
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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20 August 2013

Based on the refuge and bodhicitta motivation we have just generated, we can now engage in the meditation practice. *[meditation]*

For next week's class I would like to ask Tara Garward to lead the prayers before the meditation. It is important that the younger generation start to take a more active role by training in how to lead prayers and so forth. Tara Institute definitely needs to continue to exist, regardless of how long I am around. So my intention is to provide the means for that continuity to be maintained. I am constantly thinking about what will benefit the centre; when things are working well for the centre it brings me great joy! Of course if it's beyond my ability to help then I can't do much, but I do think about what is best for the centre. I am not intending to boast but I have personally done over a thousand Tara pujas for the success of the centre. Mentioning this now might sound as if I am seeking compensation for buying offerings and so forth, but this is definitely not the case. Normally I am not the type who announces what I do for the centre; rather the main thing is if it is beneficial for Tara Institute.

When I first started teaching at Tara Institute, Wayne and Jeremy were the younger generation—I think Jeremy might have been the youngest. Wayne used to have a good voice then. When we were up at Atisha centre Geshe Dawa used to say, pointing at Wayne, 'Oh, that young lad there has a good voice. If we ask him to lead the pujas, it would be good!' Of course now we can hear that his voice has changed a fair bit; in the recent guru puja his voice was quite hoarse. *[loud laughter]* Wayne himself may not think that he's much older, but the fact remains that he has aged! In any case, the main point is that it would be good for the younger students to start taking initiative in leading pujas and so forth.

In the past I have commented that there always needs to be an assistant for every role. For example a director needs to have an assistant, so that if the director is unavailable then the assistant can temporarily fill that position. The Spiritual Program Co-ordinator also needs an assistant who can step into that role if need be, and in relation to even myself, the teachings will continue to be presented regardless of whether I am around or not.

I remember being in Adelaide once when Jampa Gendun was anticipating going to Italy. I was asked, 'What will we do if he leaves?' I said 'Khensur Rinpoche is here, so why don't you check with him. Why do you need to ask me when Khensur Rinpoche is still here?' Apparently there was no other western teacher who was trained well enough to be able to teach if Jampa had to leave. So they asked, 'What do we do now? How would we find someone to replace him?'

However it's not really our business to think about what is happening in other centres!

Nevertheless, I am always happy when I see a flourishing, well-run Buddhist Dharma centre because it serves a great purpose in helping others. Beyond Dharma centres, even when I see a Christian church for example, running well with a good community, that brings me great joy too, for it fulfils the purpose of the congregation. Thinking in this way and maintaining such positive attitudes will definitely lessen mental pain and agony, and contribute to one's own mental happiness. So, this is a very important point that I am passing on to you.

4. CONFESSING WITH THE FOUR COMPLETE POWERS

Here confession refers to the practices that purify negativities. This need to purify negativities is based on an acceptance of karma. If someone doesn't believe in karma then they would not see the need or relevance for engaging in any purification practices.

The need to purify negativities comes about because one does not wish to experience the consequences of negativities, which are not limited to the suffering of pain. In fact any kind of unwanted or unpleasant experience is the consequence of having amassed negativities in the past. Likewise, if we wish to experience pleasant circumstances we need to take an interest in accumulating virtue, as any happiness that we experience is a result of virtue. So, we need to know how to accumulate virtue and how to discard and purify negativities.

A keen interest in wanting to purify negativities arises from an understanding of the cause and effect sequence of the law of karma. One might wonder about the purpose of engaging in purification practices. The simple answer, as presented in the lam rim teachings, is because one wishes for happiness and does not wish to experience any suffering. As will be explained, purification is achieved when the four opponent powers such as regret and so forth are intact. These four opponent powers are also explained extensively in the lam rim teachings on karma.

When one understands that the causes of suffering are negativities, and one does not wish to experience suffering, then one understands the need to purify those negativities. Likewise if one wishes to experience happiness, one needs to create the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

This understanding of karma, even at this very basic level, can be related to our everyday experiences in this very lifetime. When we relate the various unpleasant experiences we have in our everyday life, as well as the sense of fulfilment and joy when things go well to the explanations of karma, then our understanding of karma deepens and is firmly established. We have all experienced the ill-effects of anger. Because it is such an unpleasant experience, no-one willingly chooses to feel angry, so in order to overcome the unpleasant experience of anger one will attempt to practise patience. As one develops more patience, one will notice that the mind of anger becomes weaker. It is through one's own experience that one will see the positive effect of

practising the virtue of patience. Thus, acquiring virtuous states of mind, such as developing patience to oppose the non-virtuous state of mind of anger, will help to overcome disturbing and unpleasant states of mind.

We would all consider ourselves Dharma practitioners who engage in some form of practice. So if we are really inclined to practise the Dharma, then we need to ensure our practice is one that is essentially based on the actions of discarding and adopting, which means discarding negativity and adopting virtue. If our practice does not comply with this practical aspect, then we won't really have much of a basis for real practice. We need to understand that this is how we need to engage in practice.

There are two subdivisions to this section of the text:

- 4.1. General presentation
- 4.2. The individual meaning

4.1. General presentation

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins his explanation with:

One should strive to not have any negativity from the very start. However should one, although striving in this way, receive faults through the power of carelessness and the many afflictions, then it is unsuitable to just leave them thoughtlessly.

As the commentary explains, it is best to strive from the *very start* to not engage in *negativity*. However, due to the faults of *carelessness*, or lack of conscientiousness, and the *many afflictions* we continue to accumulate negativities. This is actually indicating one of the four ways that compel us to engage in negativity. As explained in the teachings, the four conditions for creating negativity are:

1. Lack of conscientiousness
2. Having many delusions
3. Lack of faith
4. Because of not knowing

So when one does incur negativity it is *unsuitable to just leave them thoughtlessly* or carelessly. Rather, as the commentary further explains:

One should strive in the method for confession as laid out by the Compassionate Teacher.¹

The confession of downfalls should be done as explained in the higher and lower vows. The confession of negativity should be done with the four powers.

Higher and lower vows relate to the particular set of vows. For transgressions of the tantric vows there is a particular confession method explained in the tantric teachings. Likewise, if one has committed a downfall of a bodhisattva vow, the way to confess that is explained in accordance with the bodhisattva vows. It is the same with the self-liberation vows, with particular methods of confession for fully ordained monks and so forth.

Having mentioned that *confession of negativity should be done with the four powers*, the four powers are thus introduced.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

From the *Sutra of the Four Dharmas*:

Jampa, if bodhisattva mahasattvas possess the four dharmas then, although they create and accumulate negativity, it will be cleared away.

This refers to one of the four ways of amassing the karma that is both created and accumulated; also referred to as the karma where the result is definitely to be experienced.

To continue with the quotation from the sutra:

If the four are stated they are: thorough application of strong repudiation, thorough application of the antidote, the power of reversing from the fault and the power of the basis. These are as it is explained.

If the created and accumulated karmas are karmas definitely to be experienced, then what need is there to talk about those that are not definite.

It is important to not only be able to identify what the four opponent powers are, but to recall them when engaging in purification practices.

The power of regret

Then Gyaltsab Je goes on to explain the four opponent powers individually:

The first power: This is generating many regrets for the non-virtuous karma created. To generate this, one needs to meditate well on the way the three results are generated from non-virtuous karma.

To explain this point we can use the example of the negative karma of killing. In order to develop regret about the negative karma of killing, one needs to contemplate the three types of results that will be experienced as a consequence, which are:

1. The ripened result
2. The result similar to the cause
3. The environmental result.

As explained extensively in the lam rim teachings, there are specific consequences that accompany each of the types of results. So when one thinks about the prospect of having to experience one of these results, then strong regret about having engaged in the negative act of killing will develop. As explained in the teachings, the intensity of the regret should be to the same degree as regret about having consumed poison, where there is a profound wish to expel the poison from your system. Another example is a poisonous snake suddenly dropping on your lap; you immediately want to get rid of it!

With the example of consuming poison, three individuals consume the same type and quantity of poison at different times. The first person is already dead and the second person dangerously ill and facing death. The third person, having seen that the first person has perished and that the second person is very ill, becomes very anxious when he realises that he has consumed the same substance. With one dead and the other dangerously ill and facing death, the prospect of having to face the same consequences is quite apparent!

While that third person may not have experienced the effects of the poison right away, seeing the fate of the other two he would develop very strong regret and would definitely want to get rid of that poison from his

¹ Here *Compassionate Teacher* refers to the Buddha.
Chapter 2

system. This analogy is presented as a way of indicating the extent of regret about having engaged in negativity.

As the teachings explain, if someone develops strong regret about having engaged in some negativity, then half of the negative karma can be purified just by developing that regret. Furthermore, when strong regret is developed then that will automatically encourage the individual to refrain from engaging in negativity again, thus the power of reversing from the fault will be applied. Then the means to purify negativity, with thorough application of the antidote and the power of the basis, will also naturally arise in the mind. So we can see that the application of the later three opponent powers is related to having developed a strong regret first.

To return to that illustration of the three individuals who have consumed poison, the first person is analogous to the person who has created negativity in the past and, as a result, has been reborn in the lower realms. The second person is analogous to one who is about to be reborn in the lower realms. The third person, seeing the fate of the first and second persons, realises that the negativity that they have created is the very same cause that will lead them to the same consequence experienced by the first and second persons, which is to be reborn in the lower realms. So by contemplating the suffering of the lower realms and realising that one has created the causes to be reborn there oneself, the urgency to purify those negative karmas will naturally develop. In this way a keen wish to purify negative karma will naturally be developed. This is how the understanding of the cause and effect sequence of karma is definitely related to the intensity of our determination to purify our negative karma.

The analogy of the three individuals who have consumed poison, in particular the third individual who is facing the prospect of the same fate of the first two, is a very powerful one. The third person still has a chance to rid themselves of the poison so that they won't have to experience the same fate as the first two. If the poison is identified quickly, there are ways of neutralising or eradicating it. When someone is bitten by a snake, for example, there are anti-venom injections to counteract that poison.

But if measures to eradicate the poison are not taken, it is quite certain that the third individual will have to experience the same consequences as the first and second individuals. So it is up to the third individual to do something about it and to take urgent measures to get rid of the poison. It is good for us to identify ourselves as the third person, who has created negativity but who still has a chance to purify negative karma. When we think about the prospect of having to experience the consequences, we will develop an urgent need to purify negative karma.

It is appropriate to relate ourselves to the third individual. It gives us some sense of hope, in the sense that we are not in the position of the first and second individuals. As an example of the third person, we still have good prospects as we have the chance to purify our negative karmas. So this is a very relevant example to use to encourage ourselves.

Earlier we mentioned the four conditions that compel us to engage in creating negativity. We have just dealt with

the first, lack of conscientiousness. The second is having many delusions, the third is lack of faith and the fourth is the lack of knowledge. These are really important points to consider.

How true it is that we lack conscientiousness?

When the delusions are very prevalent, then they are a doorway to engage in negativity.

Third is the lack of faith, which can be directly related to the lack of faith in karma. If we don't have faith that negativity will result in unpleasant suffering, and that virtue will result in happiness, then there will be nothing to prevent us from engaging in negativity. One will also not take any interest in accumulating virtue.

The fourth condition is quite obvious—if we lack knowledge we won't know how to avoid creating negativity. Lack of knowledge is overcome by gaining knowledge. Once we gain the knowledge of how to engage in virtue and abandon negativity, we will develop the necessary measures for the desired outcome. The whole purpose of our study is to remedy the lack of knowledge. The lam rim teachings tell us that if we lack the knowledge of how to apply the antidotes, then when we come out of meditation there will be nothing to prevent us from engaging in negativity again. The lam rim teachings, which I have covered in the past, explain these points thoroughly.

The power of remedy

Having described the first power the commentary then presents the second power, known as the power of the remedy or, more literally, the application of the antidote. One should not take a limited view of these remedies. Some teachers explain that all virtues can be the application of the antidote. Others explain that all virtues done with the intention of a purification practice will become the application of the antidote. However the fact remains that all virtues serve as a means to become an antidote to negativity. This is a good point to keep in mind.

Gyaltsab Je's presentation in his commentary reads:

The second power: There are, as explained in the *Compendium of Trainings* ...

Shantideva's text *Compendium of Trainings* presents six remedies:

1) ... relying on profound sutras, ...

Here *relying* means to actually recite profound sutras.

2)... meditating on emptiness, ...

This is one of the most profound remedies.

3)... relying on recitation ...

Recitation specifically relates to the recitation of mantras of particular deities, which are powerful for purification.

4)... relying on the holy form, ...

This implies constructing holy images such as statues, and stupas and so forth.

5)... relying on offerings ...

This refers to making offerings.

6)... relying on the names ...

Here *names* means reciting the names of holy beings such as buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The power of resolve

The third power: Refraining perfectly henceforth from creating negativity.

This implies developing a strong commitment that 'Henceforth, I will not create negativity'. One of the points in *refraining perfectly henceforth from creating negativity*, is that in order for it to be a sincere and honest resolve, one needs to develop the strong intention, 'I will not engage in that negativity again'. At that moment one develops a strong intention to refrain from negativity. If, however, later on, due to the earlier mentioned conditions, one finds oneself creating negative karma again, it will not incur the extra negativity of lying, because of the fact that one was sincere and honest at the time the resolution was made.

There are also explanations about how one can make a promise to refrain from negativity for a specific period of time, such as a few hours, one day, two days and so forth.

The power of reliance

The fourth power: Meditating on bodhicitta and so forth.

Although not mentioned explicitly here, this also refers to generating refuge as well as meditating on bodhicitta. This is as explained in other teachings.

Some may think that the power of reliance, or the power of basis, only refers to the three objects of refuge. However, as indicated here, generating bodhicitta is also the power of reliance. One needs to understand this point.

As explained in the teachings, any negative karma we create is in relation to either the objects of refuge or ordinary sentient beings. The negative karma that one creates in relation to the objects of refuge is purified by taking refuge in the objects of refuge. The object we rely upon is the very object with which we created the negative karma! The negative karma we create in relation to sentient beings is remedied by generating bodhicitta for sentient beings. That is why refuge and bodhicitta are specifically listed as being the powerful basis.

Gyalsab Je then explains in the commentary:

Here the first power is explained elaborately.

Here indicates the first power being explained elaborately in this chapter.

Furthermore:

Regarding this one needs to remember the time of the negativity, the cause, the doorway, the action, the object and how often one did it.

This is a very meticulous presentation of how to purify negative karmas. In relation to the *time* we engaged in *the negativity*, it might be hard to recall all of the details of the negativities one has created in the past, such as when we were quite young. But we can definitely recall on a day-to-day basis the kind of negativities we engage in now. *The doorway* indicates the three doorways of body, speech and mind. *Action* refers to the kind of action the negativity involved. *The object*, refers to the object of the negativity *and how often one did that*. As mentioned earlier, although we might not recall specific details from our

past, we can definitely relate to instances of the negativity that we create now.

This can also be related to the might of the omniscient mind. The mind of the Buddha is an omniscient mind, thus it is the only mind that is said to know karma in its entirety; i.e. which knows the most subtle and detailed aspects of karma. Only an omniscient mind is able to know the details about past lives. As ordinary beings we cannot recall any instances of our past lives—we don't have that memory. However when an omniscient being looks at our continuum, they are able to see each and every instance of our past lives and details of how and when we created negative karmas. *The time, the specific negativity, the cause* and so forth, all of these details would be known in great detail. That is why the subtleties of karma are said to be extremely obscure phenomena, which only an omniscient mind can know in full detail.

4.2. The individual meaning

This is subdivided into four categories:

This section explains the meaning of each opponent power again, which are:

4.2.1. The power of thorough repudiation

4.2.2. The power of the basis

4.2.3. The power of the thorough application of the antidote

4.2.4. The power of reversing from faults

4.2.1. The power of thorough repudiation

This is also subdivided into four:

4.2.1.1. Generating regret by analysing the way one created negativity

4.2.1.2. Meditating on regret by fearing dying with negativity and going for refuge

4.2.1.3. Meditating on regret by considering elaborately the way one meaninglessly generated negativity

4.2.1.4. Considering the way negativity is frightful

4.2.1.1. GENERATING REGRET BY ANALYSING THE WAY ONE CREATED NEGATIVITY

Again this is also subdivided into four:

4.2.1.1.1. Making requests to the object of confession

This involves declaring one's negativities and making requests to the object of one's confession.

4.2.1.1.2. General confession from the point of view of time, cause, aspect and so forth

4.2.1.1.3. Confessing heavy negativity created with regard to special objects

4.2.1.1.4. Confessing with regret generated by contemplating the undesired results of non-virtue

4.2.1.1.1. Making requests to the object of confession

The verse relating to this reads:

27. *The complete buddhas residing
In all directions, and the bodhisattvas,
Those possessing great compassion,
I request with folded hands.*

In his commentary Gyalsab Je explains the meaning of this verse thus:

With hands folded I request the fully enlightened buddhas [such as Buddha Shakyamuni] and the bodhisattvas abiding in all the directions, those

endowed with great compassion, to listen to my regretful confessions of negativities.

At this point one visualises the enlightened beings, the buddhas, in the space in front of oneself surrounded by the bodhisattvas. Thus the *buddhas and bodhisattvas* are the objects of reliance to whom one is confessing one's negativities. Even reading this verse itself can be a very meaningful way to build up that visualisation, and to remind oneself of the object of focus for one's confession.

One is pleading with the *buddhas and the bodhisattvas abiding in all the ten directions* to 'Please listen to my regretful confessions'. Here *regretful* has the implication of very strong regret about having engaged in such negativities, to an extent similar to the analogy of having consumed poison and wanting to immediately get rid of that poison. Thus in the presence of these enlightened and holy beings, buddhas and bodhisattvas, who have great compassion and the means to help us to purify our negativities, we declare our negativities and plead with them to please listen to us.

Earlier I explained the analogy of the three beings who consumed poison. When one really thinks about that in relation to the negativities, then one's regret will not just be fleeting. Rather we will definitely develop a very strong and deep sense of regret, and the wish to purify the negativities will naturally be quite strong as well.

It is really important that we reflect upon the consequences of the three types of results of negativity in order to develop that strong determination to purify our negativity. The three types of results are extensively explained in teachings such as the lam rim and it would be good for you to refer to that, to familiarise yourself with those types of results and so forth.

We need to understand the real significance of engaging in preliminary practices such as purification, which is a prerequisite to further developing our meditation practices. The reason we find that it is very hard to focus on the meditation object now, and that our mind is very dull and unclear, is because of negativity, specifically the strong negative imprints that we have on our mind. So, negativity is what hinders our further development.

Another important point to note is that there is a difference between negativity and a negative mind. For example, attachment in the desire realm would be a negative mind and the imprint of attachment left on the mind is the negativity. This is to be understood as follows: whenever one creates any negative action, in the very next moment that particular action will have ceased, however an imprint is left upon the mind in the form of a potential to produce negative results. That imprint left upon the mind is the negativity. Therefore a distinction needs to be made between a negative mind and negativity, and likewise, between virtue and a virtuous mind. While a virtuous mind and non-virtuous or negative minds are consciousness, virtue and negativity are not consciousness. I have explained these distinctions previously as well, and it is important to keep them in mind.

Generally we would say that there are no redeeming qualities in negativity. However the lamas have a common saying, 'Negativity does have one good quality,

which is that it can be purified'. This is also an important point to acknowledge. I have also explained previously that the purification of negativity actually takes place when one engages in a practice that will prevent one from experiencing the negative results of a previously created negative action. So, when a purification practice is done properly, one will not have to experience the negative result of that negativity. There is also a word in Tibetan, *jang* which, when used in relation to negativity, means to purify negativity. But when this particular Tibetan term is used in relation to virtue it implies *increasing* virtue.

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

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