
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we will devote some time to meditation and we can base our motivation on the Refuge and Bodhicitta prayer that we have just recited. [meditation]

Prior to taking up the practice of meditation it is very important that we understand both the conducive and the adverse conditions that affect meditation. Without recognising those two aspects, and making an attempt to overcome the adverse conditions and to adopt the conducive ones, our attempt to meditate will not be very successful. We may seem to achieve a temporary focus but apart from that we won't get much out of our meditation session. For a genuine meditation session, we really need to understand the way the conducive and adverse conditions affect a meditation session.

As mentioned regularly, the main purpose of engaging in the practice of meditation is so that one may be able to subdue one's mind. In order to subdue the mind we need to understand the process of gaining control over our own mind, otherwise we will maintain our habitual pattern of being controlled by our mind, which in turn is controlled by the delusions, and of the various delusions, the main culprit is the strong grasping at the 'I'.

We can assume that whatever activity we engage in is done with the intent of gaining happiness and eliminating suffering. Regardless of whether the activity actually serves that purpose or not, that is the ultimate goal. This is true for whatever activity human beings are engaged in—the pursuit of happiness and the elimination of suffering is always the goal. When we observe the activities of others we may notice that their activity is not serving that purpose. However, we can't tell them that, because everyone has the notion that they are using the correct methods to achieve their goal. Those methods are ingrained, and they believe that they will work for them, and so it is impossible to immediately change their approach, especially when they believe theirs to be the best method. So it is worthwhile for us to simply observe what others are doing and learn from that.

The practice of Dharma and meditation is a unique method for achieving happiness and eliminating suffering. However, we also need to understand that adopting meditation should not be presented to others as being contrary to leading a normal life in a worldly environment. Some may feel that adopting the meditation technique is a religious practice and therefore not related to their everyday life existence and wellbeing. If meditation is presented as having to lead a completely different kind of lifestyle, then it would be very difficult for ordinary people to see how meditation can benefit them. Rather, we need to present the meditation technique as being relevant to leading a happier life in their everyday existence. If one seemingly leads a normal lifestyle outwardly, but experiences a true inner transformation as a result of meditation and the practise of Dharma, then, based on that personal experience, we can share something of great value with others. Others from ordinary walks of life will

feel comfortable in our presence and easily accept what we present. This will be of real benefit to others.

It is by solving our own personal difficulties and problems through the practice of Dharma and meditation, and experiencing an inner transformation, that we will be able to confidently share the Dharma with others. And, as such, what we present will be accepted by others, because no-one can dismiss a personal experience of positive transformation—especially when it relates to overcoming problems and difficulties similar to the ones they are facing themselves. How can others say that meditation has no value when you share with them the fact that it has helped to solve your own difficulties and problems? No-one intentionally wishes to experience any kind of problem or difficulty and everyone appreciates a state of wellbeing. So when a genuine technique is presented from the basis of personal experience, it will readily be accepted by others. That is because they are also striving towards the same goal of happiness and wellbeing and not to experience any difficulties and problems.

The main point is to ensure that your practice hits the target of subduing and controlling your own mind. The great Gyalsey Thokmay Sangpo said in his *Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*:

If you do not analyse your own faults,
You might put on a Dharmic facade while
behaving in a non-Dharmic way.
Therefore, to continually analyse your faults and
then discard them,
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The essential point here is that one really needs to detect and acknowledge the faults within one's own mind and then strive to overcome them first. Otherwise, as the great master Gyalsey Thokmay Sangpo mentions, there is a great danger that we will completely mislead others by presenting them with a false appearance. If one does not attend to the real intention of the Dharma, particularly if one engages in actions contrary to the Dharma, then there will be great danger of creating doubt about the value of Dharma in the minds of others. It can cause others to think, 'How could someone behave and conduct themselves in a way that is contrary to what they preach?' If we create the conditions where others doubt the Dharma and generate a negative state of mind it is a grave fault on our part. We should strive for others to generate virtue and not more negativity.

So we need to really pay attention to the main cause of our own faults and mental unrest, which lies within our own mind, and not in external conditions and circumstances. When we are feeling a little down or depressed we may resort to going out with friends and having a good time, which may give some temporary relief. But when the enjoyment of being with others has faded away, the mental unrest and the uncomfortable feelings and negative emotions return. That is because we are not paying attention to applying antidotes to overcoming the root cause of our problems.

Seeking temporary relief each time we feel depressed and unsettled will not help to solve the real problem. Rather, we need to ensure that whatever meditation we do, and whatever Dharma practice we adopt, becomes an antidote for overcoming the real problem that lies within. Each one of us can detect a troubling state of mind, attitude or delusion in our mind that is always there to harm us. So it is

important for us to detect the cause of that, and work at overcoming the main culprit.

Of all the various delusions found in negative states of mind, the ultimate culprit is grasping at the self, an aspect of which is self-cherishing. There is some debate about whether the self-cherishing mind is actually a delusion but, regardless of that, it is quite clear that it harms us and hinders our happiness and joy. Grasping at the 'I' and self-cherishing are mutually supportive, and they work together like master and servant to cause us so much misery and pain.

Grasping at the 'I' is the root cause of all our problems, and when we are able to fully acknowledge that then the strong wish to overcome grasping at the self will develop. So what are the best methods and antidotes to overcome self-grasping? As the teachings present, the ultimate antidote for overcoming grasping at the self is realising emptiness or selflessness. There is no more supreme antidote to grasping at the self than to gain the realisation of emptiness. This is why the view of emptiness is held in such high esteem. It is considered a most precious realisation because it serves as the sole antidote for overcoming the root cause of all our problems, which is grasping at the self.

To see why grasping at the self is the cause for all unwanted misery and suffering we need to understand how it is the root cause of all other delusions and, in particular, the cause for the development of strong attachment and anger. This is not an obscure point. If we really think about it we will notice that this is true for ourselves. From strong clinging to the 'I' there naturally follows attachment to those things and individuals that are favourable to oneself, and aversion or anger towards those who oppose one's own interests. So, there is strong attachment to one's friends, relatives and the like, and anger towards enemies. Due to this strong attachment and aversion we engage in so many different activities that revolve around trying to please those who are close to us, while trying to subjugate those we consider our enemies and who oppose our interests, thus creating much heavy negative karma. In this way we come to understand how self-grasping is the root cause of all our unhappiness.

When we investigate further and look into how we carry these attitudes into our daily life we find that we make most of our decisions based on, whether 'I like this', or 'I don't like that'. Our strongly held opinions are based merely on the fact 'because I like this, I want it' or 'because I don't like it, I don't want it'. So, the driving force behind the decisions we make is mostly because 'I' like or dislike something.

We need to further investigate how that very strong opinionated 'I' appears to us. Through a sincere and thorough investigation we will come to realise that we view this 'I' as being independently existent; a very solid and unshakeable 'I' that does not depend on any other causes and conditions for its existence.

When we further investigate whether such an independent and solid 'I' actually exists or not, we come to realise that in fact such an 'I' does not exist at all. When we come to understand that such an independently existent 'I' does not actually exist, then one has identified the basis of the object of negation. Without abandoning the object of negation we cannot possibly overcome the grasping at the self. Thus, we come to understand the importance of realising selflessness.

When the Buddhist teachings present selflessness, it is not suggesting that the self does not exist at all and that there is no 'I'. Rather, it is a self-sufficient and independent 'I' that does not exist. Our wrong conception makes us believe and hold onto such a non-existent self or 'I'. However, when we

understand that there is no such self-sufficient and independently existing 'I', then we begin to gain the true understanding of selflessness and emptiness. We also begin to understand that we have to realise selflessness or emptiness because we need to overcome that grasping at the self, which is the main cause of our suffering. Furthermore, we begin to see for ourselves why the teachings on emptiness are held in such high esteem, and why it is necessary to gain an understanding of emptiness; to work on developing that realisation.

This also leads to the main point that His Holiness the Dalai Lama presented in his recent teachings in south India, which many of you attended. You might recall that he said that the purpose of this gathering can be summarised into two main points. 'The purpose of gathering here' he said, 'is to find a means to overcome grasping at the self and the self-cherishing mind. So if you can take this essential point with you and work on that, then it serves the purpose of the teachings'. He said that if you take these two points with you and think about them constantly, then coming to teachings will have served its purpose. So, it is good to take that succinct advice to heart and really try to implement it in our daily lives.

If we work on these two essential points, then the more we reduce grasping at the self and the self-cherishing mind, the greater our happiness will naturally be. Conversely, the more we hold on to grasping at the self and maintain a self-cherishing attitude, the more our happiness decreases and our suffering increases. This is very true. To give a small practical example: if, in a mutual relationship, you have to make a decision about something and the other person says, 'Let's do it this way', and you say, 'No, I don't accept that', then from that very moment the situation becomes tense and you both start to feel uncomfortable. The stronger that sense of 'I' or 'me', along with what 'I want' and 'don't want' becomes, the more we feel unsettled and uncomfortable. But if we say, 'OK, I accept and agree with you' then things settle down. There is no conflict and dispute with the other person and naturally the situation is calm. Indeed, the more we increase our genuine kindness and concern for others, the more our happiness will increase. Thus, concern for others and taking their interests into account opposes the self-cherishing mind. The more we rise above the self-cherishing attitude and think about the welfare of others the more our happiness will increase. This is the practical way to think about the benefit of overcoming self-cherishing.

Of all the antidotes for overcoming a self-cherishing mind, the optimum antidote is none other than bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, and this is the subject matter of the text we are studying. In this very text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* or *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Shantideva explains what bodhicitta is, how to develop bodhicitta and the benefits of bodhicitta and so forth. It is important that we have a deeper understanding of what we are studying and the purpose of this text from the very outset. Having such an overview and implementing it in our practice is really important for whatever studies we engage in.

Having earlier mentioned the importance of meditation, it is good to also understand how to develop a sound, genuine meditation practice. First of all, the mind has to have a *single-pointed focus* on the object, and secondly, it has to be a *sharp and clear state of mind*. Those are the criteria which need to be met in order to develop concentration.

It is also important to acknowledge the opposing factors to this sharp, clear state of mind that is single-pointedly

focussed. The opposing factors are excitement and laxity. *Excitement* causes the mind to waver and is the main opposing factor to developing single-pointed concentration; whereas *laxity* is the main opposing factor to having a clear and sharp state of mind.

The conducive factors for developing and maintaining concentration are mindfulness and introspection. *Mindfulness* is the state of mind where there is a constant recollection of the chosen object, i.e. constantly bringing to mind whatever meditation object one has chosen to focus on. *Introspection*, on the other hand, is a state of mind that is constantly vigilant of our state of mind and our focus. If the mind starts to waver (either becoming distracted by excitement or when it starts sinking into stupor and laxity), one immediately notices that and applies the antidotes. The state of mind which allows us to do this is called introspection. So mindfulness and introspection are the most important conducive factors.

When one understands that genuine meditation requires a single-pointed focus and a clear and sharp state of mind, then the real meaning of meditation becomes apparent. Meditation entails choosing an appropriate object to focus on and then intentionally withdrawing the mind from all forms of distraction. The meditation begins when we intentionally focus on the object and maintain that focus.

An appropriate object for single-pointed focus is one that does not give rise to delusions. Because we have chosen an appropriate object to focus on, and because the technique of focusing on that object involves withdrawing from engaging in the delusions, we will naturally experience a mind that is genuinely settled. So, during the time of the meditation, at the very least, the manifest delusions will subside, thus creating a virtuous state of mind. By acquainting our mind with this technique the delusions will begin to have less influence on our mind.

As Lama Tsong Khapa said, when one notices that the delusions have become weaker, then that is the true mark of one's practice of the Dharma. Furthermore, when this is complemented with a stronger faith in the gurus, the buddhas and in the Dharma itself, that is a true sign of the fact that meditation and Dharma practice have worked for us. If, despite our attempts to practise, we find that the delusions are not weakening and remain the same or worse, becoming even stronger, then we need to acknowledge that something is not right and that we are not hitting the mark with our practice. Perhaps it's because we are not making sufficient effort or that we are not adopting the correct methods.

If one's meditation practice serves as an antidote that weakens the delusions, then it has served its purpose and one's practice has born fruit. However if our delusions start to increase then this is a sign that we have to be very cautious about how we are adopting the practice and the effects it has on our mind. An example of how one's practice does not serve the purpose of overcoming the delusions and, in fact, actually feeds one's delusions to a certain extent is starting to feel proud about one's practice of meditation and so forth. Such a sense of pride can manifest in feeling jealous of those who are practising. That is a sign that one's practices have completely missed the mark, and that the delusions are increasing rather than decreasing. If one's attempts to practice have been genuinely applied, then far from feeling pompous and proud and thinking one is doing better than others, or looking down on others, or even feeling competitive or jealous of those who are practising,

one will feel very joyful and happy when one sees others engaging in practice. One might then rejoice in one's own attempts to practice, feeling 'I am very fortunate to have this opportunity to practise myself, and it's really great to see others engaging in practice too.' Wishing others well in their practice and encouraging them is a true mark of one's practice having a positive effect.

We also need to keep in mind how incredibly fortunate we are to have this opportunity to engage in these studies and practices. Most of you are still young and have the opportunity with all the right conditions intact, with the Dharma being available, and teachers presenting it. With all of these conditions intact, we need to really reflect upon having this great opportunity now, and understand how we really need to utilise and not waste this opportunity. We really need to cherish these ongoing opportunities to engage in study and practices, and remind ourselves again and again that the purpose of practising is to overcome the self-grasping and self-cherishing mind within us. That, in summary, is the purpose we need to always bear in mind.

We are up to the third and final part of Chapter 3, which is:

3.1. Rejoicing

Here the headings are:

3.1.1. Achieving one's own purpose

3.1.2. Achieving the purpose of others

3.1.1. Achieving one's own purpose

This is subdivided into three:

3.1.1.1. Rejoicing by eulogising the mind

3.1.1.2. Meditating on conscientiousness after having found such a mind

3.1.1.3. Generating joy because of having found a mind that is difficult to find

Having covered the first of these three we move on to:

3.1.1.2. MEDITATING ON CONSCIENTIOUSNESS AFTER HAVING FOUND SUCH A MIND

This refers to making use of this rare mind that is difficult to find, and applying conscientiousness to this mind.

The root text reads:

27. *From now on I shall as much as possible
Engage in actions befitting this lineage.
I shall act in a way so as not to sully
This faultless and holy lineage*

Gyalsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

If one thinks whether this alone is enough:

From now on I shall engage in actions of the three doors that befit the lineage of the father Buddha

I shall strive in the method in a way that does not sully this holy lineage, which is adorned only by qualities and is faultless in the beginning, middle and end, with the faults and downfalls of the wishing and engaging advice.

Having warned the reader, *lest one thinks whether having found this mind is enough* by itself, the commentary goes on to explain what needs to be done *from now on*, which is *I shall engage in actions of the three doors that befit the family lineage of the father Buddha*. As explained previously, the Buddha is like a father and, because bodhisattvas aspire to develop the enlightened mind, they are like his children. A prince who carries the lineage of the king has the responsibility of upholding that lineage in a manner that befits that lineage and without damaging it. Likewise, those who have now become the children of the Buddha need to engage in a manner that befits that lineage of the Buddha. That is the

point being made here. The commentary then explains that the commitment is to *strive in the method in a way that does not sully this holy lineage of the Buddha, which is adorned only by qualities and is faultless in the beginning, middle and end*. One would sully the holy lineage by engaging in *the faults and downfalls of the wishing and engaging advice* or instructions.

Generating the aspiring wish to achieve enlightenment entails recalling that wish three times during the day and three times during the night, refraining from engaging in the four black dharmas, and adopting the four white dharmas. Engaging bodhisattva vows has eighteen root downfalls and forty-six auxiliary or secondary downfalls. So the commentary is urging us to refrain from committing these faults and downfalls, and if one finds oneself doing so, to immediately engage in purification practices.

Having taken the engaging bodhisattva vows, one adopts the practices of the six perfections such as generosity and morality and so forth. Not sullyng the practice of generosity, for example, would be to ensure that whatever one intends to give is given without any sense of miserliness, or pride, or other ulterior motives. In other words, in order to ensure that the lineage is not sullied, one needs to ensure that one counteracts the adverse conditions for the practices of generosity and so forth. There is a Tibetan word used here, *tsunpa*, which has the connotation of being ethical. However, the main point is to ensure we are free from strong delusions whilst engaging in the practice.

Recalling the meaning of this verse on a regular basis would be a good practice in itself. It will be a personal pledge that, in itself, is very powerful as it reinforces one's dedication to developing the bodhicitta mind.

3.1.1.3. GENERATING JOY BECAUSE OF HAVING FOUND A MIND THAT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND

Here we are being exhorted to really generate that sense of *joy of having found a mind that is difficult to find*, which is, of course, the actual awakening mind or bodhicitta. We can definitely generate a sense of joy about having that aspiration. We can, at the very least, safely assume that we have some sort of contrived bodhicitta attitude within our mind. The analogy in the teachings for contrived bodhicitta is that it is like the bark of sugar cane; while the bark doesn't contain the full sweetness of the actual sugarcane it does have some level of sweetness. Likewise, while we have not yet developed actual bodhicitta we can still generate a similitude of the bodhicitta attitude.

As I regularly suggest, we can, at the very least, generate on a daily basis this thought: I will not engage in any action that harms any living being and I will try my utmost to engage in as many ways as I can to benefit other sentient beings. We can definitely manage to generate that thought which, in itself, is a very precious state of mind. However, that thought is not generated naturally or spontaneously, so we need to put some time and energy into generating it. When we do generate that thought, even just for a moment, it is a very precious state of mind. So, if on a regular basis we could work on developing the mind, 'I will not harm any sentient being and I will do my most to benefit sentient beings', it will be a mind that we can cherish and we can feel great joy about having generated that intention.

The root verse is:

28. *Just like a blind person finding a jewel
In a heap of rubbish,
I generated this mind of enlightenment
Just by coincidence.*

As the commentary explains:

This mind of enlightenment was born within me by pure chance, just like a poor and destitute blind person finding a jewel on a heap of rubbish by sheer coincidence. It must definitely be through the force of the buddhas.

In the Tibetan text the commentary begins with the analogy of *a poor and destitute blind person finding a jewel on a heap of rubbish by sheer coincidence*. Not only is this person destitute, but they are blind, which makes it even much more unlikely that they might actually find a jewel. And of course in a place of great poverty, finding jewels lying around is quite unlikely. If a person who is destitute and blind finds a jewel in a heap of rubbish, then how much joy would that person feel? They would feel incredible joy at the extraordinary fortune and coincidence of finding this jewel.

The generation of this mind of enlightenment is similar. An ordinary being can be likened to a blind person in that we don't have the wisdom realising emptiness. The heap of rubbish is analogous to the delusions that infest our mind. Yet despite being riddled with delusions and blinded by ignorance we have encountered this precious mind, the awakening mind of bodhicitta. This is like the sheer coincidence of a blind person finding a jewel in a heap of rubbish. This has *definitely occurred through the force of the buddhas*, which means that due to the buddhas' blessings we have had the great fortune to have had this opportunity to generate this mind. Thus we are exhorted to develop a sense of great joy in having had this opportunity to develop this mind.

One of the main points we need to consider here is that while bodhicitta is indeed a difficult mind to find, it would be a complete mistake to put it aside thinking, 'Oh, it's too difficult to generate' and not make any effort at all. Even though it is a difficult mind to generate, it is definitely possible, and because of that possibility we need to strive towards developing it. If it was not possible to be generated then we might as well cast it aside as being a waste of our time, but that is not the case. This is the main point that we need to bear in mind.

The new program for our study group evenings will be eight teaching sessions followed by a discussion and then an exam. Maybe Ven. Lhamo could keep track of the number of sessions because in my old age I may start to forget!

There is mutual benefit in combining the wisdom of the elderly and the energy and clear mind of the young. The elders definitely have a wisdom that arises from whatever experiences they have had, whilst the younger generation have not had the experiences to generate that wisdom. So the elders can share their combined wisdom and experience. The younger generation have a full life energy force and a clearer, fresher mind, so they are less likely to be forgetful. So the combination of youth and age can be mutually beneficial. I think this is usually the way it works.

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Edited Version

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