
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ་

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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With a motivation based on the *Refuge and Bodhicitta prayer*, we can now engage in the meditation practice. [meditation]

It would be very good to regularly engage in the *tong len* practice that we have just attempted to do. As it is a practice that increases one's love and compassion for other living beings, the *tong len* practice really seems to be the essence of the Mahayana practice. As one further develops and establishes love and compassion within one's own mental continuum, and as this becomes stronger and stronger, one will actually be able to engage in this practice of giving and taking.

4.2.3. The power of thorough application of the antidote

Having completed the power of thorough repudiation or regret, we can start to think about the order of the four opponent powers and how they are a means to engage in the purification practice. Relating to their sequence is in itself really beneficial.

It is good to have a general understanding of the term *the power of thorough application of the antidote*. In general, it is an antidote that counteracts the negativity that one has created. As presented in the teachings, any virtue accumulated with the intention that it will serve as an antidote to negativity is sufficient to overcome that negativity!

More specifically, there are the six different methods that were listed earlier and it is good to keep them in mind.

This section is subdivided into two:

4.2.3.1. The reason why it is appropriate to purify negativity

4.2.3.2. Why it is appropriate to purify soon

Here, the Tibetan term *jang*, which is usually translated as *purify*, can also mean *practice*. In this case the practice to overcome negativity refers to a method that counteracts the consequences of the negativity that one has created. So, as the translation suggests, *purify* in this case refers to purification practice. Practising virtue, on the other hand, refers to the practice of accumulating merit and so forth. By further developing and increasing the virtues within oneself one is practicing virtue. So the Tibetan term *jang* refers to practices that can have different intentions. I have explained this previously, but it is good to refresh one's memory.

4.2.3.1. THE REASON WHY IT IS APPROPRIATE TO PURIFY NEGATIVITY

It is good to consider the way the commentary uses headings to put the text into a logical context. Through their systematic, logical sequence the headings in themselves are quite profound. Rather than beginning with how to purify negativity we are first presented with the reason why it is appropriate to do that. If we

understand why it is appropriate to purify negativity then we will naturally be more inclined to engage in that practice. Next we can consider why it is appropriate to purify our negativity right now.

We actually gain a lot of insight just from the way the material is presented. In fact one could say that the manner in which it is presented is, in itself, a means to increase our intelligence and wisdom. It is important to first see the reason why we engage in an activity, and then analyse whether there is any benefit or not. When we find that there is benefit in a certain activity, we will then naturally be more inclined to adopt it. We can apply this practical principle to our everyday life activities. Even though these are classical teachings we can still derive a lot of practical advice that we can apply in our everyday lives. Basically, they are teaching us how to make best use of our intelligence and wisdom.

There are two sub-headings in this section:

4.2.3.1.1. Showing by example of sickness why it is necessary to purify soon

4.2.3.1.2. Showing the necessity to relate it to the example of the abyss

4.2.3.1.1. *Showing by example of sickness why it is necessary to purify soon*

This is subdivided into three:

4.2.3.1.1.1. Stating the meaning of the example

4.2.3.1.1.2. The sickness of the three poisons has many shortcomings and the medicine to destroy it is rare

4.2.3.1.1.3. It is appropriate to practice in accordance with the advice of the supreme physician

4.2.3.1.1.1. Stating the meaning of the example

The relevant verse reads:

54. *If one has to act according to the doctor's advice
Even when in fear of an ordinary sickness,
What need is there to mention one who
Is afflicted by the hundreds of faults of
attachment and so on?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

When one is concerned that one may die as one is afraid of the sickness, one has to implement the method to destroy the sickness in accordance with the advice of the physician, even to cure a common disease like a disturbance in the winds or bile.

If that is so, then what need is there to mention that it is appropriate to rely on the antidote according to the instructions of the Conqueror, the supreme physician, in order to be cured from the chronic disease of the three poisons of attachment, anger and ignorance, as one has been continuously beaten down since beginningless time by the sources of hundreds of thousands of shortcomings.

It is appropriate to rely on the antidote to negativity.

According to traditional medicine, the cause of many illnesses is *disturbance in the winds or bile*. When an illness worsens it is common to rely upon a doctor and, depending on the severity of the illness, to willingly undergo quite severe treatments such as surgery, or even amputation, in order to be cured. Harsh and severe treatments are necessary at times to save one's life. Thus

we are patient and are willing to endure them, knowing that they are for our own benefit. When the doctor prescribes a treatment that includes changing our normal lifestyle, regulating our diet to avoid certain kinds of food and drink, or taking up some sort of exercise, we take all that advice willingly in order to be cured. Rather than holding a grudge against the doctor for the severe treatment, we are quite happy to accept it.

The point of the analogy is that we willingly accept unpleasant treatment knowing it is for our own benefit. It has been statistically shown that if one doesn't have confidence in the doctor, then the prescribed medicine doesn't seem to be of much benefit. Mostly though, as the commentary explains, with respect to ordinary ailments we follow *the advice of the physician* in order to cure the disease.

Then the commentary uses the illustration of the analogy to conclude, *If that is so, then what need is there to mention that it is appropriate to rely on the antidote according to the instructions of the Conqueror, the supreme physician, in order to be cured from the chronic disease of the three poisons of attachment, anger and ignorance.* To these three poisons, we can add the other delusions.

When we really think about the harm that these delusions cause us, we realise that they are indeed a very deep-rooted disease. We experience the effects of the three poisons on a continual basis, and we have been affected by these afflictive delusions from beginningless lifetimes. The disease of the three poisons affects almost everyone regardless of their status and their physical condition; those who are physically healthy are not immune to the mental afflictions.

We can definitely see that most people have, at some time in their life, had to endure some form of mental distress caused by attachment, anger or some other delusion such as jealousy, pride and so forth. Even though they are seemingly well physically, there is always an underlying mental distress and agony; some sort of an unsettled and restless mind is always there in the background. As mentioned in the commentary, ordinary beings have been affected by this mental distress over countless lifetimes; *one has been continuously beaten down since beginningless time by the source of hundreds of thousands of shortcomings.* Because they are so very deep-rooted, they are classified as a *chronic disease*.

The delusions, and in particular the three poisons, are like a chronic disease because we have been continuously affected by them since beginningless time and they are *the source of hundreds of thousands of shortcomings* and suffering. In order to be cured of this chronic disease, it is appropriate to rely on the antidote in accordance with the instructions of the Conqueror, who is likened to the *supreme physician*. So the antidote for overcoming the chronic disease of the three poisons was presented by the compassionate teacher, the Conqueror.

Even though we have not seen the Buddha directly, we have definitely come into contact with qualified teachers who have presented the unmistakable teachings of the Buddha. So right now we have these incredible conditions where we can use the teachings of the Buddha as an antidote for overcoming this chronic disease. We

have the ability and intelligence to recognise what the delusions are, their shortcomings, how they affect us, and the need to overcome them.

We would be doing ourselves a great disservice if we do not take advantage of these perfect conditions that we have now to make a genuine attempt to apply the appropriate antidotes for overcoming the delusions in our mind. Trying to develop an attentive and focussed mind in meditation is not sufficient by itself. We need to really work at applying the specific antidotes for overcoming the different delusions, which involves first recognising them. As the great teacher and master Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned, the real sign of one's meditation and practice bearing fruit is when we develop strong faith in the Dharma, along with the confidence that if we apply the antidotes, we will be able to overcome the delusions in our mind.

So *applying the antidote* means applying the antidote to the very causes of negativity, which are the delusions; the three poisons in particular. In fact, these three are the fundamental cause of all our physical and mental diseases and suffering. So, as mentioned here in the teachings and in the commentary, we need to apply an antidote to the source of the hundreds of thousands of shortcomings, i.e. the delusions. That is what we need to focus on.

4.2.3.1.1.2. The sickness of the three poisons has many shortcomings and the medicine to destroy it is rare

As I have explained earlier, it might be difficult to find these good conditions again in the future. So not utilising these conditions now while we have them would be like not bothering to seek treatment for a chronic disease. There is no benefit in having access to an incredible panacea and not making use of it. If we don't take our prescribed medicine we will not be cured. Likewise, if we don't apply the practices and antidotes for overcoming our delusions, we can't expect the delusions to naturally fade away, leaving us completely cured! The heading alone, *the sickness of the three poisons has many shortcomings and the medicine to destroy it is rare*, actually points out the great conditions we have now, and that we have that rare medicine right now!

We have met with the unmistakable Dharma teachings and the pure teachers who present them, so it would be an incredible waste if we don't utilise this wonderful opportunity now. The point is that, as the teachings mention, if a skilled doctor has prescribed the best of medicine to cure a disease, but the patient doesn't follow the treatment, then the patient cannot expect to be cured from the disease. Likewise, we are not deprived now of the teachers and the teachings, so if we find we are not making progress in our practice of overcoming the delusions, it is not the fault of the Dharma or the teachers. The fault lies with us because we have not applied the practice to ourselves. So we need to ensure that we don't fall into this trap of not using this opportunity we have now.

We really need to take to heart just how essential it is to apply the antidotes to overcome the delusions. I assume you are afflicted by the disease of the three delusions—I certainly am! So if we are alike in being afflicted by the

chronic disease of the delusions, then we are alike in that it is up to us to try to cure it. It's not as though we are deprived of the means to do so. We all have the ability to apply the cure for overcoming the chronic disease of the delusions; more specifically the root delusion of grasping at the self.

In this way we see that the teachings gives us the way to overcome the very core of our chronic disease, which is grasping at the self. The more we gain an understanding of the selflessness, or emptiness, of persons and the emptiness of phenomena, the more profound that understanding will be. Then we can begin to actualise that understanding and gain even more insight into emptiness. As explained in the teachings, the direct realisation of emptiness is the ultimate antidote for overcoming the chronic disease of grasping at the self. So once we are able to overcome this grasping at the self we begin to shatter our grasping at all other phenomena, and then the delusions will slowly become weaker and weaker. It is good for us to really reflect upon how the realisation of selflessness or emptiness serves as an antidote that overcomes grasping at the self.

In order to understand that, we first need to understand how grasping at the self affects our perception. How do we perceive things when we are grasping at the self? How does grasping at the self cause delusions? The more we understand that the grasping at the self is the cause of all of the delusions and the problems and suffering that we experience, the more we will realise that we need to overcome that grasping. And the means to overcome grasping at the self is to realise selflessness, or the emptiness of the 'I' and other phenomena. That is the crucial antidote. These are the essential points to understand.

In his Lam Rim teachings Lama Tsong Khapa explained that we should begin by applying the antidote to the strongest and most prominent delusion. As presented very succinctly in the teachings, the antidote for overcoming strong attachment is to meditate on the imperfections of the object. To overcome anger one generates love and compassion for the object of anger. To counter ignorance, one meditates on emptiness. To eliminate pride one meditates on the various aspects and different categories of phenomena; and the best method to overcome discursive and disturbing thoughts is to meditate on the breath.

Although these methods will not overcome the very root of these delusions, they will definitely help to settle down the mind and to overcome the manifest aspects of these delusions, which means that the strong feelings these delusions give rise to will subside. So to that extent we will definitely benefit from applying these antidotes. We all know that during intense moments of anger we are really disturbed, and when that intense anger subsides, we definitely feel relief and a genuine sense of calmness. Of course we may not yet have overcome the very root of anger, but even at a manifest level the intense anger has subsided; so we do gain benefit from these techniques.

If one leaves these instructions to overcome strong and pronounced delusions in one's mind aside, and instead attempts to meditate just focusing on an object, I wonder how focused one could really be on any chosen object

while in the grip of strong delusions. Even if one were to achieve some sort of focus temporarily, it would soon be overridden by that strong delusion. So it is much more practical to overcome the strong delusion first, and then apply the meditation technique. Some people have confided in me that, 'When I attempt to meditate, I am able to focus for quite a long time. However after the meditation finishes and I come out and begin to interact with my partner, I immediately become very upset and angry!' That illustrates that the intended effect of the meditation is not taking place.

The term *three poisons* is very succinct, yet we can easily relate to it. As presented in the teachings, the three poisons are attachment, anger and ignorance. The ill effects of the three poisons are not obscure; we have all experienced them. Feeling ignorant about something is quite daunting and disturbing, and another form of ignorance is where the mind becomes very dull and dark. So we can see the ill-effects of ignorance. We definitely know the strong effects of anger as we have all experienced that! Then there are the ill-effects of attachment. It is attachment that keeps us very busy, rushing around all the time; it makes us go to work, to earn money and so forth. The driving force behind all this busyness is actually attachment.

On a subtler level ignorance is of course what prevents us from knowing the ultimate nature of phenomena, which is emptiness. As the teachings present, our problems arise because of this fundamental ignorance. So we can see how essential it is to gain the profound understanding and realisation of emptiness.

The verse relating to this heading is:

*55. Even a single one of these destroys
All humans of Dzambuling [or Earth]
If one does not find a different medicine
In all the directions to cure it.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Even one moment of anger towards a bodhisattva can destroy all humans in Dzambuling and throw them into the lower realms. The medicine against this great sickness, meditating on the path and so forth, one will not find anywhere else, apart from the texts that reveal it.

If one cannot find it in any other place, such as the world of Brahma and so forth, then it is unfindable elsewhere and therefore rare.

As the commentary explains very precisely, *even one moment of anger towards a bodhisattva can destroy all humans of Dzambuling* (our world) by *throwing them into the lower realms*.

In his many texts Gyaltsab Rinpoche often refers to the great negativity that would be incurred by engaging with a bodhisattva in a hostile manner. There is, of course, a profound reason why Gyaltsab Je specifically uses the example of bodhisattvas in this way. In *A Commentary On Valid Cognition*, Gyaltsab Je mentioned that it is extremely difficult to know who really is a bodhisattva. So the great danger in harming others is that if they are a bodhisattva, which may not be at all obvious, then we will incur very heavy negative karma. Gyaltsab Je explains this with the analogy of a pit with burning embers at the bottom,

camouflaged with leaves and so forth on the top. If someone happened to step on the leaves over the pit, they would fall in and be burned by the embers. Just as we don't know where the camouflaged pit may be, likewise, we can't tell who could be a bodhisattva. There may be some bodhisattvas amongst us here right now. How are we to know? We wouldn't! So, as explained in many teachings, the best way to relate to others is by developing a pure view and seeing others in a good light and not focusing on their negativities. We need to always remember that what appears to us is not necessarily based on reality. In general we can say that it is best not to criticise those who have good qualities, who may also be quite learned! At least this can be quite obvious. Criticising someone who has good qualities is quite dangerous, so we need to be careful.

The particular delusion that Gyaltsab Rinpoche and other masters caution us against is anger towards these supreme beings. Of course, other delusions are also as damaging, but anger is the most likely one that we might develop and, as just explained, the consequence is very heavy negative karma. As mentioned in the commentary, *even one moment of anger*, or any other delusion for that matter, can cause a human to be reborn in the lower realms. If one delusion can cause so much harm and bring so much suffering, there's no need to mention the suffering created by all of the delusions combined together!

Having explained the great danger in allowing delusions such as a moment of anger to rule our behaviour, the commentary goes on to say that, *the medicine against this chronic disease is meditating on the path and so forth*, and this is something *one will not find anywhere else, apart from the texts that reveal it*. The teachings of the Buddha present the unmistakable antidotes for overcoming these delusions. As emphasised here, *one will not find it anywhere else*, which indicates that there is no instruction other than the unmistakable teachings that present the unmistakable methods for overcoming the delusions. *One cannot find it in any other place, such as the world of Brahma and so forth, therefore it is unfindable elsewhere and rare*.

We need to be able to apply this to ourselves, by recognising and acknowledging that we have met with these rare teachings that provide the unmistakable methods to apply the antidotes to overcome these chronic diseases. We have an incredible opportunity now, when we have these perfect conditions and have met with these rare teachings! So we need to really take it to heart and try to apply the practice as much as we can, while making strong prayers to never be parted from these profound teachings of the Buddha. In this life and in all future lifetimes we need to continuously meet with these perfect conditions until we reach our ultimate goal of enlightenment. So we must not waste this opportunity that we have now, and it is also important to make strong and fervent prayers to meet with these conditions again in the future.

Having explained how it is very rare to meet with these conditions, a question which may arise as to whether it is appropriate to practise according to the advice of the supreme physician. In other words, do we have the

capacity to practise in that way? The meticulous presentation here shows how this is definitely possible.

The verse relating to this reads:

56. *And if one thinks not to act in accordance
With the advice of the all-knowing
physician,
Which can cure all pain,
Then that is extremely ignorant and the
object of ridicule.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

If one stays obsessed with the causes of infinite cyclic existence and the lower realms, instead of putting the advice given by the all-knowing physician, who knows all the medicines to eliminate the sickness of the afflictions, and that liberates from all the pain of the afflictions, into practice, then that action is extremely ignorant and the object of criticism.

Therefore one should take refuge in the teacher from one's heart and practise the Dharma shown by him accordingly.

The opening lines from the Tibetan text are that *the medicines to eliminate the sickness of the afflictions* are presented *by the all-knowing physician*, which refers to the omniscient Buddha. Because the cure to overcoming the disease of the afflictions is presented by the omniscient one, that in itself answers the earlier hypothetical query, 'Is it appropriate to practise according to the advice of the supreme physician?' The answer is that it is definitely appropriate because it is presented not just by anyone, but by the supreme being who is all-knowing and thus free from all obscurations. Because the all-knowing omniscient Buddha is free from all obscurations, the methods and techniques presented by the Buddha will not have any mistakes or flaws. So it is appropriate for us to apply this medicine-like teaching and practice, because it is presented by the unmistakable Buddha, the all-knowing one free from all obscurations. Thus we put into practice *the advice given by the all-knowing physician, who knows all the medicines to eliminate the sickness of the afflictions; that liberates from all the pain of the afflictions*. But *if one stays obsessed with the causes of infinite cyclic existence and the lower realms*; in other words, if we don't put the advice into practice, then the flaw comes from our own side.

As the commentary explains, the medicine-like antidote to overcome the disease, which is presented by the all-knowing one, the Buddha, eliminates the sickness of the afflictions. It is also implied here that this antidote eliminates the sickness of the afflictions at its very core. As explained earlier, the very core of all our delusions, problems and mistakes is grasping at the self, and the Buddha presents the techniques and methods to overcome that grasping. Eliminating that grasping at self eliminates the sickness of all afflictions. When we overcome the very cause of the disease, then naturally the disease itself will subside. So when the core and the very root of those afflictions, self-grasping, is completely eliminated, all afflictions are eliminated.

If, rather than implementing this technique we intentionally create more causes to be in samsara, then as the commentary states, *that action is extremely ignorant and*

the object of criticism. Whenever someone wastes a great opportunity, they are scorned with comments like, 'How stupid that is'. We would fall into that category if we neglect to adopt the practices and intentionally create even more causes to remain in samsara. To avoid falling into this trap *one should take refuge in the teacher from one's heart.* This means that having understood the qualities of the Conqueror, the omniscient one, the great compassionate all-knowing one, who has no flaws and who is endowed with only great qualities, we need to take heartfelt refuge with the confidence that the Conqueror has the ultimate means to free us from the disease of the delusions. Then, having taken refuge, we practise the Dharma taught by the Buddha, which is the means to cure the disease of the delusions. Just like receiving treatment for a disease, we implement Dharma practice to cure ourselves. Accordingly, we should follow what the unmistakable teacher, the Buddha, taught.

As the Buddha very succinctly said, 'Don't engage in any negativity, accumulate all virtues, and subdue your mind; this is the teaching of the Buddha'.

The three higher trainings are the realisation of the Buddha's doctrine and the three baskets are the oral teachings of the Buddha's doctrine.

There followed a discussion of the translation of two specific Tibetan terms that are translated interchangeably as Dharma or the teachings.

In a general sense dharma refers to all phenomena because the literal meaning of *dharma*, is *to hold its own identity*. So whatever holds its own identity is the dharma. This glass, for example, holds its own identity. Whenever we see it, whenever we look at it, wherever we put it, it is always a glass.

Earlier we referred to the Buddha's doctrine or teachings as an antidote to overcome the delusions. Here Dharma refers specifically to the Buddha's doctrine or teachings, rather than general phenomena or dharmas.

If we refer to the Dharma as the Buddhadharmas, it might have a more specific connotation and relate more to the Buddha's teachings. Also there are many faiths which have personal benefits and we can then say that these are dharmas too, but they are not the Buddhadharmas or the Buddha's teachings.

As I have mentioned hundreds of times, whatever practice we do can become a Buddhist practice if it is based on the principles of non-violence and having sound faith in the Buddha.

This is my definition of Buddhadharmas: if one practises non-harmfulness and goes for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, then whatever one engages in will be a Buddhist practice.

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