
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ལྷན་མེས་པོ་འཇམ་དཔལ་ལྷོ་ལྷན་པ་ལ་འཇམ་པ་བཞུགས་སོ་

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As we have already generated our motivation while reciting the prayers, we can now engage in the practice of meditation. [meditation]

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

For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So, for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put it into practice well.

4.2.4.1.2. Striving day and night to be liberated from negativity

The implication of the outline is that there will be grave consequences if we do not strive day and night to be delivered from negativity. So we need to contemplate this, and follow this advice. The relevant verse reads:

62. "From non-virtue arises suffering
How does one become free from that?" you say.
It is suitable that I contemplate
This alone day and night.

With respect to this, Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins:

'From non-virtues such as killing arise the sufferings of the hells and so forth. How can I become free from that?' As presented:

It is suitable for me to contemplate day and night only karmic cause and effect.

The quote from *non-virtue arises suffering* is from Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, which explains that the sufferings of the hells and so forth arise from non-virtues such as *killing*. While killing is specified here, the rest of the ten non-virtues are implied as well. When one engages in non-virtues such as killing, the definite consequence will be suffering in unfortunate rebirths such as in the hell realms. The implication here is that karma is infallible—once the cause is created one will definitely have to experience the consequences.

One has definitely engaged in non-virtues such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and so forth in the past, so a great amount of negativity has already been accumulated. By contemplating the law of cause and effect, one realises that the consequence of engaging in such negativity is that, if it is not purified, then one will definitely take unfortunate rebirths in the hell realm, or hungry ghost realm or animal realm and experience great suffering. Faced with this prospect the question arises, 'How can I free myself from the consequences of my negative acts?' Thus, *it is suitable for me to contemplate day and night only karmic cause and effect*.

The Tibetan word *tak-tu* means *at all times*, so the implication here is to think about karma at all times—*day*

and night. Also when the root text says *this alone*, it is emphasising that one should be contemplating the essential points of karma at all times. When one really contemplates the effects that arise from the creation of negativities, then the need to purify those negativities will inevitably become a primary concern.

The next part of Gyaltsab Je's explanation is this essential point:

If one does not gain certainty with regard to karmic cause and effect, then one will not have certainty for any Dharma that makes the Conqueror happy.

Therefore everybody should strive in this.

This really encapsulates the essence of the verse. *If one doesn't gain certainty with regard to karmic cause and effect*, refers to the understanding one needs to gain from contemplating that the consequence of engaging in non-virtue is definitely suffering, and that the consequence of engaging in virtue is definitely happiness. There is no room for negotiation: negative karma definitely brings about unpleasant and unhappy results, and positive karma or virtue definitely brings about happy results.

Until one gains *certainty* about this point, whatever *Dharma* one does will not be in accordance with what would *make the Conqueror happy*. The emphasis here is to always be mindful about the infallibility of karma in all our activities. When we really take the initiative to contemplate the infallibility of karma, then the more we contemplate this, the more confidence we will gain about the certainty of karmic causes and effects. And as we gain more confidence about the certainty of karma, the stronger our determination and willingness will be to refrain from engaging in non-virtues such as taking the life of other sentient beings, and so forth. Likewise, our willingness to engage in accumulating virtue will naturally increase. So the essential practice of shunning negativity and adopting virtue comes about from an understanding of how karma works. Thus, cultivating certainty about karma is essential.

This is also in line with the advice of the Kadampa masters, who said, 'We regard any person who engages in the practice of avoiding the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues, while encouraging others to do likewise, as a real practitioner and a true adept, regardless of the tradition that they may be following'. The great Kadampa masters said that that they were not concerned about particular traditions or particular appearances, i.e. whether they are a monk or a lay person; if they are truly practising this essential point then they are a real practitioner, a true adept, a noble being, and a real virtuous friend. This is something that we need to keep in mind.

It is also good to reflect on the common ground of all traditions, which is to acknowledge that adopting the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues is common to all religions. There are differences in explaining what it means to hold a wrong view, but the importance of avoiding killing and so forth is common to all religious traditions. In fact anyone with some commonsense would definitely accept the ten non-virtues as misdeeds. Thus, as presented in the commentary, abiding by the law of

karma is an essential practice that makes the conquerors happy.

The commentary concludes with:

That some say they have gained certainty with regard to emptiness but do not value karma is clearly a distorted understanding. They have not ascertained that emptiness is in actuality dependent arising.

If someone claims that they have gained some understanding of emptiness, and that they do not need to abide by karma (the law of cause and effect), then that in itself proves that what they are claiming is distorted and a completely wrong understanding. The reason it is a wrong understanding is because they have not ascertained that emptiness is in actuality dependent arising.

The point that is raised here is *that emptiness is in actuality dependent arising*. I have explained this extensively hundreds of times. So, if you have paid good attention then you will recall those explanations. This explanation is based on the teachings of the great master Nagarjuna and his disciple Chandrakirti. These great masters gained a profound understanding of emptiness by exhaustively applying themselves to understanding the Buddha's teachings particularly those on ultimate truth. They then very kindly presented this unmistakable view to us through their written works. We need to regard these great masters as being extremely kind in presenting the unmistakable view of emptiness to us, as without their clarification we would definitely be lost. We would come to wrong conclusions and develop a distorted view of emptiness.

This point is encapsulated in these words from the *Heart Sutra*, '*Form is empty, and emptiness is form*'. This indicates that while form is completely empty of inherent existence, it is within the sphere of emptiness that form is able to manifest and function interdependently. It is because things are empty of inherent existence that it is possible for things to exist interdependently as form, sound, smell, taste, tactile objects and so forth. When the *Heart Sutra* states, *Form is empty, emptiness is form*, it is explaining that while form and so forth are ultimately empty of inherent existence, conventionally they do exist interdependently. You need to remember this essential point always.

4.2.4.2. CONFESSING WHAT ONE DID BEFORE

This has two subdivisions:

4.2.4.2.1. What one has to confess

4.2.4.2.2. The way of confessing

4.2.4.2.1. What one has to confess

This refers to the negativity that one needs to confess. The verse relating to this point reads:

*63. I, out of unknowing ignorance,
Have created natural non-virtuous actions
And accepted negativities. Any of these
That I have done,*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Due to unknowing and ignorance with regard to karmic cause and effect, I have created either natural non-virtues which are a negativity whoever commits them—regardless of whether one has vows or not,

and misdeeds through decree which are committed only by those who have taken vows. Thus, I declare whatever wrong doings that I have committed.

One has *created each and every negativity* because of a failure to recognise actions as being negativities *due to unknowing and ignorance*, specifically ignorance of the karmic law of cause and effect.

Here, *whatever* refers to the two ways of creating negativity—the misdeeds of a person with vows who creates negativity with respect to their vows, and those without vows who create natural non-virtues.

The Tibetan text presents *natural non-virtue* first. Killing is a natural negativity or *misdeed* because it is a misdeed, regardless of whether the perpetrator knows it is a misdeed or not, regardless of whether they have taken vows or not, and regardless of whether they are ordained or not. Anyone who engages in the negative act of killing, for example, will incur negativity. That is why it is called a natural misdeed.

Whereas *negativity by decree*, which is translated in the root text as *accepted negativity*, is negativity committed by those who have taken particular vows, such as ordained monks and nuns, who incur negativity if they break their vows. If a lay person engages in the act of killing, they would incur the natural negativity or misdeed, but a monk or nun who engages in the act of killing would incur both the natural misdeed, as well as the negativity or misdeed by decree, because they have taken vows to refrain from killing.

With both natural negativities and the negativity of decree one creates negativity in relation to *self and others*.

So, confession involves confessing negativity incurred by either natural misdeeds, or a negativity that one has incurred because of decree. Regardless of how the negativity was committed, it has to be purified.

To summarise the main point, one needs to recall whatever negativity one may have created in the past and identify it as negativity by confessing it. This then gives one the impetus to engage in practices to purify it.

That covers the point about what one has to confess, which are the negativities incurred in the past.

4.2.4.2.2. The way of confessing

The verse relating to this outline is:

*64. Before the eyes of the protectors,
With hands folded and a mind seeing the
fears of suffering,
I prostrate again and again
And confess all of them.*

The explanation in Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

One should confess all one's negativities by prostrating repeatedly in front of the buddhas and their children with folded hands and a mind that sees the dangers of the negativities.

As the commentary explains, the way to confess negativities is to begin by visualising *the buddhas and their children*, indicating the bodhisattvas, *in front of oneself*. We really need to pay attention to the importance of visualising the buddhas and bodhisattvas as the objects of reliance. When we do a purification practice such as prostrating, it is important to really bring to mind the

buddhas and bodhisattvas, and try to generate as much as possible a strong sense that they are actually present in the space before us.

This has great significance because the more we develop that awareness of the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, the stronger our inclination to confess and engage in a purification practice becomes. It also guards us against engaging in further negativities.

An awareness of the presence of buddhas and bodhisattvas helps to develop a conscientious mind, as well as the mental factor of shame and embarrassment. Basically, when there is the awareness of the buddhas always being present, one will be hesitant about creating negativities. The awareness that because the buddhas are omniscient they always know what one is doing, will protect one from engaging in negativity.

Prior to prostrating, one can kneel in front of the buddhas and bodhisattvas with one's palms together, recalling the negativities one has engaged in the past, and being moved to tears by strong regret and remorse, one now acknowledges the great opportunity that one has to purify this in the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. So with that understanding in mind one can then engage in the purification practice such as prostrating, which also encompasses taking refuge in the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The word *repeatedly* in the commentary indicates that one needs to engage in confession and purification practice again and again.

As mentioned previously, the degree of regret that one feels is dependent on recalling the consequences of the negativities. When one has a strong sense of how the consequences of the negativities will result in suffering, then strong regret and remorse will definitely arise; which will then be followed with the strong wish to refrain from negativities; followed by making a promise to refrain from such negativities in the future. This is how to engage in this practice.

4.2.4.3. MAKING A PROMISE TO REFRAIN FROM NEGATIVITY AFTER HAVING REQUESTED ATTENTION

The meaning of this heading is quite clear. The relevant verse is:

65. *I request the guides to accept my
Negativities as mistakes.
Since they are not wholesome
I shall not do them again.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Oh guides, for these reasons, please accept my negativities as mistakes. Since these negativities are not wholesome I promise not to do them again, even at the cost of my life.

Make the promise in this way, not to do the negativity henceforth, by cutting off the continuity.

As the commentary explains, one pleads with *the guides*—the buddhas and bodhisattvas—for *these reasons*,—referring to the negativities that one recalls and their great consequences—*please accept my negativities as mistakes*.

Since these negativities are not wholesome I promise not to do them again, even at the cost of my life is where one makes a promise to refrain from negativity in the future. As mentioned previously, this is also in line with the confession ceremony for the sangha where the abbot asks, 'Do you see your faults as faults?' and the reply is, 'I do'. 'Henceforth will you refrain from engaging in them again', to which the reply is 'I will'. It is the same with any confession and purification practice. Having pleaded with the guides or the buddhas and bodhisattvas to pay attention, one proclaims one's negativities and accepts them as negativities, and then makes the promise, 'I will not engage in negativity again even at the cost of my life. This should be the extent of one's promise.

As I have mentioned previously, when one promises not to engage in negativity it needs to be a very sincere promise, from the depth of one's heart. There must be a definite determination not to engage in any negativity by clearly accepting them as faults. If one thinks, 'I am not so sure if I wish to avoid engaging in negativity', then the 'promise' is more like a lie, because there is no actual intent to avoid engaging in negativity. So making the promise with keen determination to avoid negativities in the future is essential. This is emphasised in the commentary which explains that one makes the promise not to commit negativity *by cutting of the continuity*.

Then Gyaltsab Je continues:

Although there are many doors for purification explained in the teachings and treatises, that which has the antidote complete is to purify by way of the four powers intact. Thus, this is the way to purify.

As explained here there are *many doors for purification*, meaning that there are many purification methods. For example, those negativities incurred by breaching the commitments of tantric vows are purified by engaging in the practice of Vajrasattva, while the negativities incurred by breaching the commitments of the bodhisattva vows are purified by engaging in practices such as *Thirty-five Buddhas* practice. This practice commences with the indication it is the means to confess and purify the negativities incurred by breaches of the bodhisattva vows. While there are different methods, one needs to apply the four powers for them to be a complete antidote. In order for the Vajrasattva practice of purification and the Thirty-five Buddhas practice of purification to be complete antidotes, one has to actually apply all four opponent powers, thus all four powers have to be intact. This is the actual way to purify negativity.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary goes on to say

That this purifies also the karma definitely to be experienced is explained in the *Togke Barwa* and *The Great Commentary to the Eight-thousand Verse Sutra*.

I had explained previously that when the four opponent powers are intact, even the karma that is to be definitely experienced can be purified. And, as explained previously, the karma that is to be definitely experienced is that which is both created and accumulated. This is explained in the Buddha's teaching in sutras such as *Togke Barwa* and *The Great Commentary to the Eight-thousand Verse Sutra*.

Then Gyaltsab Je exhorts us with the following lines:

We, who do not know the instances of karmic cause and effect well, ...

This means that we might lack a complete knowledge of the instances of karmic cause and effect

... and who, although knowing a little, do not practise what has to be abandoned and what has to be practised accordingly, should confess on a daily basis, uninterruptedly, by way of the four powers.

This is really succinct advice reminding us that while we may not know about karmic cause and effect in great detail, we do have some understanding. But while we do have some understanding we may not really engage in the practice of abandoning negativity and adopting what has to be adopted, which means that we still find ourselves engaging in negativities on a daily basis. So because we find ourselves engaging continuously in such negative deeds, it is befitting for us to engage in confession by way of the four powers, continuously, on a daily basis.

As I have explained in the past, it will be really worthwhile at the end of the day, before we go to bed, to really recall the day and if one has engaged in negativities, to confess that, and then rejoice in the virtues that one has accumulated. It is important to reflect on these points.

Actually it would be a good idea to memorise these few lines so that you can recall them regularly.

The commentary concludes its explanation of this section thus:

Especially one should practise by focusing on purifying the obstacles to the generation of bodhicitta.

This presentation returns us to the main topic of the root text, the methods of generating the altruistic mind of bodhicitta.

Summarising verse

Then the author of the commentary, Gyaltsab Je, presents his summarising verse:

Those tormented by the faults of attachment, jealousy
And conceit due to exaggeration will not generate the
supreme mind.
Hence, whatever mistakes one made with body,
speech and mind,
Confess them from the depths of one's heart to the
protectors.

In *Those tormented by the faults of attachment, jealousy and conceit*, the Tibetan word *zir*, translated here as *tormented*, also has the connotation of being *intoxicated*. So the first two lines of this verse mean that it is not possible for the altruistic mind, the supreme mind of bodhicitta, to be generated by those who are tormented or intoxicated with the faults of attachment, jealousy and conceit, which can only result in the continuous creation of negativity.

Realising that, one needs to exhort oneself to confess to the protectors whatever mistakes one has made in body, speech and mind, from the depths of one's heart. The confession practice is essential if one is inclined to purify one's mind.

II. THE TITLE OF THE CHAPTER

The root text reads:

This is the second chapter on confession, from the Introduction to the Actions of the Bodhisattvas.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary concludes with:

This is the commentary on the second chapter called Purifying Negativities from the commentary on the *Introduction to the Actions of Bodhisattvas*, called *The Entrance for the Children of the Conquerors*.

Of the seven limbs, this chapter has covered the limbs of prostration, offering, and confession, in addition to refuge. However the chapter is called the chapter of confession, because the primary focus is on confessing and purifying negativities.

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

Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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