full-length prostration you need to be mindful to stretch out completely on the ground and then to stand up immediately. You should not remain on the ground for too long.

Some teachings explain that we need to ensure that all *four aspects of ourselves are straightened out*. This begins with stretching out our body, which allows the channels within us to be straightened out. When the channels are straightened out then that allows the wind to be straightened out, meaning that it will be flowing well within the channels. As a result of that the mind will be straightened out, meaning that it will be in a good frame; a fresh and clear state of mind. As these instructions are given in the teachings, they must definitely be significant.

That covers physical prostration, explained here under the heading Physical Homage.

### 2.2.2. To the basis for generating bodhicitta

This is covered in these two lines of verse:

*25ab. To the bases of the awakened mind  
And to stupas I prostrate.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

The basis of bodhicitta refers to the causes from which that mind is generated:

There is a Tibetan term *nam* in the verse which indicates numerous, and this refers to the numerous causes of bodhicitta.

Then the commentary lists the causes from which that mind of bodhicitta is generated. The first is:

The three Mahayana baskets;

This refers to the Mahayana scriptures, which give specific instructions on how to develop bodhicitta, such as the seven point cause-and-effect method of developing bodhicitta, and the exchanging self with other technique of developing bodhicitta.

This text we are studying, Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, is definitely an object of prostration as we always have access to it and by studying it we can understand the supreme method to develop bodhicitta. So this text definitely serves as one of the causes.

The individuals who become a condition for generating that mind;

This refers to genuine individual beings who help us understand what bodhicitta is. They show us the way to generate bodhicitta that has not been generated; they help us to maintain whatever bodhicitta we may have already developed; and they encourage us to further develop and increase that bodhicitta. Such genuine individual beings who help us in that way are definitely causes for developing bodhicitta.

The place where it is generated;

This refers to holy sites where enlightened beings and holy beings have generated bodhicitta. They are places that inspire us to generate bodhicitta ourselves.

The body of the Buddha and so forth;  
Stupas;

*The body of the Buddha* refers to actual representations of the Buddha. As other teachings explain, one can take the bodhisattva vows, either from a living teacher or in front of a

holy image such as a Buddha image or a *stupa*, which represents an enlightened being's mind.

To put all this together, once we have gained an understanding of what this precious mind of enlightenment is, we develop that keen determination to develop it ourselves. Then all the causes and conditions for developing that mind naturally become an object of great respect and veneration. Thus we naturally generate great respect for the teachings and the texts that present the ways and means of how to develop bodhicitta. Then the living masters, the virtuous friends or gurus who present these explanations and give us the vows and so forth, definitely become objects of veneration and respect, along with the place where it is generated, such as holy sites, images of Buddhas as well as stupas. All of these causes are naturally worthy of great respect and veneration, and thus an object of prostration.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary concludes with:

To these I prostrate

### 2.2.3. To abbots, preceptors and so forth

Here *abbots* refers to abbots who bestow the novice vows, as well as abbots who bestow the full ordination vows.

*Preceptors* refers to teachers of novice vows as well as the lay person vows.

The lines of the verse relating to this are:

*25cd. I prostrate to abbots and likewise to preceptors  
And to the supreme adepts.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

I prostrate to the abbots who connect and complete the earlier and later words of individual liberation; likewise I prostrate to the preceptors who bestow the vows.

As mentioned here, abbots confer the rituals of taking individual liberation vows; abbots and preceptors can also refer to one's spiritual teachers.

... and to the supreme adepts who carry the burden of training in the supreme disciplines of the path to liberation.

So the prostration is to the abbots and preceptors who bestow and explain the vows of self-liberation. It is also to those who have taken those vows, and who actually uphold that discipline, which is the path to achieve liberation.

## 3. REFUGE

We will leave this for our next session.

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

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