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# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ལྷན་མེད་མཁའ་འགྲུབ་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation that we have just generated, we can now engage in the meditation practice. [meditation]

Let us now generate a positive motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines:

I need to obtain enlightenment for the sake of benefitting all sentient beings. So for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well.

#### 4.2.1.4. CONSIDERING THE WAY NEGATIVITY IS FRIGHTFUL (CONT.)

**4.2.1.4.2. If one does not purify negativity, then one must experience suffering even in this life**

This has three subdivisions:

4.2.1.4.2.1. If one does not purify one's negativities, then one's friends and relatives cannot rescue us from the suffering of the life-force being cut

4.2.1.4.2.2. It is fearful because of not having created merit

4.2.1.4.2.3. One will be overcome by regret

**4.2.1.4.2.1. If one does not purify one's negativities, then one's friends and relatives cannot rescue us from the suffering of the life-force being cut**

This is an essential point because it relates to the most critical time of our existence, which is the transition to the next life. As the outline indicates, friends and relatives cannot help us at all at that time. The analogy that is given in other teachings is that the end of our life is like plucking a hair from butter; just like the piece of hair comes out solely by itself, there is nothing you can take with you when you go onto the next life.

The point here is that the consequence of not purifying our negativities is that we will experience suffering when our life force is cut, hence the need to purify negativities. If one were to die without having the opportunity to create any merit or virtue, the prospect of having to experience the consequences in a future life would generate great fear. However, as everyone here is engaged in purification practices, I'm sure no one here would have this fear!

Nothing can help us at the time of death except for our stock of virtue and merit, coupled with the purification practices we've done. So here we are being exhorted to actually engage in purification practices.

The lines relating to this section are:

40. *While I am lying on my bed,  
Although I am surrounded by all my  
relatives and friends  
The feeling of being separated from life  
Is experienced by myself alone.*

41ab. *When I am held by the minions of the lord  
of death*

*What benefit are friends, what benefit are  
relatives?*

Shantideva is saying, 'There is nothing to alleviate my fear; friends and relatives are of no use against the minions of the lord of death when he holds my frightened flesh'. This again is not very obscure or abstract—it is quite obvious that when someone dies, they are completely alone and nothing can help them at that time.

The explanation in Gyaltsab Je's commentary is also quite clear so we will go through the next few verses quite rapidly. As Gyaltsab Je explains:

If one does not create merit, then at the time of death, when I am lying on my bed, although friends and relatives surround me with their affection and sorrow, I will have to experience by myself alone the suffering feeling of having my life-force cut.

We can readily understand that merit is accumulated by abandoning the ten non-virtues such as killing, stealing and so forth. In fact, adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues are very practical ways to accumulate merit. If one has not engaged in practices such as these, then, even though we are surrounded on our deathbed by loving friends and relatives, which is often customary, they cannot help us.

As the commentary explains, no matter how much affection they have for us, at that time *I will have to experience by myself, alone, the suffering the feeling of having my life force cut*. When the teachings refer to the suffering of death they are specifically referring to the suffering that arises when the mind, or the consciousness, is separated from the body. For those who are not prepared, that will be a time of great suffering.

While the main suffering at the time of death is the separation of the mind from the body, there are other kinds of suffering too, such as being separated from one's loved ones, one's wealth, possessions and all the enjoyments one was attached to in this life. This separation brings great mental agony and suffering.

As explained in the teachings, one form of suffering is not being able to meet with those we want to meet and not being able to accumulate the wealth we want and so forth. Having amassed a certain amount of wealth and met with loving people, we experience suffering when we have to separate from loved ones and discard our wealth. As explained in detail in the teachings, all of these sufferings become more pronounced and more intense at the time of death.

In this life, we all know that even a temporary separation from one's relatives and loved ones causes us suffering. But there is always the likelihood of meeting them again or finding another loved one, at which time the earlier suffering will be alleviated. But at the time of death, the separation is permanent; you will have to leave absolutely everything behind, never to be seen or enjoyed again.

As the commentary explains, friends and relatives cannot help us against the minions or messengers of death.

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When the lord of death holds our frightened flesh, friends and relatives are of no use. Only the Dharma can rescue us at that time. It is said that those who have created a lot of negativity and have not got around to purifying it, will experience all kinds of fearsome visions at the time of death, which cause great fear and suffering. Conversely, it is said that those who have accumulated a lot of virtue and merit will have pleasant experiences which will help to soothe and settle down their mind, rather than causing fear. These sorts of experiences seem to take place when an individual's life force is being separated from their body.

What point is there in being excessively attached to wealth, friends, relatives and so forth when at the time of death they cannot be of any help to us? We spend so much time and energy trying to please them, yet when we need them the most they cannot help us. In order to apply antidotes to overcome strong attachment to worldly objects such as relatives, possessions and so forth, one needs to engage in accumulating virtue, which is the Dharma. So here we are being exhorted to realise that only the Dharma can rescue us and help us at the time of death.

Our ultimate protector is the Dharma, which brings us back to our practice. One particularly powerful practice that we regularly attempt to do in our sessions is the *tong len* practice of giving and taking. How incredibly beneficial it would be if we could implement this powerful practice at the time of death resolving, 'At this time I am taking upon all of the suffering of all beings and may whatever discomfort I am experiencing now be a substitute for the suffering of other beings. May their suffering ripen upon me and may other beings not have to experience such suffering'. If we are familiar with this practice we will be able to recall it without hesitation when we are dying. What an incredible practice that would be!

As a consequence of this amazingly powerful practice of offering love and compassion to all other beings, the mind will naturally become calm and peaceful. And if one were to die in that peaceful and tranquil state there is no question that one will be protected in the next life, and not be reborn in the unfortunate realms. Indeed the very purpose of the *tong len*, or giving and taking practice, is that it is a way to transform all difficulties on the path to enlightenment. This is really an important point and I want to emphasise the importance of not taking the *tong len* practice lightly; if we take it seriously now it will definitely be of help at that crucial time of death.

We might not be experiencing extreme difficulty or great suffering right now, and so we might not see the relevance of doing this giving and taking practice. The real purpose of doing the practice now is to familiarise our mind with it. Then, when difficult situations arise, we will be able to immediately and naturally rely upon this practice because of our familiarity with it. If we don't pay much attention to practices such as the *tong len* practice now, but familiarise ourselves with strong desires and attachments then, due to that familiarity, it will be quite natural for strong desire and attachment arise at the time of death. So it is really important that we prepare ourselves from now on.

The *tong len* practice is definitely one of the highest forms of practice as it protects one from unfortunate rebirths. As mentioned previously, it is based on love and compassion towards other sentient beings, and if one dies with a sense of love and compassion in one's heart, then there is no possibility of taking an unfortunate rebirth. Not only will dying with love and compassion in one's heart secure a good rebirth, but it will be a rebirth endowed with the conditions of meeting with the Mahayana teachings and the perfect Mahayana gurus, and all of the conditions that will enable one to practise the Dharma. These are essential points that we need to keep in mind.

Even though it will be explained in more detail further on, we need to see that this explanation relates to the real meaning of Dharma. The Dharma protects whatever virtue and merit we have accumulated within our own mental continuum. In the teachings the actual or ultimate Dharma is presented as the true cessation and the true path that are in the mental continuum of the arya beings. If that's what we relate to as the Dharma, then how could the truth of path and truth of cessation in an arya being's mental continuum actually help us? We cannot relate to that on a personal level. If we relate to the Dharma in that way then it is really hard to explain how Dharma serves as our protector. Whereas when we relate to the Dharma to the virtue and merit that we have accumulated within our own mental continuum, then it makes sense when the teachings explain that the Dharma is the actual protector. That is what is to be understood.

To restate the point, it is explained that the Dharma protects one from the unfortunate realms. So when we relate to the Dharma as a protector, we need to understand how it protects us from an unfortunate rebirth in the next life. When we understand that it is the merit and virtue within our own mental continuum that protects us from taking an unfortunate rebirth, we begin to understand how the Dharma protects us. When we see that, we can understand the literal meaning of Dharma, which is to hold its own entity. In the context of the Buddhadharma, this means holding one's mind from adverse conditions. This is the real meaning of the Dharma. The meaning of the word *dara* in Vajradhara also means to hold; thus Vajradhara literally means 'the one who holds a vajra'.

#### **4.2.1.4.2.2. It is fearful because of not having created merit**

This implies that if one has created merit, there is no need to be fearful at the time of death. We can relate this to the experiences of people who are facing death. When people who normally don't pay much attention to spiritual practice and so forth come to the end of their life and face death, it seems that it suddenly dawns on them that there is something beyond the material world. It seems that they realise that there is some intangible thing that is not found in the physical or material world. At that time, they may experience sadness that they had not paid any attention to this during their life, when they were completely immersed in the worldly aspects of the material world. This experience is not restricted to spiritual or Dharma practitioners—it dawns on ordinary people from all walks of life.

The next two lines of the verse are:

*41cd. At that time only merit can rescue,  
But I also did not rely on that.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on these lines read:

At that time only merits such as refuge, keeping morality and so forth are the supreme refuge, but I also did not rely on them.

This shows regret because of not having practiced virtue.

When the commentary explains, *at that time only merits such as refuge, keeping morality and so forth are the supreme refuge*, the word *only* implies that, as explained earlier, one's wealth, possessions, relatives and friends are of no help at the time of death. The only thing of benefit is the merit that one has accumulated by taking wholehearted refuge in the Three Jewels and observing morality, which is referred to in the commentary as the *supreme refuge*.

Observing morality is based on abandoning the ten non-virtues, which we can all definitely attempt to practise. There is no need for us to take the life of others, so we can definitely avoid killing; we are fortunate enough that we don't have to engage in the act of stealing due to insufficient means; as lay people you can definitely avoid sexual misconduct such as adultery and so forth. None of this is out of your reach. Avoiding the remaining non-virtues is also within your capacity. So abandoning the ten non-virtues is not an obscure practice, or difficult to relate to.

In fact the *Abhidharma* says that most Dharma practices are actually subsumed into abandoning the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues. It is good to really pay attention to observing the ten virtues. In everyday life, we all take refuge as part of our daily practice, and we should spend significant time considering the qualities of the refuge objects and how they are the supreme objects, rather than just giving lip service and merely repeating the words. Taking such wholehearted refuge in our daily life, as well as observing ethics and morality, is a way to amass merit and virtue, which will help us at the time of death. This is the point that is being presented here.

Today when I was reading the text I spent some significant time just reflecting on these essential points—I became quite immersed in them for almost an hour.

Our whole practice is subsumed in the heading *It is fearful because of not having created merit*. That is the crux of our practice, so I try in my daily life to spend time considering these points. It would also be good for all of you to really pay some attention to them and take them to heart.

When studying this text or referring to these points, it is good to relate them to the Lam Rim teachings. The topics of the Lam Rim should not be put aside when one is doing other study or practices. The points in the Lam Rim are the very basis of whatever practice we do, so we should complement the explanations in this text with the understanding we have gained from reading and studying the Lam Rim. Then our study will be more beneficial.

#### 4.2.1.4.2.3. One will be overcome by regret

All of the earlier points relate to the power of regret which is one of the four opponent powers. This is an essential part of any purification practice because it is said when strong regret is generated it suffices to purify half of the negativity that one has incurred. So it is essential that we try to develop a strong sense of regret for any negativity that we may have created in the past, along the lines of, 'It is incredibly unfortunate that I was compelled to engage in this negativity, and I need to overcome and purify it by every possible means'. That is the kind of intention one needs to develop.

We are all here under the assumption that we are Dharma practitioners, so we need to really pay attention to what is essential for our practice, which is developing regret about negativity, rather than rejoicing in it. There is the danger that one may regret some virtue, feeling that it is too hard and difficult. There is also the danger of rejoicing in having an opportunity to create negativity, thinking 'For years I have wanted to experience this and I have not had the opportunity so far. It's really incredible that I have this opportunity now. How wonderful!'. Rejoicing in negativity in this way is completely contrary to the actual practice of Dharma. So we definitely need to protect our minds from this danger.

Since we all bear the name of Dharma practitioners it is not out of place for us to attempt to practise the Dharma in the most appropriate way, which means developing regret for negativities, and rejoicing in our virtues and so forth. I don't blame those who try to fill what otherwise seems to be an uncomfortable and lonely life by trying to find a girlfriend or a boyfriend, who may seemingly fill that void and provide some sort of pleasant experiences. However, when we really think about it, there is really no ultimate benefit in spending time and energy on that.

The verse under this heading reads:

*42. Protector, I, this careless one,  
Did not search out these dangers.  
Even though, in this impermanent life  
I accomplish much negativity for them.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary quite succinct:

Referring to the object of refuge as *Protector* one proclaims: I, this reckless person, did not search out these dangers of the lower realms and I did not know about them. But I generated much negativity in this impermanent life for the purpose of this life, such as friends and so forth. This I regret.

As the commentary indicates, the objects of refuge such as the buddhas and the great bodhisattvas are protectors who are endowed with loving kindness. In proclaiming them as *protectors* the commentary is indicating that one must rely on them. Thus *one proclaims* in front of these objects of refuge who are endowed with great love and compassion, 'I, this reckless person, did not search out these dangers or fears of the lower realms'. Here *reckless* comes from the Tibetan word *bak-me*, which is the opposite of *bak-yo* which means conscientiousness. Thus reckless

refers to the lack of conscientiousness, which I've explained previously.<sup>1</sup>

So a reckless person would be one who does not maintain a conscientious mind. Such a lack of conscientiousness would allow the delusions to overpower the mind, leading to actions that incur many faults. Thus, many faults are created under the influence of the delusions because of the lack of conscientiousness. Conversely when we apply conscientiousness, we protect ourselves from the influence of the delusions, and thus from engaging in many faults.

When one does not apply conscientiousness, one becomes a reckless person, and out of recklessness, or a lack of conscientiousness, *one did not search out these dangers of the lower realms because one does not know about them*. This implies that recklessness arises as a result of ignorance, in particular ignorance of how karma functions. Due to a lack of faith in karma one doesn't realise that the consequence of negativity is suffering and so forth. Here *dangers* refers to the suffering of death itself, both at the point of the separation of one's mind from the body, as well as the sufferings of the intermediate state.

Apparently there are particular sufferings that are experienced in the intermediate state such as visions, and of course there is the suffering of the next life in unfortunate rebirths. Not considering the consequences of negativity brings about this suffering. And, as explained here, 'Due to this ignorance, I generated much negativity in this impermanent life for the purpose of this life such as friends and so forth'. One's life is impermanent and by not reflecting upon the impermanence of one's life, one incurs a lot of negativities due to attachment to friends, constantly trying to please them, and trying to vanquish or overcome one's enemies, or those with whom one disagrees due to aversion. In this way, one will incur a lot of negativities. Having realised that, and understanding the consequences, one will develop strong regret about having engaged in these negativities.

The essential point of this verse is that it is by reflecting upon the various negativities one has accumulated in this very lifetime, one develops strong regret, along with the intention to purify those negativities.

#### 4.2.1.4.3. *The reason why it is so fearful*

The two verses presented under this heading read:

43. *If a person is led today to the place  
Where his limbs will be chopped off, he is  
frightened.  
One's appearance will differ to before,  
With a dry mouth, burning eyes and the  
like.*
44. *One will be held by the terrifying  
Helpers of the Lord of Death  
And befallen by the terrifying sickness,  
What need is there to mention the very  
pitiable?*

The commentary then presents the meaning of these verses:

A person who is being led today by other humans to the ground where his limbs will be chopped off, will be frightened. His mouth will be dry, his complexion will be pale, his eyes will burn and so forth. As such, his appearance will be quite different to before.

If that is so, then what need is there to mention the fear of the extremely pitiful person, whose flesh is being held by the fearful minions of the lord of death and who is stricken with the fear of death. Such a person will have great fear:

Hence, generate regret for negativity!

In the past those who stole were punished by having their hands chopped off. So being led to the place of punishment where *their limbs were be chopped off* would generate a lot of fear. Using this analogy the commentary explains that when such a person is led to the place of punishment, they will be stricken with great fear to the point of their mouth being dry, the complexion of their face becoming completely distorted and their eyes burning and so forth. When we see someone being led to a trial and so forth, their heads are bent down and you can see on their face a lot of embarrassment, and the fear they are experiencing, and how their very appearance is completely different to their normal state.

People are taken to the places of punishment by *other humans* who have the same nature and body and so forth. If being led to the place of punishment by other humans generates great fear, *then what need is there to mention the fear of the extremely pitiful person, whose flesh is being held by the fearful minions of the lord of death*.

As mentioned previously, those who have engaged in negativities will experience extreme and fearful visions at the time of death. When such a person has these visions of fearsome beings leading them away from their life source, it definitely gives rise to extreme fear. I've heard that when those who have engaged in warfare and have taken the lives of others, such as generals and so forth, approach the last stages of their life, they have visions of weapons coming towards them, or others coming to kill them with weapons and so forth. It seems that what they engaged in during their life comes back to them in the form of these fearsome visions. In their mind, it is very real and brings about tremendous fear.

The point in relating all of this is that one needs to generate regret for one's negativity with the intention of wanting to purify it. We might bring to mind whatever negativity we can recall from this very lifetime, but there might be occasions when we feel, 'Oh, I haven't done anything as bad as taking a life and so forth'. But if one considers one's previous lifetimes, one can definitely assume that one has accumulated all sorts of negative and evil deeds in previous lifetimes. All of that needs to be brought to mind, and we need to develop regret for that as well, with a sense of wanting to purify that negativity.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the teaching of 21 March 2006.

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#### 4.2.1.4.4. *The way one will be overwhelmed by suffering later*

This is referring to our future lives. The two verses under this heading are:

45. *'Who can perfectly rescue me from  
These great dangers', I exclaim.  
With fear showing in my wide open eyes  
I look into the four directions for help.*
46. *Seeing that there is no refuge in the four  
directions  
My mind becomes completely dark.  
If there is no refuge in that place,  
Then what shall one do at that time?*

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

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In explaining these verses Gyaltzab Je's commentary reads:

Having been reborn in the hells and seeing the hell guardians, one becomes very afraid and exclaims: 'Oh, which person can rescue me from this great fear?'

With fear showing in one's wide open eyes, one searches in the four directions for a refuge. When one does not find one despite one's search, one's mind becomes completely dark. Hence one should go for refuge to the Three Jewels starting right now.

If there is no refuge in the hells that rescues one from dangers, then there is nothing to do then, and one must make an effort right now to becoming free from the causes of those dangers.

While the commentary is quite clear, the main point being presented is the importance of contemplating the prospect of having to be reborn in unfortunate realms such as the hell realms. The very nature that state is such that one has no immediate protector. Even if it occurred to one to search for refuge, one couldn't find it because that is the very nature of having such a rebirth, which, of course, is the result of one's negativities. If it is daunting to think about that prospect, the implication is that now is the time to rely upon the unmistakable refuge as protection from being reborn in states where there will be no refuge.

In very simple language, we are in the condition right now where protecting ourselves is definitely within our grasp! As the commentary concludes, *one must make an effort right now to becoming free from the causes of those dangers*. So, in simple terms, we rely upon ultimate protection and refuge, which we can all identify, and we can apply the practices of adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues. We need understand that now is not the time to lay about thinking that this is something we can put aside until later. Rather we need to make the commitment to apply it, beginning right now.

#### **4.2.2. The power of the basis**

We can leave this for our next session.

The main point of this evening's presentation is to reflect on the negativity that one has incurred during one's life, and to develop strong regret about that. Then, based on that strong regret, one engages in purification practices in order to purify those negativities. This is an essential practice for our own benefit. These are really important points for our own personal benefit.