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# *Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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The *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited will suffice as our motivation for the meditation practice, and so now we focus our minds on our meditation. [meditation]

It is important to engage in the practice of meditation, just as we have attempted to do in our short session.

Something that we really need to consider is using our precious human life with its eight freedoms and ten endowments meaningfully. So what does that mean? The worldly way of making life meaningful would be to exert oneself in amassing wealth, possessions, a good career, and to enjoy the status which that brings. But that is only a superficial view of a meaningful life. From the Dharma point of view, in order to make one's precious human life meaningful - which is also described as taking the essence of this precious human life - one needs to first generate the wish of wanting to do just that.

In order to generate that genuine wish to make one's precious human life meaningful, four types of attitudes must be generated. These are known as the four attributes for taking the essence of one's precious human life. I have explained these points previously and I find them very meaningful. The four attributes are: thinking about the need to practise the Dharma; thinking about the ability one has to practise the Dharma; thinking about how one needs to practise the Dharma in this very life; and thinking about why it is essential to practise the Dharma right now.

## **1. Thinking about the need to practise the Dharma**

Why is there such a need? Put succinctly it is simply because we all wish for happiness and don't wish to experience any suffering. That simple fact has to be linked to the need to practise Dharma. In other words, we have to see how it is only through the practice of Dharma that we can fulfil our wish to experience genuine happiness and rid ourselves of all suffering.

Then we need to turn that understanding into a conviction that only the practice of the Dharma will fulfil that wish of gaining true happiness and eliminating suffering. Once that conviction is developed, we will spontaneously engage in accumulating virtues and shunning negativities. When we really think about this in detail we will be convinced that the only cause of happiness is virtue, while non-virtue or negativity is the cause of suffering.

What naturally follows is the conviction that it is only through the practice of Dharma that one establishes the means to accumulate virtue and shun negativity. To become a true Dharma practitioner, we need to contemplate these facts again and again and develop a deep sense of conviction in them.

## **2. Thinking about one's ability to practise the Dharma**

Having contemplated at length on the need to practise the Dharma, and arriving at the conclusion, 'Yes, I definitely need to practise the Dharma', the next question that quite naturally arises, is, 'Do I have the ability to practise the Dharma?' So that question needs to be addressed. The reason that one does have that ability is because one has a precious human rebirth with the eight freedoms and ten endowments intact. That is the true meaning of a precious human rebirth.

The next step is to contemplate thoroughly the fact that one is free from the eight adverse circumstances in relation to personal favourable conditions, and thus endowed with the eight freedoms. In particular, one has the discriminating wisdom of being able to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. Furthermore, one is endowed with the ten endowments in relation to the external favourable conditions, such as meeting with the perfect Mahayana teacher and so forth.

Contemplating these factors again and again, thinking about the precious rebirth and how one has all of these faculties intact, is a very worthwhile meditation—in fact, it's an essential meditation practice. Contemplating in this way again and again, helps to calm down and subdue the mind, thus providing further encouragement to practise the Dharma.

I spent a lot of time contemplating like this when I was around 18 or 19 years old, and I can safely say that, even though I cannot claim to have any realisations about the Dharma, this practice definitely helped me. I didn't do it to become well versed so that I could become well known and famous through my understanding of these topics. That was not at the forefront of my mind at all! I was considering these points on a personal level as a way to help to subdue my mind, and to that effect I can safely say that it has definitely been of benefit.

It is really important to work with whatever helps one's mind in the moment, and to utilise whatever understanding one has of the Dharma, at whatever meagre level that may be. If a practice helps your mind, then make that your main practice, rather than aiming at higher forms of practice. Aiming high while putting aside the practical approaches can be quite destructive for one's own development. I'm not saying that one shouldn't aim high, but the point is that aiming to do high level practices, whilst neglecting more practical approaches, can definitely be harmful.

Last week we reviewed Gyaltshab Rinpoche's succinct explanation on how to practise in the correct sequence. We need to take that important instruction to heart. As you will recall, he said that it can be dangerous to aim at high level practices of generosity, for example, or adopt practices that are inappropriate. We need to take instructions like these to heart. They come from precious teachers, lamas, and great masters, so we need to take heed of them.

## **3. Thinking about the need to practise the Dharma in this very life**

Having contemplated the need to practise the Dharma, and understanding that one has the ability to practise the Dharma, one might fall into the trap of thinking, 'Well,

maybe I can leave practising the Dharma to my next life'. To avoid that trap we need to think again and again about the rarity and difficulty of finding a precious human life. To contemplate the rarity and difficulty of finding a precious human life with the eight freedoms and the ten endowments intact, we need to consider the difficulty of acquiring the cause for such a precious human life.

The causes of a precious human life are the practice of morality aided by the practices of generosity and so forth, sealed with unstained aspirational prayers. So when we contemplate how difficult it is to acquire those causes, then we can see why the result, which is the precious human rebirth, is so rare and difficult to find.

When we really think about these points, asking ourselves, 'Do I have all of those causes intact?' and 'How difficult is it to obtain all of those causes?', then it will dawn upon us that obtaining such a precious human life with the eight freedoms and ten endowments intact is indeed very rare and will be difficult to obtain again in a future life.

#### **4. Thinking about why it is essential to practise the Dharma right now**

The fourth attribute of taking the essence of our precious human life is that we need to think about how this precious human life can so easily cease. We have already realised that we need to practise the Dharma in this life, but we might fall into the trap of thinking that we can practise Dharma next week, next month, or next year. To avoid procrastinating like that, we need to contemplate how the precious human life can so easily end in a moment.

##### **How to take the essence of this precious human life**

When we contemplate these four points again and again, then the outcome will be a genuine, unmistakable wish to take the essence of this precious human life, endowed with the eight freedoms and ten endowments. Having developed that wish, the next question that arises is, 'How, then, do we take the essence of our precious human life?'

As an answer to that we reflect upon the fact that there are three different levels of taking the essence of this precious human life: the small way, the medium way and the great way, and this is what we contemplate next.

To understand how these three scopes relate to what the Buddha taught, we need to recall that the Buddha taught the Dharma for the sole purpose of benefiting other sentient beings—the Dharma has no other purpose than that. There are three levels in which the Dharma benefits sentient beings. At the lowest level is the temporary benefit of being reborn again as a human or in the god realms; the medium benefit is becoming free from the cycle of samsara, in other words obtaining the state of self-liberation; and the optimum way to benefit sentient beings is to lead them to the ultimate state of supreme enlightenment.

These benefits can be grouped into temporary benefits and the ultimate benefit. With respect to the temporary benefits, the Buddha presented the unmistakable methods for obtaining high status, and most importantly that state

of nirvana or self-liberation. To obtain the ultimate benefit, which is supreme enlightenment, the Buddha further presented the paths and grounds and so forth. So if the question, 'How did the Buddha benefit sentient beings?' arises, then we know that these are the ways in which the Buddha benefits us.

So how do we take this as personal instruction? Beginning with the temporary benefits, by avoiding the ten non-virtues and adopting the ten virtues will definitely close the door to being reborn in the lower realms in the next life. While it may be difficult to overcome the causes for unfortunate rebirths entirely, we can at least affect the course of our next rebirth, ensuring that there will again be an opportunity to continue to practice to avoid being reborn in the unfortunate realms in the life thereafter. When we think in this practical way, we can see that we can definitely manage to engage in this practice.

Next, we need to consider what prevents us from engaging in the pure practices that secure the causes for obtaining the fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. When we look into those opposing factors, we will see that from beginningless times we have had a strong clinging to the pleasures of life, and it is this strong grasping and clinging to the pleasures of this life that prevents us from working towards the goals of our future lives.

So the way to overcome this strong grasping at the affairs of this life is by contemplating and thinking about the need for taking refuge, the importance of karma and its effect, and engage in confession and purification practices with four opponent powers. When we engage in these practices, and change our attitude from one of clinging merely to the affairs of this life, to one of thinking about the purpose of our future lives, then we have actually engaged in the practice of Dharma. That is the true meaning of Dharma—when the mind is held fast against strong clinging to non-virtues.

##### *The small scope*

Dharma practice at the small scope is replacing the strong clinging to this life with an attitude focussed on the purpose of the next life. As mentioned previously, that involves avoiding the ten non-virtues, adopting the ten virtues, taking refuge, implementing the correct understanding of karma and engaging in purification practices. When the mind is transformed from a state of clinging to this life to one that holds the future life as being more purposeful and more meaningful, then that mind is being held by the Dharma. That is the Dharma practice of the small scope; this is taking the essence of one's precious human rebirth in a small way.

##### *The medium scope*

As presented in teachings, when one considers the pitfalls of samsaric or cyclic existence, and, with the aid of the wisdom realising selflessness and so forth, actually develops a strong sense of renunciation, then that will be engaging in the practice of the medium scope, and taking essence of one's precious human life in the medium way.

Here the practice of Dharma means replacing clinging to samsaric pleasures with a genuine longing for liberation, and this transformation comes as a result of the practices of the three higher trainings. That which actually

prevents us from having a true aspiration for liberation is clinging to the pleasures of samsara. For as long as we value the pleasures of samsara and cling to that, then the mind of longing for liberation will never arise. In fact, this clinging is the factor that obstructs the development of a true longing and aspiration for liberation. When one develops disenchantment with the pleasures of samsara, then that will be the antidote that overcomes clinging to samsara, and thus becomes an aid to developing a genuine aspiration for liberation.

### **The great scope**

The supreme way to take the essence of the precious human life is to develop bodhicitta—if not actual bodhicitta right away, then a similitude of it. When that is developed and cultivated within one's mental continuum, and one engages in actions with that bodhicitta attitude, then that is the supreme form of practice. This was, of course, explained in earlier teachings.

The meaning of Dharma in accordance with the great scope practice is, when working for the purpose of merely oneself is replaced with an attitude of wishing to work for the benefit of all beings, when that mind of bodhicitta is generated, then that is the meaning of Dharma in accordance with the great scope.

### **Dharma in relation to the three scopes**

We need to really understand how Dharma is defined in relation to the three levels of practice. The true meaning of Dharma is that it serves as an antidote for overcoming three types of attitudes. The Dharma of the small level serves as an opponent to clinging to merely this life's affairs. The meaning of Dharma at the medium level is when it serves as an opponent to overcome the clinging to the pleasures of samsara. Finally, when Dharma serves as an opponent to overcome the selfish attitude of clinging to merely one's own purpose, and replaces that attitude with one of working for the purpose of other sentient beings, then it becomes the Dharma of the great level.

The main obstacles for developing bodhicitta are these three attitudes of strong clinging to the affairs of this life, strong clinging to the pleasures of samsara, and clinging to merely one's own purpose. These selfish attitudes are definitely obstacles for developing bodhicitta. For as long as one harbours any one of these three attitudes, there is no way that one can develop bodhicitta. We need to consider these points thoroughly. There is nothing that prevents us from developing bodhicitta other than these three attitudes. So the more we develop ourselves and work towards abstaining from these three negative attitudes, and the more we distance ourselves from them, the closer we will get to developing actual bodhicitta. That's how the practice of Dharma works.

We can safely say that some are closer to developing bodhicitta than others. What determines that difference is none other than how closely the mind is related to these three opposing attitudes. The ones who are closest to the three opposing attitudes, holding them dear to their heart, are the ones who are furthest from developing bodhicitta. Those who are distant from these selfish attitudes, who don't hold them dearly in their heart, are

the ones who are closer to developing bodhicitta. No-one else determines that other than oneself. This, of course, is explained in great detail in the *Bodhicharyavatara*. As Shantideva says, 'What need is there to mention more? Look at where the Buddha is now. Look at where we are now!'

Using a more contemporary example, while there might be some in this room who have developed bodhicitta, generally we don't know if that is the case or not. However if we were to consider ourselves as being at the same level of not yet having developed bodhicitta, then who of the seventy-eight individuals in this room will be the first to become bodhisattvas and become enlightened first? The obvious answer is that it will be those who are genuinely striving to work for the benefit of others, thinking of the welfare of others and being more concerned about that than their own mere purpose. Those who are holding their own interest as being of primary importance, and who have minimum concern for the welfare of others, will be further away from developing bodhicitta. That is basically what Shantideva is saying — it is our own way of thinking and our own attitudes that determine whether we will develop bodhicitta and obtain the ultimate state of enlightenment. We need to take that as a personal instruction. In brief, Shantideva is saying 'Be careful or you might miss out'. So, to make sure that you don't, generate the appropriate attitudes and get rid of the opposing attitudes.

Taking the essence of this precious human life at the small scope means overcoming strong clinging to the affairs of this life. That is done by contemplating the purpose of our existence in our next life. The more we think about the importance of working for our future life, the more the strong clinging to this life's affairs will gradually be reduced. That is the way to slowly transform our mind and imbue it with the genuine practice of Dharma. We need to understand that the real meaning of Dharma is not merely counting the number of achievements, like how much one has studied, or the numbers of particular practices, but rather it is to slowly transform our mind.

Finally, what I wish to convey is that you have done very well with your attendance and study this year; you have definitely put an effort into your study. That of course is really fortunate, and I rejoice in that. From my side it has also been fortunate; I have presented the teachings with the best intention and motivation that I can. So I have definitely seen this year as being very fortunate for us all.

The material in Shantideva's text, the *Bodhicharyavatara*, which we have been studying, is quite incredible. It has been praised by all the masters as being a really great and masterly and succinct teaching. From whatever point of view we look at it—sutra or tantra—there is no greater teaching, in terms of personal instructions, than this text. We can contemplate how fortunate we have been in having this opportunity to attempt to explain and study and understand the *Bodhicharyavatara*. So we can dedicate the virtues we have accumulated from all of our efforts in studying and practising this text towards being able to continuously engage in the study, understanding and practice of this text again and again in all future lives, in the company of virtuous Dharma friends like ourselves.

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We just might be able to meet with these conditions again in our future lives.

We can be certain that being able to assemble here, and enjoy each others' company, and study and practise in this way, is the positive outcome of previous karmic connections that we have had. We have created an appropriate cause in the past to enjoy our present conditions. That is definitely the case, and that's something we can be definitely be joyful and happy about!

This text, *Bodhicharyavatara*, is the supreme means for understanding bodhicitta, and indeed, it is a manual for actually developing bodhicitta—the mind of awakening. His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentions this again and again. Whilst I cannot claim that I have any experience of the intended result of this text, when a supreme being such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is endowed with bodhicitta himself, confirms the importance of this text and mentions it again and again, then that helps me to develop a stronger conviction in it as well. So it is on that basis that I can confidently say to you that it is indeed a supreme means to develop bodhicitta.

It is good for each of us, individually, to generate the resolve to take the initiative to develop this altruistic mind, by first working on the seed of bodhicitta, which is a kind mind with a genuine concern for others—in short, developing loving kindness. When we work at developing loving kindness in our heart, being considerate of others as much as we can, and practise that with the intention of developing this altruistic mind of bodhicitta, then our attempts won't be meagre at all. In fact they will be a great practice.

In a practical way, we need to think about how the more we genuinely attempt to adopt virtues and practise kindness, the more happiness we will have in this very life, not to mention it being a cause for happiness in our future lives. So we really need to work on developing kindness, more specifically love and compassion, on a regular basis. We need to understand that love and compassion is the basis on which to develop bodhicitta. Therefore, we need to further cultivate that basis to develop that which is not yet developed. Where kindness and love and compassion have not been generated or developed, we need to work on developing it, and when it has developed, we need to further increase it. This is how we establish a sound basis for enjoying the accrued benefits in future lifetimes.

As I regularly mention, the attitudes of love and compassion are really our best friends. When we have secured them as our best companion then we will not feel too disturbed when we are separated from external friends. Without such an internal friend, being separated from external friends can bring so much suffering. As I have mentioned previously, I have not developed any experience of bodhicitta myself, but just thinking about the necessity of love and compassion, and contemplating on it again and again has really become my best companion, regardless of when I am with others or when I am alone. I can confidently say that I don't experience the suffering of loneliness, or feel a lack of connection with others and so forth. On the contrary, I feel quite joyful and happy even when I am alone in my room.

When I am alone, love and compassion suffice to uplift my mind. As Shantideva and other masters such as Lama Tsong Khapa have so succinctly mentioned, one needs to generate love and compassion, not just in meditation sessions, but also in the post-meditative sessions. We shouldn't restrict the development of love and compassion to some allocated time, but really take it to heart and make it our core practice in whatever we are doing, and wherever we are. That is how we familiarise our mind with these positive attitudes.

When one has developed a strong sense of loving kindness and compassion, then friends and companions will be loving and kind. Conversely, when that loving attitude and love and compassion begin to weaken, then others may seem to have become distant or even appear to be enemies. As we all wish to have good companions and friends, we might as well develop the causes for that.

As mentioned previously, we need to familiarise our mind with loving kindness in our everyday life, again and again. Putting that into practice means beginning with our Dharma brothers and sisters, ensuring that we try to help each other as much as we can, and, at the very least, avoid harming each other. In particular, we need to be very careful that we don't cause harm to other's Dharma practice. As mentioned in several texts, one of the heaviest negative karmas is to harm Dharma practitioners by obstructing their Dharma practices. Thus, we need to ensure that we don't create such negativity by having harmful intentions and hurting others in that way. So we begin our practice with each other—we try to help each other with the genuine attitude of kindness, at the very least ensuring that we don't hurt and harm each other. That is very important to keep in mind.

A very simple reason for not intentionally hurting or harming others is because we do not wish to be hurt or harmed ourselves. If hurting and harming others didn't incur any negative consequences for ourselves, then we might think that there is no reason to avoid doing that. However, since we do not want to experience harm and negative consequences ourselves, it is good to consider not harming or hurting others. A few individuals (not necessarily Dharma practitioners) have confided in me, 'I don't know much about karma, but it does seem that when you are kind to others, something good happens in return, and if I intentionally harm or hurt others, something bad happens to me. That is something I do notice'. These are people who confess that they don't know much about karma. So if people who are not religiously inclined, or who do not consider themselves to be Buddhist, appreciate there is such a thing as the consequences of one's actions, then we Buddhists, who have faith in karma, definitely need to give much more consideration to this point.

As I said earlier, you have all definitely put in a lot of effort this year, by coming to the classes and doing all of the related studies and so forth, and I definitely appreciate it. You have been extremely kind to me and I appreciate your kindness.

### **Christmas Program**

On a another note, you will remember that last week I checked out how many of you are staying behind and

will be in Melbourne for the Lama Tsong Khapa Day puja. So, if you did raise your hands, then please make an effort to come to that puja on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December. I'll remember who raised their hands! Of course I can't really force you to attend, but if I later hear that you were not here then I might be a little bit disappointed! I might think, 'Oh, those who have not come to the puja may not be so keen about listening to my advice!'

The puja should begin with the recitation of the *Mig-tse-ma Prayer*, (the praise to Lama Tsong Khapa), followed by the guru puja itself. At the end recite the *Prayer for the Flourishing of Lama Tsong Khapa's Doctrine*, concluding with *Mig-tse-ma Prayer* at least eight or nine times. It would be good to begin with a silent meditation, generating your own good motivations. Rather than having someone speaking aloud, which could distract people, just sit quietly in meditation for a while before beginning the puja. Afterwards people can stay behind, have tea and interact with each other. It should be a joyful occasion, so you can announce, 'Geshe-la has said to stay behind and have tea, enjoy the company and have a good time'.

As there is also the tradition of staying up until midnight on New Years Eve, those who are so inclined might come together and do Tara Praises until midnight. You can take breaks for tea and so forth. However if you want to light firecrackers, then it's best to go down to the beach!

You will be aware that there will be a Medicine Buddha practice next Wednesday night, which will also be very beneficial, and another very good occasion for people to come together. I had thought about that anyway, before my change of plans.

Those who have family engagements at Christmas should generate the best motivation and intention, which will contribute to making it a joyful occasion. Some may decide to not engage in social or family gatherings. That's fine too, as long as you also generate love and compassion.

There are only two weeks where there are no sessions. Monday evenings begin on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. My intention in having these sessions is so that you are able to maintain some kind of continuity in your practice. You could come and do your own practice if you don't feel like following what is being taught. Two of the Wednesday sessions in January will be Tara practice nights and the other two are Chenrezig meditation practices. These will be led by Allys and Jeremy, so that will also very good.

If those of you who live nearby want to gather for additional meditation sessions, you can take the opportunity to do those sessions here. When we were in St Kilda, there was a lady who would come regularly to the small gumpa that we had then, to do her meditation; she would come from her house, do her meditation and then go to work. So she was using the venue for her personal practice. Practising meditation in this gumpa will definitely make a difference because it is definitely a blessed place. The main thing to keep in mind is that the centre is always open and that there is a place to meditate if you want to come.

There used to be some people who would just come to sit in here for awhile. Apparently just spending a few minutes in this hall gave them a good feeling. So even though they might not have been meditating, just sitting here gave them some solace. I am not sure whether they still come or not.

So again, thank you everyone!

I have had to change my plans—I had no choice but maybe it has turned out for the better. The reason for the change of plans is that the reincarnation of one of my own teachers, Khensur Urygen Tseten, is being enthroned. The late Khensur Rinpoche was one of my main teachers; he really helped me to subdue my mind and I attribute this to his great kindness.

To give an indication of how close my teachers were to me, there was the occasion when I visited Khensur Urygen Tseten and Geshe Ngawang Dhargye in New Zealand. After spending some time there, when it came time for me to leave, Khensur Urygen Tseten and Geshe Ngawang Dhargye both wanted to come to the airport to see me off. I, who have no real qualities, was very moved that such great teachers wanted to see me off. At the airport, as I was waiting to pass through immigration and so forth, we spent the time chatting. As I went in, Khensur Urygen Tseten commented, 'Can't we come in there with you?' When they were told that they were not allowed to do so, Khensur Urygen Tseten commented, 'We will wait until we see your plane take off'. Apparently, as they saw the plane take off he commented, 'One of our friends has now left'. This shows how close we were, and the kindness my teachers showed to me.

Whenever I went to visit Geshe Ngawang Dhargye in Dunedin, he would always be there to greet me when I arrived. If I left early, he would excuse himself from accompanying me, saying, 'I have to finish my prayers'. But whenever I went there, he would always receive me, and his kindness was really remarkable.

Their consideration and care was really remarkable. They were never pompous. They never said, 'Oh I am the teacher', or felt there was no need to relate to their students. They really joined their disciples and showed their care in that way. Maybe some of those caring ways have rubbed off on me, as that is how I try to care for you too.

So as the volunteers bring in the tea, we can recite the Tara Praises. It is good to really make strong prayers to Tara—she is definitely unailing in providing assistance and help. I definitely have strong faith in, and a strong reliance, on Tara. This morning, for example, I did a Tara practice for over two hours, and tomorrow I also intend to do the same. She definitely brings a very swift result.

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

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