
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

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Based on the motivation that we generated with the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in the practice of meditation. [meditation]

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

In order to benefit all sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment myself, so for that purpose I will listen to the teaching and put it into practice well.

In previous sessions we went into quite a bit of detail about the significance and purpose of rejoicing, and it is important to remember those points.

1.2. Requesting to turn the wheel of Dharma

The verse relating to the next limb of the seven limb practice reads:

5. *To the buddhas of all directions
I request with my palms folded:
Please light the lamp of Dharma
For sentient beings confused in the darkness of suffering.*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je begins his explanation of this verse as follows:

The respectful request is made with palms folded to the buddhas of all the directions, who became enlightened recently and have not started to teach the Dharma yet:

This also relates to the life story of Buddha Shakyamuni. After he became enlightened the Buddha didn't teach the Dharma right away but remained in meditation for seven weeks. It is said that the gods Brahma and Indra requested him to turn the wheel of Dharma. Brahma offered a thousand spoked golden wheel while Indra offered a right turning conch shell, which to this day is quite rare, and together they exhorted the Buddha to teach proclaiming, 'You engaged in amazing great deeds in the past and as a result have now surpassed all practices and have become fully enlightened. We, the people of Magadha¹, are capable of listening well, we are of sound mind and have intelligence and faith, request you to please turn the wheel of Dharma for the benefit of all'. The Buddha accepted this request and gave his first teaching, thus turning the wheel of Dharma. I have already explained this in detail in previous teachings, so you can refer to your notes and the transcripts.

Of course, because of their great compassion, enlightened beings will naturally and spontaneously teach the Dharma to benefit sentient beings, regardless of any request being made. However, requesting Buddha Shakyamuni to turn the wheel of Dharma illustrates the

eagerness to receive the Dharma. It also establishes an auspicious interdependent connection with the teacher, thereby ensuring that the Dharma teaching benefits the listeners and becomes the means to subdue their minds and accumulate great virtue. So making this request is very meaningful and of great benefit. As one of the seven limb practices, it is also the means for accumulating great and extensive merit.

While making the request, the physical gesture should be as indicated in the commentary; a *respectful manner with one's palms folded*. When doing this practice it is appropriate to visualise that one is presenting a thousand spoked golden wheel as an offering to request the buddhas and one's gurus to turn the wheel of Dharma. As explained extensively in the *gor chor* preliminary practice, when making the request to turn the wheel of Dharma, one visualises numerous bodies of oneself—as many bodies as there are enlightened beings—and a replica of oneself in front of each and every enlightened being requesting them to turn the wheel of Dharma. This visualisation is a supreme means to accumulate vast and extensive merit.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues with the actual request:

Please light the lamp of scriptural and realised Dharma that clarifies the path to liberation, for the purpose of sentient beings who suffer and who are confused in the darkness of ignorance.

Having said that one makes a respectful request, the commentary then indicates that the request is *for the purpose of sentient beings who suffer, and who are confused in the darkness of ignorance*. As indicated here, the request is specifically to *light the lamp of scriptural and realised Dharma that clarifies the path to liberation*. Here, the lamp is an analogy for the *scriptural and realised Dharma* that dispels the inner *darkness of ignorance* within sentient beings, which is the cause of all suffering. In accordance with the *gor chor* preliminary practice, a mandala is traditionally offered at this point to accompany the request. One then imagines that the buddhas are actually accepting the request.

We need to understand that this practice of requesting the buddhas to turn the wheel of the Dharma is a means to accumulate extensive merit for ourselves. It is also said to be a supreme antidote for overcoming the negativities of disparaging the Dharma, which is one of the heaviest negativities that one can incur. Engaging in this practice will purify such negativities. Furthermore, one's wrong views, held due to ignorance and so forth, will also be purified, so that in all future lives wrong views will not be generated in one's mental continuum. In addition, one will not be separated from the light of the Dharma.

1.3. Requesting not to pass beyond sorrow

This again establishes an auspicious interdependent connection with the buddhas and our teachers. Here we request them to remain with us, rather than showing the aspect of passing into nirvana or passing beyond sorrow. The explanation in the commentary is quite clear, so there is no need to clarify much.

Since we engage in the seven limb practice regularly it is really worthwhile to fully understand the practice and its

¹ Known today as Bihar.

significance. For example, we do the *Ganden Lha Gyama* prayer regularly in our sessions here, which consists of the seven limb practice. It is good to note however that in the *Ganden Lha Gyama* prayer the request not to pass beyond sorrow and remain steadily with us is presented before requesting to turn the wheel of Dharma.

The relevant verse is:

6. *Requesting with palms folded*
The conquerors wishing to pass beyond sorrow
To not place these migrators in blindness
And remain for uncountable eons.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

The request with folded palms is made to the conquerors who wish to go beyond sorrow:

Please do not cause the wisdom eye of these migrators to be blinded by ignorance. Rather, please remain for uncountable eons to illuminate the darkness of ignorance.

As mentioned previously, the buddhas and the enlightened beings may show the aspect of *going beyond sorrow*. So here we are requesting them to remain with us as our guides and not pass beyond sorrow. Again, the request is made *with one's palms folded* at one's heart.

The actual request is, *Please do not cause the wisdom eye of these migrators to be blinded by ignorance. Rather, please remain for uncountable eons to illuminate the darkness of ignorance.* So we are requesting the conquerors to remain with us *for many eons* in order to remove the *darkness* from sentient beings who are *blinded by ignorance*.

The immediate personal benefit derived from this practice of requesting not to pass beyond sorrow is that one establishes the cause to attain the state of immortality. It is said that a supreme practice to ensure one's own long life is to request a lama to live long. Furthermore, it is an antidote to overcome the negativities that one has accumulated through losing faith in the guru, which might include disparaging or upsetting the guru, or inflicting any kind of harm on the guru's body and so forth.

We have covered the benefits in brief although there are many more benefits that can be enumerated.

1.4. Dedicating virtues

This is subdivided into four:

- 1.4.1. General dedication
- 1.4.2. Dedication for the sick
- 1.4.3. Dedication to alleviate hunger and thirst
- 1.4.4. Dedication for the fulfilment of all wishes

As we can see, these are really beneficial aspirations.

I recall that when the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye was teaching at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, he would encourage his students to regularly recite the *Seven Limb Prayer* with a very melodious tune.

Geshe-la then sang the first two verses of dedication using a tune that he said was very similar.

1.4.1. General dedication

The verse under this heading reads:

7. *Having thus done all of this,*
Whatever virtue I have accumulated,

May through it all sufferings
Of all sentient beings be cleared away.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

Through these virtues, from making offerings up to making requests, as well as all other virtues that I have accumulated, may the suffering of all sentient beings be cleared away.

The virtues *from making offerings up to making requests* that are to be dedicated are those that are accumulated from the first six of the seven limb practices. The first three limbs, prostrations, offerings and confession, were the main focus of the second chapter, and we have just completed rejoicing, requesting to turn the wheel of Dharma, and requesting not to pass beyond sorrow. Now comes the final limb, which is to dedicate these practices.

As well as the specific virtues accumulated through these practices, one also dedicates all other virtues that one has accumulated in the past, thus dedicating all one's accumulated virtues to *clearing away all suffering of all sentient beings*. This suffices as a general dedication.

In summary, all of the virtues that have been accumulated, from the specific practices such as making offerings and so forth, are dedicated towards the end of completely clearing away all the suffering of sentient beings. This also shows the purpose for accumulating virtue. One accumulates virtue so that one can dedicate it to the alleviation of the suffering of all sentient beings. So here we are being shown in a very succinct way the purpose of accumulating virtue and merit.

As presented in the *yor chor* preliminary practice, dedications are made for the achievement of the ultimate state of complete enlightenment; for the long life of one's gurus; for one to be always held in the guru's care, i.e. always under the guidance of the guru; for the Buddha's teachings to expand and flourish; and to always be with the Buddha's teachings in all of one's future lives. This encompasses the general dedication of one's practice.

As I have explained previously, in order to dedicate a practice one has to have accumulated a root virtue. This means that one has to have accumulated some virtue in order to make a dedication. All dedications can be aspirations, whereas all aspirations are not necessarily dedications.

1.4.2. Dedication for the sick

The verse under this heading reads:

8. *Until all migrators who are sick,*
Are cured from their disease,
May I be their medicine, physician,
And their nurse.

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Through the power of these merits may I be the medicine, physician and the nurse for the sick migrators until they are cured from their disease.

Through the power of these merits can relate to the merits that one has accumulated with the specific seven limb practice as presented here, as well as all the merit that one has accumulated in the past. The specific dedication is that, due to *these merits*, *may I be the medicine, physician and the nurse*. These aspirations are not just a mere wish. By dedicating one's merits in such a way, we are implanting the seed in our mind to be able to actually help those who

are in need, such as the sick. By making such dedications now in the form of aspirations, we will be able to assist the sick as doctors, nurses and so forth in the future, when we acquire the right conditions. These aspirations by the great bodhisattva Shantideva to directly benefit those who are sick are incredibly vast. When we dedicate our merits it helps us to accumulate the causes to help others in this way.

Again, we can recall the life story of Buddha Shakyamuni, who personally nursed the sick. Out of his great compassion, Buddha Shakyamuni led by example and showed how to benefit others, such as by personally taking care of the sick and disadvantaged. So it is important for us to make dedications and aspirations such as, 'May I be able to assist those who are sick and impoverished', and 'May I be able to be of service to them until all sickness is completely alleviated'.

1.4.3. Dedication to alleviate hunger and thirst

The verse relating to this reads:

9. *With a rain of food and drink
May I clear the suffering of hunger and thirst.
During the intermediate eon of famine
May I become food and drink.*

The explanation in Gyaltsab Je's commentary is not too obscure and is easy to understand.

May I be able to clear away all harm of hunger and thirst with a rain of various foods and drink for all those that are hungry and thirsty.

At the time of the intermediate eon of famine, one of the three intermediate eons, may I be able to pacify the hunger and thirst of sentient beings by becoming food and drink for them.

As with previous dedication, the dedication is also in the form of an aspiration. One of the three *intermediate* eons is the *eon of famine*. So we are making an aspiration for that specific time, 'May I turn into *food* and *drink* to pacify the *hunger and thirst* of sentient beings'. We can see the great extent of the bodhisattvas' intention to benefit sentient beings just from these aspirations.

In the event that we become a skilled doctor or a nurse in the future, then when the conditions are appropriate we will be able to benefit those in our care. Even in these times we find doctors and nurses who are genuinely kind and caring, and who really benefit the sick and their patients really respect them. Their capacity to benefit others comes not just from their skills but from their compassionate mind, which is the result of previous aspirations and prayers. So if we develop these aspirations and make these dedications now, we will definitely have the capacity to benefit others at the appropriate time. There is an indication of this in the words *accomplishing magnificent prayers*, in the short long life prayer for Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As with any other practice, it is good to relate to what *accomplishing prayers* actually means.

1.4.4. Dedication for the fulfilment of all wishes

The root text reads:

10. *May I become an inexhaustible treasure
For destitute and poor sentient beings,
And abide as various requisites and necessities
In front of them.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

For the sentient beings who are destitute and lack the requisites and necessities of life, may I become a treasure that is inexhaustible despite being used. May I abide effortlessly in front of them as the various necessities they need.

Again, the dedication is in the form of an aspiration. Here the aspiration is that one's merits will be a means to fulfil the needs of sentient beings who *lack the requisites and necessities*, by becoming a *treasure vase that is inexhaustible*. In other words, we are aspiring to become an inexhaustible treasure vault, which will naturally replenish itself no matter how much you take out of it.

May I abide effortlessly in front of them as the various necessities they need means being able to spontaneously and effortlessly fulfil the needs of those who are deprived. The specific connotation of *effortlessly* is that, while one might have an inexhaustible treasure vault, there might be some hesitation in using that wealth if effort is required to do so. If there is effort involved we might not be so inclined to use those resources to benefit others. So *effortlessly* has the specific indication that one has no hesitation and will be naturally and spontaneously able to give to others in need.

1.5. An auxiliary of the perfection of generosity: training in the thought of giving away one's body, possessions and roots of virtue

In order to be generous we first need to train our mind in generosity, such as when we do the *tong len* practice of giving and taking, where we give away our body, possessions and virtues.

As indicated here, we are initially *training in the thought of giving away our body, possessions and roots of virtue*. The significance of training one's mind in doing these practices is that there will be no hesitation and no sense of miserliness when it comes to actually giving. Without that training we might develop miserliness or hesitation when we give to others. So training the mind in the thought of giving is most important.

Having covered some specific dedications, it is good to come back to the significance of dedication in general. It is said that dedication in general is an antidote for overcoming negativities that one has incurred through holding wrong views, specifically the wrong view that there are no past or future lives, and wrong views in relation to the cause and effect of karma.

When one makes a dedication towards the achievement of complete enlightenment then imprints are implanted in one's mind to obtain the four enlightened bodies of a buddha. We need to understand that someone who does not believe in past and future lives, and who has the wrong view about karma, would not engage in any kind of dedication to benefit the future lives. Because they have no belief in the positive effect of karma for good deeds, the thought of dedicating towards future lives would not occur to them. When we intentionally engage in a dedication practice it actually serves as an antidote for overcoming negativities otherwise incurred from these wrong views held in the past.

This section of the chapter is subdivided into three:

1.5.1. Training in the thought of giving away one's body, possessions and roots of virtue

1.5.2. Dedicating it to be the cause of inexhaustible virtue

1.5.3. Dedicating it to be the cause of enjoyment

1.5.1. Training in the thought of giving away one's body, possessions and roots of virtue

This is further subdivided into three:

1.5.1.1. The way of giving

1.5.1.2. The reason why one should definitely give

1.5.1.3. How to practice after the offering

1.5.1.1. THE WAY OF GIVING

The verse relating to this is:

11. *Also my body, possessions
And all virtues of the three times
I will give away without regret
To achieve the purpose of all sentient beings.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Also my body and possessions, such as food and drink, and all my virtues of the three times that are related to and contained in the three bases, I offer with a mind free from regret and dependence, to achieve the temporary and ultimate goals of sentient beings.

In relation to the explanations here, one is again training one's mind in the thought to give away one's body and possessions, such as food and drink.

The three times refers to the past, present and future. One could not however be generous with food that has already been consumed in the past. You can't say, 'Oh, I will give you the lunch that I had yesterday.' How could you possibly give away food that you have already consumed? However one can be generous with food in the present and in the future. You can say, 'I will share my lunch with you tomorrow', or 'I will give you some food tomorrow', and it would not be a lie if you actually intended to do that. So dedicating in this way has a sense of being a promise.

- One can definitely dedicate virtues accumulated in the past. Even though the actual accumulation of the virtue occurred in the past, what remains of those positive actions is their imprints. Whenever one creates karma, an imprint remains in one's mental continuum. Therefore, the virtues of the past, refers to the positive imprints of the virtues accumulated in the past.
- Likewise the virtues one is accumulating in the present can definitely be dedicated.
- Dedicating now is also a way to encourage oneself to accumulate more virtue in the future, which will be a very significant means to accumulate merit, which is definitely significant.

Another point to note is that when one mentally offers food, possessions and so forth to the Sangha or others, it is permissible to consume food that has actually been offered, if it is for the purpose of benefitting others.

The *three bases* refers to the practices of the three trainings, i.e. generosity, morality and meditation.

The purpose of engaging in the practices of giving away one's possessions, food and drink and virtues is to fulfil the temporary and ultimate goals of all sentient beings.

1.5.1.2. THE REASON WHY ONE SHOULD DEFINITELY GIVE

We can leave this for the next session.

My intention is to try to finish this chapter by the end of this year.

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

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Edited Version

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