
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

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18 March 2014

As usual we will now spend some time engaging in the meditation practise.

[meditation]

It is important to generate the appropriate motivation to receive the teachings. The main point is to ensure that the motivation is not tainted with self-interest. Then it is important to familiarise our minds with the wish to benefit others, as this naturally reduces self-interest. We need to intentionally develop this approach because otherwise almost every activity in which we engage has 'What is in it for me?' at the forefront of our minds. The practical benefit of generating the wish to benefit others is that the more we familiarise our minds with this wish, the less likely we will intentionally harm others. At the very least it will prevent us from harming others and actually help us to benefit whenever possible. By cultivating this approach we can start to measure the extent to which we have developed the genuine wish to benefit others.

Lama Tsong Khapa highlights that if we genuinely engage in benefiting others then our own needs will be fulfilled subsequently; this is an essential point. At his recent teachings in India His Holiness the Dalai Lama twice emphasised this point; we need to derive the real meaning from this. And that is, if we genuinely benefit others, our own needs will naturally be fulfilled subsequently, which in turn implies that we do not need to intentionally think or worry about our own needs. This approach prevents one from feeling discouraged from benefitting others. To summarise, the main point is that if one knows that one's own needs will be met and that we are not missing out by benefiting others, then one will not feel overwhelmed or discouraged about helping others. These are the essential points to bear in mind.

2.2.1. Conscientiously abandoning faults (cont.)

2.2.1.3. THE FREEDOMS AND ENDOWMENTS WILL BE DIFFICULT TO FIND

In relation to oneself, the point here is that if we give up bodhicitta (as mentioned previously), then this causes difficulty in finding the freedoms and endowments again.

As the outline here presents, the *freedoms and endowments will be difficult to find*, so we need to take this as a personal instruction to be conscientious in utilising the freedoms and endowments that we have now obtained. This heading is subdivided into two:

2.2.1.3.1. If bodhicitta degenerates, the freedoms and endowments with the condition of four wheels are difficult to find

2.2.1.3.2. Although attaining one, as it disintegrates quickly make an effort

2.2.1.3.1. If bodhicitta degenerates, the freedoms and endowments with the condition of four wheels are difficult to find

Due to a lack of conscientiousness, if one's bodhicitta degenerates, then the freedoms and endowments and the conditions of the four wheels, which are necessary to traverse the Mahayana path, will be difficult to find.

I will list and then explain the four wheels:

1. Living in a conducive place
2. Relying on a sublime being
3. Making aspirational prayers
4. Accumulating merit

1. The first is to abide in a place which is conducive for the Mahayana path to be actualised. This is also presented simply in some texts as living in a place where one can accumulate virtue.

2. The second is to associate and rely on a sublime being, such as a virtuous friend, who leads one on a path to abandon negativity (overcoming faults) and adopt virtue (acquiring good qualities). Thus, the first indicates the kind of place that one should abide in, and the second is in relation to the kind of being that one should rely upon.

3. The third is to be endowed with the results of aspirational prayers that one has previously made.

4. And the fourth is to be endowed with the results of previously accumulated merit.

The conditions of the four wheels were also presented in *Precious Garland*. As direct advice to the king, Nagarjuna highlighted that the freedoms and endowments with the condition of the four wheels are difficult to obtain in the future. He exhorts the king, 'since you have obtained the eight freedoms and ten endowments with the conditions of the four wheels now, you must definitely use them to ensure that they don't go to waste, by practising the Dharma'.

To take this as personal instruction, we need to relate all the points in the four conditions to our own lives; that is, to actually see the significance of making aspirational prayers and see the significance of accumulating merit etc. Whatever attempt we make to accumulate merit is extremely important because the merit that we accumulate now will be experienced later as ripened results with favourable conditions. Likewise, making very strong aspirational prayers now when we have the opportunity is also important and has great significance. As mentioned in other sutras and teachings, the enlightened beings are constantly benefiting sentient beings now as a result of their past aspirational prayers. These are the points we need to keep in mind by understanding their significance.

The main point here is that it is not sufficient just to have the eight freedoms and ten endowments and the conditions of the four wheels. What we need to do is ensure that they are utilised by practising the Dharma to bring about the ultimate goals we seek. That is the main point. It is presented here that the freedoms, endowments and conditions of the four wheels are extremely difficult to find, so we definitely need to utilise them wisely. You will recall that at the end of the *Guru Puja* there is a dedication, 'May I not be separated from the four

Mahayana wheels'. This is exactly what is being explained here.

The commentary introduces the meaning of this verse with a hypothetical query:

One may think: I will make an effort when I attain the freedoms and endowments later on.

One may become complacent by thinking *I will make an effort when I attain the freedoms and endowments later on*. So, as a way to overcome this sort of apathetic resolution in one's mind, the verse presents:

15. *The coming of a tathagata
Faith and the attainment of a human body—
These, making it possible to meditate on virtue,
Since they are rare, when will they be attained?*

The commentary then reads:

To have attained the five personal endowments and the five circumstantial endowments that make it possible to meditate on virtue, is as rare as the Udumbara flower.

These are, among others:

- A tathagata has descended.
- One has faith in the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings.
- One has also attained a human body.
- One has been reborn in a central country.
- One has complete faculties.
- One has not transgressed the border of karma.

The commentary explains that *a tathagata* (or a buddha) *has descended* relates to one of the endowments. The ten endowments are categorised into five personal or internal endowments, and five that are circumstantial or external endowments. That a Buddha has descended to this earth is an external endowment. It relates to the fact that we are born in a light eon or an illuminated eon, which is at a time when the Buddha has descended to this earth; thus this condition is intact for oneself. There is also the period called a dark eon, which is a time when the Buddha has not descended.

The next line in the verse, *One has faith in the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings* is a personal endowment. The Lam Rim teachings present this in abbreviated form as having faith in the source, which is *having faith in the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings*. It is very rare indeed to have genuine faith in the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings.

The next lines are: *One has also attained a human body and not only has a human body been obtained, but one has been born in a central country*. These are both personal endowments.

The final two lines are: *One has complete faculties* and *One has not transgressed the border of karma* (or extreme actions).

The five personal endowments have been explicitly presented here: one has faith in the Buddha's teachings; one has obtained a human body; one has been reborn in a central country; one has complete faculties and one has not transgressed the border of karma, for example having wrong views about karma is concluding that karma doesn't exist, or that the objects of refuge don't exist and so forth.

Among the five circumstantial endowments 'a tathagata has descended' is presented here. The remaining four

after the Buddha has descended are: the Buddha has taught; the teachings still remain in the world; there are those who are practising the teachings; there are those who are kind and support practitioners.

For us, all these endowments are intact. There is no question we've been born a human; born in a light age when the Buddha has come to this world and taught, and where the Buddha's teachings remain; born in a central country where the Buddha's teachings are taught; and being born with full faculties. Even though we may not have met the actual Buddha Shakyamuni, the teachings are presented to us by great teachers of his direct lineage. As these teachers represent Buddha Shakyamuni, we have received the unbroken lineage of the teachings from the unmistakable masters who are practicing at this time.

The commentary continues:

If this is so rare, then to have attained a precious human rebirth where one trains in the two minds is even rarer.

The *precious human rebirth* refers to one with the endowments, and *where one trains in the two minds* refers to the two minds of bodhicitta. The key point here is that if it is difficult to obtain the endowments, then to actually attain a state where one develops the two minds of bodhicitta is even rarer.

2.2.1.3.2. *Although attaining one, as it disintegrates quickly make an effort*

The next verse is preceded by another hypothetical doubt:

One may think: This body I have currently attained has no obstructing conditions against it and is endowed with conducive conditions. Hence I shall practise later.

This doubt represents the need to contemplate on death and impermanence as a way to show how such doubts and queries occur and obstruct one from utilising one's perfect opportunities.

The verse reads:

16. *A day like this without sickness,
Although there is food and no harm,
Life is deceptive on a momentary basis,
The body is a one-time loan.*

The commentary begins with:

One should not act as if one has leisure.

We need to really consider this point, as we often procrastinate about our practise of Dharma by falling under the illusion that we have time to practise later. When we look at how this thought affects us in what we do now, it leads to mostly non-virtuous activities which incur negativities. One must judge one's own activities. If one finds one is leaving one's practise until later, then what is being done now is activities that will incur negativity. This is the fault of thinking that we have leisure and that we have plenty of time to practise later.

An understanding of death and impermanence definitely relates to this point in that the reason why *one should not act as if one has leisure* is because one's life with the freedoms and endowments could end at any moment and then one's opportunity to practise Dharma would have been completely wasted.

The commentary further explains:

A human body without the obstructing condition of sickness is like a day in the context of saying: 'A day like this'.

The key here is the word 'a day' (or 'a sun' in Tibetan) which means a day without sickness.

The commentary goes on:

But a day like this, without sickness, without the obstructing conditions of harm...

This line refers to factors that oppose one's health or wellbeing, oneself in general, or one's life conditions

...and with the conducive conditions of food and so forth, is deceptive....

This line explains that it is deceptive to maintain the view that one has everything going well for oneself (food etc.) because, as the commentary goes on to explain:

Life does not abide even for one moment and disintegrates quickly. This body is only a one-time loan and one has no power over it.

The point presented here is that our life is being used up on a momentary basis, and it can end at any given moment. Thus one should not fall under the deception that one has time to practise the Dharma later on.

The commentary uses the analogy *that the body is like a one-time loan*. This is a very significant analogy to illustrate the point that our body is indeed like a loan, because we have to give it back—we don't have real power over it; i.e. all the good conditions that we have with this body can end at any moment. Recall using something borrowed: we always know we do not have complete control over the object because it belongs to someone else, and eventually will have to be given back. Also, we cannot use it for as long as we want, or do anything we like with it. Because it is on loan we have to take good care of it and give it back at the appropriate time. Similarly, our bodies are like this. An analogy presented in the thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva compares our bodies to a guest house with the guest being our consciousness. So just as a guest stays in a guest house for a short time and then moves on, our consciousness comes into this body, remains for a short time and then moves on.

The teaching emphasises that our body is like something which is on loan. If we ask ourselves whether our body belongs to oneself, then technically it does, however we also recognise that we don't have real power or ownership over it because we have to discard it. At the time of death, the consciousness moves on and we have to leave our body behind. The Lam Rim teachings state that since our consciousness will definitely depart from our body, only the Dharma will help us at that time. This is the point to recognise: that it is only the Dharma that will help one at the time of death when our consciousness departs the body. As only the Dharma can help us, we need to try and implement it in our everyday lives to the best of our ability. I have tried to emphasise these points to you, and of course I do this out of great concern and kindness for your well-being. Recognise that you have an opportunity to accrue virtue even in everyday activities such as eating and drinking, by making offerings, by reminding oneself that one is eating for the sake of

benefitting all sentient beings, that one is drinking for the benefit of all sentient beings etc. In this way, whatever activity one does, when one walks, sits, does tasks at work, in short, whatever activity one engages in can be utilised, and incorporated into one's practise so that it becomes a means to accumulate virtue. The practise of Dharma in short is to engage in creating virtue.

The commentary concludes:

Therefore, do not act as if there is time, and make an effort.

2.2.1.4. IF REBORN IN THE LOWER REALMS ONE HAS NO OPPORTUNITY TO GENERATE VIRTUE

Try to embrace what is being presented here and take it to heart. As I remind you again and again, don't lose the opportunity to practise or accumulate merit and virtue in whatever way you can now, when you have the opportunity, because if you were to lose that opportunity, it would be an incredibly great loss. It is hard for us to imagine being reborn in the lower realms (such as an animal) where one would not have the same opportunities again. In comparison to losing wealth, losing the opportunity to practise Dharma is a far greater loss. Recently you might have heard of instances where some very wealthy people, due to certain circumstances, lost their wealth and consequently became depressed, sick and died soon afterwards. All the sickness, the worry and the sadness was caused merely by losing material wealth. Compared to losing the opportunity to practise Dharma, losing material wealth is not really significant at all. Losing material wealth will not cause one to go to the lower realms, but losing the opportunity to practise Dharma is definitely a cause to go to the lower realms and be reborn as something like an animal. Therefore, pay attention to the following points.

Under this heading there are three subdivisions:

2.2.1.4.1. There is no opportunity for virtue in the lower realms

2.2.1.4.2. If one does not strive while in the happy realms one will be confused in the lower realms concerning what is to be practised and abandoned

2.2.1.4.3. It is extremely difficult to be liberated from the lower realms

2.2.1.4.1. *There is no opportunity for virtue in the lower realms*

The verse is again preceded with a hypothetical query:

It is unsuitable to relax, thinking: I will attain a succession of precious human rebirths, so I will practise later on.

The verse reads:

17. *With behaviour like this
I will not even attain a human body.
If I do not attain a human body
There will be only negativity and no virtue.*

The commentary reads:

Someone like myself, through actions that create negativity and no virtue, will not even attain a human body in the next life.

If I take rebirth in the lower realms, without attaining a human body I will only generate non-virtue and not the slightest amount of virtue, and it will be difficult to be reborn again in the happy realms.

As the commentary indicates we need to take the advice here as personal instruction. When looking into one's own behaviour, *someone like myself*, one is one's own best judge; one knows oneself best. Therefore looking honestly into oneself, if one's actions incur negativity and hardly any virtue *through actions that create negativity and no virtue* then the result is that one *will not even attain a human body in the next life*. This aims to counteract the notion we may have that: 'Oh, if I don't get around to doing well in this life I shouldn't worry too much because in my next life I can continue to practise.' But what does obtaining a human rebirth in the next life depend on - virtue or negativity? If the causes depend on virtue, then the question one needs to ask oneself is, 'Have I accumulated virtue?' Is one actually engaging in virtue now, or is one engaging more in negativity? This is something we have to look into. If, when you look into your actions you find that you are creating virtue and no negativity, then a good rebirth in your next life is guaranteed. But if, after looking into your actions you find you are creating more negativity and hardly any virtue, then, as the commentary states, you will not *even attain a human body in the next life*.

The commentary continues: *If I take rebirth in the lower realms, I will only generate non-virtue and not the slightest amount of virtue, and it will be difficult to be reborn again in the happy realms*. So, if one has found that one's actions are mostly negative, then the result is rebirth in the lower realms. If one were to be born in the lower realms, the opportunity to accrue virtue is almost none. Thus, since it is hardly possible to accrue virtue in the lower realms, it will be extremely difficult to be reborn again in the happy realms such as a human again.

The emphasis here is the importance of ensuring that one engages in virtue and shuns negativity. The cause for a fortunate rebirth in the happy realms is virtue, and the cause for rebirth in the lower, unfortunate realms is non-virtue. To be free from a rebirth in the lower realms, we must shun negativity and adopt virtue. At the time of death we don't disappear and become nothing; there is a continuity. Even those who believe in a creator or God agree that we don't completely disappear or disintegrate at the time of death and that there is continuity. They believe that if one has acted according to God's wishes then one will progress into a good state, and if not, one will go into an unfortunate state. The explanation here is the same: if we have created negativity we will have an unfortunate rebirth, and if we have accumulated virtues we will have a fortunate rebirth. The point is, as we will not disappear and become nothing after our death, we need to take responsibility for ensuring that we have a good rebirth. His Holiness explains that what the Christian faith calls the soul is similar to what we call the 'self'. So even in the Christian faith they say that after death the soul continues.

Again, why is it difficult to be reborn again in the happy realms? Firstly, we can relate to the existence of unfortunate rebirths. So, if we were to be reborn in any of these unfortunate states, such as the hell realms, the hungry ghost realms or the animal realms, we would be completely immersed in suffering. If this occurs there would be hardly any opportunity for virtue to occur in

the mind. Take the example of the animal realm, where we can see that with many, their very existence depends on preying on other animals and consuming their flesh. They must actively go out and kill other living beings for their very survival. If they didn't do that they would not survive. Imagine how much negativity they incur just having to survive by killing other beings. Hence there is hardly any opportunity for animals to accumulate virtues when in the lower realms, which is why it is difficult to go from a lower realm to a higher realm. Note that it is easy to go from a higher rebirth to a lower rebirth—that is very easy! However, ascending from a lower rebirth to a higher rebirth is very difficult.

To summarise the meaning of the text in more practical terms, it is suggesting it is better not to go to a place where you would have much suffering and misery and in which it would be very difficult to accumulate virtue. Rather, wouldn't it be better for you to remain in a happier state where you can accumulate virtue? If you're enjoying some leisure now in this realm, wouldn't it be better to be reborn into such a realm again in the future, rather than having to take rebirth in a state of much suffering? If you agree that you don't want to be reborn in a realm where there is more suffering, and you want to be reborn continuously in happy rebirths, then what you need to do is intentionally avoid creating negativity and proactively accumulate virtue. This is how we need to practise to create the causes for that outcome.

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

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