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# *Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Based on the refuge and bodhicitta motivation that we have just generated, let us now engage in the meditation practice. (*Pause for meditation*)

You can generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings, to free 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 listen to the teaching and put it into practice well.

## **4. CONFESSING OF NEGATIVITY WITH THE FOUR COMPLETE POWERS**

### **4.2. The individual meaning**

#### **4.2.1. The power of thorough repudiation**

##### **4.2.1.1. GENERATING REGRET BY ANALYSING THE WAY ONE CREATED NEGATIVITY**

###### **4.2.1.1.1. Making requests to the object of confession (cont.)**

In our last session we spoke quite extensively about the purpose and need for purification practices. Then we covered verse twenty-seven. As presented in this verse and explained in the commentary, one first visualises the enlightened beings and the objects of refuge in the space before oneself. One then makes the request to these enlightened beings; in particular to the Omniscient and Compassionate One, Buddha Shakyamuni, to accept one's confession. One then engages in the purification practices. In fact, it is really very good to recall the Buddha's presence in all our activities, both mundane as well as spiritual. That is a really good way to be mindful about ensuring that one maintains a virtuous frame of mind.

In our normal activities such as drinking or eating, it is good to recall the Buddha and make offerings of the food and drink to the Three Jewels. When that becomes a habit, then whenever we consume food and drink, even if it is just a cup of tea, we will remember to offer it. If we were to forget to offer it in a rushed moment, soon afterwards we would start to feel a bit uneasy and feel regret, 'Oh, I didn't get the opportunity to offer my tea'.

When we start to feel uncomfortable in the event that we forget to make an offering, then that is one sign that we have actually incorporated the practice into our daily life. Likewise, it is good to remember the enlightened beings during other activities such as travelling and so forth. Also before we go to bed it would be really good to visualise the Buddha right above our pillow. Recalling the enlightened beings just before we go to sleep would indeed be a very good practice.

We can notice for ourselves that when we are not able to engage in a familiar activity we start to feel

uncomfortable. This is particularly true with mundane activities, such as when we have formed the habit of going to a movie once a week or watching an episode of a TV serial every week. When we don't get a chance to do that activity then we feel uncomfortable and regret what we might have missed.

It is because of our familiarity that there is a sense of unease and regret when we break that habit. Just as that is true for insignificant mundane activities, so too as we start to develop more and more familiarity with engaging in virtue, that same sort of regret will arise when we miss an opportunity to engage in virtue.

We need to make it part of our practice to periodically recall the enlightened beings such as the Buddha, so that we feel the presence of the Buddha at all times. Every time that we contemplate the qualities of the enlightened beings, we obtain immeasurable benefit. The more we become familiar in recalling the unsurpassable qualities of the enlightened beings, such as their great love and compassion, the more it benefits our own mind. Thus, any kind of mental disturbance that we may feel will subside the moment that we recall the qualities of the Buddha. Our mind will definitely feel at ease and we will feel a real sense of fulfilment. This is a very practical benefit.

By recalling the Buddha on a day-to-day basis we familiarise our mind with the qualities of the enlightened beings, which will naturally carry through all the way to the end of our life. Then, when we are facing death, due to our earlier familiarity we will naturally be able to remember the Buddha. Focusing on the Buddha at the time of death will definitely protect us from being reborn in the unfortunate realms in the very next life; that is because one's mind will be completely immersed in virtue. As explained in the teachings, when the last thought in our mind is a virtuous one, it will ensure that we will have a higher rebirth. This is how the Buddha, the enlightened beings, and the objects of refuge protect us, by enabling our mind to be in a virtuous state.

The following verse was presented last week:

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

These lines exhort us to recall the enlightened and noble beings, buddhas and bodhisattvas, all of whom possess great compassion. The essence of the qualities of the enlightened beings and bodhisattvas is great compassion, and just recalling this will ensure that our mind is in tune with great compassion. This is an incredible method to generate a virtuous and positive frame of mind, as well as a way to amass great merit. As mentioned previously, through the familiarity with this state of mind in our daily life, we will automatically be able to anchor our thoughts and focus on the objects of refuge at the time of death. Our mind will be clear and calm and focused on the essence of the practice, which is going for refuge.

If we don't pay enough attention to this fundamental aspect of practice and constantly seek some higher form of practice, then the danger is that at the crucial moment of death we will be confused as to what to focus on. If we

have never developed real familiarity with any one practice, then at the critical moment when we face death we may wonder what practice to do and what object to focus on. A confused mind is not a conducive state of mind to be in at the time of death. So we really need to acknowledge the essence of the practice and try to familiarise ourselves with it. At our level we may not yet be able to engage in grand or high level practices, however we can definitely manage to focus on the objects of refuge.

#### 4.2.1.1.2. *General confession from the point of view of time, cause, aspect etc.*

This is another meticulous presentation. Here we go into detail about the time, cause and aspect of the negativities that one has engaged in. Recalling these details and confessing them makes our purification practice a complete form of practice.

The following verses are quite easy to comprehend, so we can go through them quickly.

28. *From beginningless cyclic existence,  
In this life and in others,  
The negativity that I have done by myself  
Or induced others to do,*
29. *Which I hid due to being confused by ignorance,  
That I rejoiced in,  
Seeing these faults  
I confess them to the protector from the depth  
of my heart.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Since beginningless time I have circled in cyclic existence. I confess all negativities in this and other lives due to being confused with regard to the ripening result of karma.

#### **Time**

The first part refers to the duration. In terms of duration we have circled in samsaric existence since beginningless lifetimes. It is said in the teachings that we cannot pinpoint our first life, thus there is no beginning to samsara; the continuity goes back endlessly. We could hypothesise about our beginning, but it is in fact impossible to determine the first human race on earth. Likewise with going back through our past lives; it is impossible to determine that there was a beginning. Thus, as indicated here, we have been circling in samsara over beginningless lifetimes.

#### **Cause**

One confesses all the negativities one has done in this life, as well as all other previous lifetimes. The cause of those negativities is being confused or, more literally, not knowing the ripening result of karma. So confusion or ignorance particularly refers to ignorance of karma, i.e. not knowing the cause and effect sequence of karma, such as that engaging in non-virtuous actions will bring about unpleasant consequences, and engaging in virtuous actions will bring about happy results. So here ignorance specifically means not knowing the cause and effect sequence of karma. In particular, as explained here, the ripening results of negative karma are suffering; particularly to be reborn in lower realms. That covers causes.

#### **Aspect**

Because of confusion or ignorance one does not know that by engaging in virtuous actions one will experience happy results, and by engaging in non-virtuous actions one will experience suffering. Without knowing this, how would one possibly avoid creating negative karma and adopt virtue? Without that knowledge there is no encouragement to practise in that way.

This understanding of the cause and effect sequence of karma helps to prevent one from creating negative karma, while at the same time adopting virtue. Most importantly, it will help one to generate great compassion for others who are engaging in non-virtuous activities. Normally when we see someone engaging in grave negative deeds, we might scorn them or feel hostile, thinking that they are really bad and evil. But with this understanding we will feel great compassion for them, knowing that they are engaging in deeds that will bring about the grave consequences of great suffering. Then our attitude towards them will be naturally one of great compassion, because we understand that they are creating these negative deeds out of ignorance. Overpowered and controlled by ignorance, they are compelled to engage in those negative deeds. This is the reason why we should feel great compassion for them.

We can relate to this with our own experiences. Whenever we have engaged in negative deeds it was because we felt that we were compelled to do so; we either didn't know the consequences or because we were controlled by strong delusions.

The way to really contemplate how beings who are voluntarily engaging in great misdeeds have no control over their actions, and indeed are compelled to engage in these negative deeds, is to relate it to ourselves. We are supposed to have an understanding of karma, knowing that engaging in non-virtue will bring about suffering and engaging in virtue will bring about happiness. Yet we still find ourselves engaging in negative deeds under the influence of strong delusion. If that is case for us who have some understanding about karma, then how much more so will it be true for those who don't have any understanding about karma?

When we bring that understanding to mind, then instead of feeling hostile and generating anger towards those who are creating misdeeds, we can develop a sense of great compassion for them. Understanding karma becomes a means for one to develop compassion and also develop a sense of patience with them. These are really important points for us to consider. Whenever we relate to passages in the teachings such as those presented here, it is always good to try to reflect upon the main points. How does it become personal instruction? How does it encourage us to engage in the practice of developing essential points about the path? How does it help us to develop a sense of renunciation? How does it help us to gain higher levels of understanding? How does it encourage us? To relate the teachings to one's own understanding of the essential points of practice is most important.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary then further explains:

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I confess the negativities that I have done myself and those that I have induced others to do, as well as the faults of having rejoiced in the negativities of others, due to being oppressed by the confusion of ignorance regarding the law of cause and effect.

As the commentary explains, we are confessing *the negativities that I have done myself*. Thus we are confessing negativities we have engaged in ourselves, as well as those that we *have induced others to do*. The negativities that we have engaged in include non-virtuous actions such as killing, stealing and so forth. Inducing others means influencing others to engage in negative actions. Here it is important to note that in order to incur a negativity of killing or stealing and so forth, one does not need to perform the action oneself. If one influences or orders someone else to perform an action on behalf of oneself, or for the purpose of both, then when they complete that action, one incurs the negativity of that misdeed oneself. It is essential to understand this.

Furthermore there is the fault of *having rejoiced in the negativities of others*. This refers to feeling glad when others are engaging in negativity, rather than acknowledging their actions as being a fault or a misdeed. One incurs negativity when one is happy to see others engaging in negativity.

One commits these negativities *due to being oppressed by the confusion of ignorance*. As explained previously, one engages in these negativities as a result of being completely confused or ignorant about the law of cause and effect.

Thus there are three main types of negativity: those performed by oneself; those that one has induced others to do; and rejoicing in the negativities that others perform.

In his commentary, Gyalsab Je further explains how to develop regret and make a confession.

Generating an understanding of these faults of mine I regret them, and accordingly confess them from the depth of my mind to the protectors, not hiding or concealing them.

As explained here, *generating an understanding of these faults of mine*, indicates that one actually recognises the negative actions that one has created and acknowledges them as faults. There is a part in the confession ceremony for monks and nuns where the abbot asks, 'Do you see the faults as faults?', to which the response is, 'Yes, I do'. That response indicates that one is acknowledging the faults as being faults and taking personal responsibility for them. Following that, the next question is, 'Henceforth will you apply restraint well?', and the response is 'Yes, I will'.

Confessing faults *from the depth of my mind* indicates acknowledging one's negative actions as being misdeeds, and from the depth of one's heart generates a determination to confess and purify them. As mentioned here, one confesses these negativities *to the protectors*, which means the enlightened beings and bodhisattvas. So the enlightened beings are the object of one's confession, and one does not hide or conceal negativities in their presence. This indicates that one completely declares all the negativities one has accumulated since beginningless time.

Following that confession with a strong regret that is generated from the depth of one's heart, one then develops a strong commitment not to engage in negativity again. That is the third power, the power of resolve or refraining henceforth from creating negativity. So we can see in these two verses a summary of the four opponent powers.

As the past masters have indicated, if one develops very strong regret for any negativity that one has engaged in, then half of one's negative karma is purified. This shows how important it is to develop a strong regret. When one applies the third opponent power of resolve or refraining from creating negativity, then one has secured an intact practice of purification; it is in this way that negative karmas are definitely purified.

One also needs to take note that regret can be either virtuous or non-virtuous. As the great master Vasubandhu indicated, when one develops regret about non-virtuous actions, then that is a virtue. Whereas, if one regrets doing good deeds, that is a negativity.

When one recalls the misdeeds and negativities that one has engaged in in the past and develops strong regret about that, then that becomes a major part of the purification practice. Later, after having engaged in other forms of practice to accumulate virtue, if one rejoices in the virtue that one has accumulated, then that becomes the means to further expand and increase one's virtue.

So it is good to know that developing regret about misdeeds is a way to purify them, while rejoicing in good deeds will be a means to accumulate virtue. Otherwise we could fall into the danger of actually regretting having engaged in good deeds, which would be a complete waste of positive energy.

On a practical level it is good for us to take this as a personal instruction. As ordinary beings it is quite impossible for us to completely avoid engaging in negativity, because we are still oppressed by the confusion of ignorance. But we do have these methods for purifying that negativity. So it is good for us to develop a sense of regret whenever we find ourselves engaging in any kind of negativity. If we can remind ourselves to immediately regret any negative action, then slowly we can improve to transform ourselves. Of course, this will be explained in more detail later.

As mentioned in last week's session, past teachers have indicated that one quality that negativity has is that it can be purified. This means that we don't have the excuse, 'I can't do anything about it'. We definitely can purify negativity if we engage in purification practice. However, one needs to be mindful not to become complacent thinking, 'Oh well, if negativity can be purified I might just as well engage in negativity'. That would be a lame excuse for creating more negativity.

#### ***4.2.1.1.3. Confessing heavy negativity created with regard to special objects***

These special objects are presented in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, the last text we studied. The special objects are those objects that are endowed with unsurpassable qualities, such as the objects of refuge; the Three Jewels; those who have been personally kind and benefitted us, such as our parents; and objects that are the

source of whatever understanding that we have gained, who are our abbots and teachers, our spiritual friends. Spiritual friends can be the source of kindness as well as a source of knowledge and qualities.

Any negativities with respect to these objects are very heavy negativities, and need to be purified.

The root text reads as follows:

30. *Whatever harm I have inflicted  
To the Three Jewels,  
Father, mother and other teachers  
With body, speech and mind, due to afflictions.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

I confess all negativities that I, this confused person, created with regard to the Three Jewels, my father, mother and other fields of merit like teachers and others, due to the cause of the three poisons, with the three doors of my body, speech and mind.

The particular negativities that one confesses are the negativities relating to oneself as *a confused person* who is oppressed by ignorance. Due to this confusion, one has created negativities *with regard to the Three Jewels*, which are the objects endowed with great qualities, and *my father and mother*, who are objects of kindness and benefit to oneself. *Fields of merit like teachers* indicates one's own teachers, and *others* refers to those like the abbot, who have bestowed vows and so forth upon oneself. It can also refer to teachers with whom one may not have direct connection, or other beings who are special objects; so *others* can be quite expansive.

The *cause* for creating negativities in relation to the special objects is *the three poisons*, and the manner or doorway through which one creates those negativities refers to *the three doors of one's body, speech and mind*.

There is a possibility that, as a result of strong delusions, one might **physically** harm special objects such as one's parents or teachers.

Or we may have harmed them **verbally**, criticising what they are saying, or saying it is not true, or reversing their points against them.

Creating negativity through the doorway of one's **mind** would be generating wrong views in relation to the Three Jewels, one's teachers or one's parents, or having harmful intentions towards them.

Whenever one engages in any negativity, it is always through these three doors; there is no other way to engage in negativity other than through our physical actions, our speech and negative states of mind. Of these three, the most important to protect at all times is one's state of mind. That is because physical misdeeds and negative speech come about as a consequence of having negative intentions in one's mind.

As indicated in the Vinaya sutras, the main emphasis has to be on protecting and disciplining one's mind. Then, as one disciplines one's mind, one's physical and verbal actions will naturally be disciplined as well. So, that is where we need to really focus our attention.

On a practical level, we might in this lifetime have not found occasions where we might directly criticise the Three Jewels or create heavy negative karma in relation to the Three Jewels; we might not have been in close

proximity to teachers for long, thus have not accumulated heavy negativity with respect to them.

However, one arena where we have probably created heavy negative karma is in relation to our parents. We might have found many occasions where we have engaged in physical, verbal or mental negativities. So this is something that we need to really acknowledge and take ownership of. Then we will see that there is a definite need to engage in purification practice.

The confession and purification practice with regard to the special objects is to confess the negativities and engage in purifying them, by applying the antidote. Then resolve, 'Henceforth I will not create such negativities in relation to the special objects'. This is how we engage in the purification practice.

With respect to these special objects, the way to purify one's negative karma is by developing a strong sense of regret from the depth of one's heart, confess one's negativities, and then making the commitment, 'Henceforth I will not engage in these negativities'.

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

This is another significant point. Here one contemplates the undesirable results of non-virtue, where one thinks about the ripened result of each specific non-virtue, as well as other types of result of each of the negative karmas we have created. When one contemplates the prospect of having to experience those results, then a strong sense of regret and wishing to confess those negativities will arise quite spontaneously.

The relevant verse is:

31. *I, this sinner, afflicted with various faults  
Of different negativities, whatever frightful  
Negativities I created,  
I confess to those that guide all.*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

I, this sinner, who is afflicted with the many faults of attachment and the like, the causes that produce the results of the hell realms and so forth, have created many heavy negative karmas of killing and so forth. Whatever frightful negativity I created I confess to the ones that guide all.

The commentary indicates that the one who has created the negative karma is oneself, a *sinner afflicted with many faults*. The extent of the negativities we have amassed is such that we are the very embodiment of faults of attachment and the other two poisons. The *many negative karmas, such as killing and so forth* that we have created are *the causes that produce the results of hell realms and so forth*. So the faults within oneself act as the causes that produce the resulting suffering states, such as the hell realms. With a sense of a strong regret, one confesses all this frightful negativity to the omniscient buddhas, who are the guides to all sentient beings. Thus, by contemplating the undesirable result of non-virtue one will generate a strong sense of regret, and following that, actually engage in an action of confession and purification; then a sense of restraint will naturally follow.

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#### 4.2.1.2. MEDITATING ON REGRET BY FEARING DEATH WITH NEGATIVITY AND GOING FOR REFUGE

We can leave this for the next session.

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Edited Version*

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In relation to the points that have been covered this evening, it is good to really bring to mind and acknowledge any negativities one has created, with the understanding and knowledge that they can be purified. Then one develops a strong sense of regret, and in the presence of omniscient and compassionate beings, such as the buddhas and the bodhisattvas, one makes a confession. When we take the initiative in this way we will definitely reap the benefits of the confession.

The following verses in the chapter are an elaborate presentation of the ways one has engaged in negativities. Lest one is tempted to think, 'Maybe I am free from negativity', or 'I might not have engaged in much negativity', the following verses present very clearly the ways in which one has created negativities. They also explain the consequences of not confessing and purifying those negativities. Both the gravity of the situation and the urgency of having to purify those negativities are explained very clearly. So reading the following verses and contemplating them is a really meaningful personal practice.

We are quite familiar with the seven limb practice, which can be presented in a few lines. However, each of those seven limb practices can be practised very elaborately. Earlier in these teachings we covered the limb of offering, and then the limb of prostration was presented. Now we are in the limb of confession. Each of the seven limbs are actually presented very elaborately in this text in great detail. So when we recite the *Seven Limb Prayer* and do some sort of practice in relation to the seven limbs, all the material presented here will enhance our practice, because of our deeper understanding.

The *Seven Limb Prayer* that we recite regularly prior to engaging in teachings and other practices begins with:

I prostrate with my three doors.

This indicates the doors of body, speech and mind. So what does the prostration of the three doors imply? This was elaborately presented earlier.

I make actual offerings and mentally created offerings.

What those actual offerings are and what mentally created offerings are was also presented very elaborately. Do you remember?

I confess all negativities that I have created since beginningless time.

All of this has been explained in great detail tonight.

These verses might consist of just a few lines, but when one has a deeper understanding of what each practice entails, it will, as mentioned previously, really enhance one's practice.

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