
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

[meditation]

Now we can generate the motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings, to alleviate all their suffering and bring them to ultimate state of happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put it into practice well.

2.2.1. Conscientiously abandoning faults

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

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

We need to consider how fortunate we are to have obtained this perfect human rebirth with its freedoms and endowments. If we were to be reborn in the lower realms we would hardly have any opportunity to engage in virtue, because of the lack of wisdom, and thus no opportunity to create the causes to obtain higher rebirths. So we need to remind ourselves again and again that it is like a miracle and pure chance that we have obtained such good conditions now. When we think about it in great detail we can see how incredibly fortunate we are to have these amazing conditions now, and in that way develop a great sense of joy. It would be extremely foolish to waste the good conditions that we enjoy now!

When we think of our own circumstances we can see how remarkable it is that we have all of these perfect conditions now. In my case it may seem more natural, in that that I was brought up as a Buddhist because of my birth into a Buddhist family. Traditionally, the very first thing Tibetan parents do is bring their child to a revered and respected lama or geshe. This happened in my case and I was given the name Lobsang Dorje. So we could say that the conditions were already there for me to be a Buddhist. Of course there was no choice—it was my destiny to be brought up in that way. As amazing as that is, your situation is even more amazing. Considering your background and so forth, it is really quite amazing for you to have met all of these conditions now.

The main point in considering all of this is that it should encourage us to engage in the practice of Dharma. Having considered how we enjoy these great conditions now, and how they will not come our way again easily, we need to take the initiative to utilise every minute of the day to practise the Dharma.

Newer students seem to find it hard to deal with the explanations of the sufferings. As many of you are already quite familiar with them it might be easier for

you, but it seems to be really difficult for new students to listen to the extensive explanations of sufferings. At his recent teachings in Sera, His Holiness the Dalai Lama commented on the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey's great skills in presenting the teachings. Those of you who were there would have heard him say that. Indeed, when Geshe Ngawang Dhargye presented teachings on bodhicitta, the students' minds would naturally become subdued. Apparently there was one occasion when a new student attended a class where Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey was teaching on bodhicitta and the kindness of others. He went into great detail and explained it in a way that made this person really inspired and drawn to the teachings. However, when Geshe-la started to explain the sufferings, it became difficult for this student to take it in, so he started to slowly come out of the teachings. He just didn't want to listen to accounts of suffering.

In 1985 when Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey came to Australia he gave teachings at Atisha Centre. This time there was a lady from Germany who later commented that when she went to the teachings she was really inspired and it was very helpful for her mind. She did, however, confess that when it came to the topic of suffering, it was hard to accept all of it. About three years later she came to see me and confided, 'Those sufferings that Geshe-la was explaining in detail were hard for me to accept then, but later I actually experienced those very sufferings. It was exactly as Geshe-la described them'.

Initially it was hard for her to accept some of descriptions of the sufferings—even the sufferings of the human realm were hard for her to accept. However, later she found from her own experience that they were definitely true. This is an instance of where it might be difficult to fully grasp some aspects of the teachings initially, but because they are the words of truth, they gradually become much clearer due to one's understanding and experiences.

The verse relating to this heading reads:

*18. If, although having the fortune to practice virtue,
I do not create virtue,
Then what am I going to do
When completely confused by the lower realm's sufferings.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

If, although having the fortune to practise virtue, I do not make an effort now to practise virtue, then how am I going to practise when I am in the lower realms?

At that time I am miserable because of continuously experiencing the feeling of suffering of the lower realms, and I am confused concerning what has to be practised and what has to be abandoned. As a result, I cannot practise anything.

Hence I need to make an effort now at this time when I have obtained freedom and endowments.

First of all, the commentary acknowledges that one has the *fortune to practise virtue*. Here we can use ourselves as an example of a fortunate one who is endowed with two types of fortune; the fortune of not being deprived of material necessities, and not being deprived of the conditions for practising the Dharma. I consider one is fortunate if one is endowed with both good external and internal conditions.

The Tibetan term *kal-den*, translated into English as fortunate, has the literal connotation of someone who possesses their share. So if we use that literal meaning from the Tibetan word, then *fortune* can relate to having our share of the perfect conditions to practise the Dharma, as well as having our share of material conditions.

As the commentary explains, *although one does have this fortune to practise virtue*, i.e. the good conditions that enable us to practise virtue, that is not sufficient in itself if *I do not make an effort now to practise virtue*. It is not sufficient to have these good conditions if we don't strive to put them into practice.

Here we need to understand that the emphasis is on the necessity for engaging in the practice of Dharma if we are to be saved from the sufferings. What is being implied here is that the Dharma Jewel is the real protector which needs to be cultivated within oneself. As the *Offering Prayer* reads:

To supreme teacher, the precious Buddha;
To the supreme protector, the precious Dharma;
To the supreme guides, the precious Sangha;
To these Three Jewels, the objects of refuge, I make
this offering.

The Dharma developed within oneself is indeed the real protector, which implies that one is one's own saviour and liberator.

What we really need to consider is how we are our own protector and guide. The person who guides us to fortunate rebirths in the higher realms is none other than ourselves. So we are the ones who need to take the initiative to guide ourselves to a higher rebirth and protect ourselves from lower rebirths. How foolish would it be to practise the reverse, and guide ourselves to the lower realms? Why on earth would you want to work towards an unfortunate rebirth? That wouldn't be wise at all. No-one else but ourselves can guide us to a higher rebirth, so it is up to us to take the initiative. Likewise, no one can lead us, or drag us down to the lower realm but ourselves. We are the ones who must take the initiative to prevent being reborn in the lower realms. Likewise, one cannot ultimately guide others to the higher realms or lead them to the lower realms. The point here is that we have to take personal responsibility for securing good conditions for ourselves in the future.

Thus, in very simple terms, if the finger is to be pointed, it has to be pointed at ourselves; we need to constantly remind ourselves, 'Don't lead yourself down to the lower realms, but lead yourself up to a higher rebirth'. This is the sort of internal dialogue we need to engage in to ensure that we are creating the causes for higher rebirth.

Even though it is not in the Tibetan root text, the commentary poses a rhetorical question: *how am I going to practise when I am in the lower realms?* The point here is that one will not be able to practise in the lower realms, because *at that time I am miserable because of continuously experiencing the feeling of suffering of the lower realms*. There is a Tibetan word here, which has a connotation of intense suffering. The point is that being completely immersed in intense suffering deprives one of the initiative to practise Dharma.

Furthermore, *I am confused concerning what has to be practised and what has to be abandoned. As a result, I cannot practise anything*. The point here is that because one lacks the intelligence or wisdom to be able to know what is virtue, which is to be adopted, and negativity, which is to be abandoned, one cannot engage in practice. How can you abandon what you don't know? These are actually quite pertinent and pointed points. They are a personal instruction that we really need to apply in our everyday thinking. Hence, Gyaltsab Je concludes, *we need to make an effort now when we have obtained the freedoms and endowments*.

It is also then good to complement these points with our understanding of the Lam Rim teachings, which explain the need to practise Dharma, and the need to practise Dharma right now.

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

One might think, 'If I were to go to lower realms, then I would eventually be able to free myself from that'. However, once in the lower realms it is very difficult to leave them.

Again, we need to relate this point to our understanding of the difficulty of finding the freedoms and endowments that we have gained from the Lam Rim teaching. The Lam Rim explains that finding the freedoms and endowments is difficult because accumulating their causes and so forth is extremely difficult.

The relevant verse reads:

19. *One did not generate virtue
And one accumulated negativity easily.
Even for ten million eons
One will not hear even the words 'happy
realm'.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

It is extremely difficult to later obtain the freedoms and endowments because in this life one has not generated any virtue, and accumulated negativity easily, and so one will not even hear the words 'happy realm' for ten million eons.

The essential point here is that it *is extremely difficult to later obtain the freedoms and endowments*. While the explanation in the commentary is quite easy to understand, the main point is that we really need to incorporate it into our minds so that it is a constant source of encouragement. As explained here, the reason why it is extremely difficult to obtain the freedoms and endowments in the future is *because in this life one has not generated any virtue and has accumulated negativities*. If one has not generated any virtue and accumulated negativities, then it is difficult to obtain the freedoms and endowments in the future. Again, we can relate this to the explanations in the Lam Rim, which say that the cause of obtaining the freedoms and endowments is virtue.

If we have not accumulated the causes then naturally we will not be able to experience the result, specifically the result of the freedoms and endowments. If one is reborn in the lower realms then *one will not even hear the words 'happy realms' for ten million eons*. This means that if one were to be reborn in the lower realms then, let alone being able to create the causes for the freedoms and

endowments, one will not even know what the freedoms and endowments are, just like a creature in the depths of the ocean could not be aware of other types of existence. Without even knowing about them, the chances of creating the causes for a happy existence would be very remote, to the point of being virtually impossible. Again, the main point here is to take this as an encouragement to actually practise the Dharma.

To explain this in practical terms, if we wish to obtain a perfect human rebirth with its freedoms and endowments in the next lifetime, then we need to shun negativity and accumulate virtue. We can wish as much as we want, to obtain good conditions and be born as human beings, but if we continuously create negativity and put little or no effort into accumulating virtue, then we are not creating the causes to enjoy these good conditions again in the future. All too often we fall into a state of procrastination thinking, 'Well, even if I don't do too well this time round I will probably obtain a human rebirth again next time and it might be better the next time round. I will do better then'. However, being able to obtain a perfect a human rebirth again in the future is dependent on the causes and conditions that we need to be creating now.

2.2.1.5. WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND FREEDOMS AND ENDOWMENTS

The relevant verse reads:

20. *For that very reason the Bhagavan taught
That merely becoming human is extremely
difficult,
As it is for a turtle
To put its neck through the yoke floating on the
great ocean.*

Gyaltsab Je begins his explanation of this verse with:

Because it is very difficult to find a happy rebirth from the lower realms, the Bhagavan taught in his perfect scriptures:

Then Gyaltsab Je quotes the *Perfect Sutra*:

Bhikkhus, if all this ground were to become a great ocean on which a yoke with one hole is moved by the wind. And in that ocean if there was a blind turtle that only sticks its neck out of the water once a hundred years.

Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is it easy for the turtle to catch the yoke with its neck? 'Tathagata, it is not so'. The Tathagata replied: Bhikkhus, similarly is it difficult merely to attain a human rebirth.

The commentary then continues

If one does not create virtue and accumulates negativity, then one does not even hear the word 'happy migration'. For that reason, the Bhagavan taught that merely to attain a human rebirth is much more difficult than for the blind turtle that comes up only every hundred years, to stick its neck into the single hole of the yoke floating on the surface of the ocean, being moved here and there by the wind.

Therefore one needs to make an effort to practise virtue when one is in the happy migration.

As the commentary explains, the freedoms and endowments are incredibly difficult to find, and even more so when one is in the lower realms. In the *Perfect Sutra* the Buddha gave a hypothetical example to illustrate the degree of difficulty this entails. We imagine

the whole ground becoming an incredibly vast ocean, and on that the ocean is a single yoke with only one hole in it, and this yoke is constantly moved by the wind. At the bottom of the ocean is a blind turtle, which surfaces only once every hundred years. The likelihood of that blind turtle entering its neck into that single hole of the yoke is very remote indeed.

Then the Buddha asked his disciples, 'What is the likelihood of this happening? Is it easy for a blind turtle to enter its neck into the hole?'. They replied, '*It is not so, it is very difficult*'. This, said the Buddha, is as difficult as attaining a human rebirth.

As explained in the teachings, each part of this example is an analogy.

- The blind turtle represents ignorant beings who are ignorant of the wisdom as to what to adopt and what to discard.
- Once every hundred years is an analogy to the fact that it is very rare to be reborn as a human being with all the perfect conditions.
- The turtle surfacing is analogous to being reborn in a higher rebirth.
- The yoke on the surface of the ocean represents the Buddha's teachings.

Just as the likelihood of that blind turtle placing its neck into the yoke is a near impossibility, taking a higher rebirth, with the chance of meeting with the Buddha's teaching is very, very remote. One might be reborn as a human, but in the country or place where his teachings are not available, or where there are no conditions for the Dharma to be taught or practised. So one might be born as human, but without the conditions to practise. From this analogy, we can see how extremely difficult it is to find all these freedoms and endowments intact.

Obtaining the freedoms and endowments of a higher rebirth, with all the perfect conditions, is said to be even more remote than this hypothetical example of the chance of a blind turtle sticking its neck into the hole of the yoke. That is how it explained in the teachings.

Then the commentary on this section concludes with, *Therefore one needs to make an effort to practise virtue when one is in the happy migration.*

2.2.2. Conscientiously meditating on virtue

This section is subdivided into three:

2.2.2.1. It is appropriate to strive in abandoning the infinite negativity accumulated previously

2.2.2.2. Why a single suffering in the lower realm exhausts that karma, but does not exhaust the karma of the lower realm

2.2.2.3. Why it is appropriate to strive in the antidote to negativity

2.2.2.1. IT IS APPROPRIATE TO STRIVE IN ABANDONING THE INFINITE NEGATIVITY ACCUMULATED PREVIOUSLY

This explanation follows on from the earlier explanation that if creating negativity is the cause for one to be born in the lower realm, then it is most appropriate that one strives to purify the infinite non-virtue accumulated previously.

The verse relating to this outline reads:

21. *If one remains in the naraks for eons
Due to one moment of negativity,
Then why even mention that one won't go to
the happy realms
Due to the negativity accumulated in
beginningless samsara?*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

If one has to remain in the hells without respite for eons due to only one moment of anger at a bodhisattva, then what need is there to mention that one will not go to the happy migrations due to the negativity in one's continuum that has been accumulated since beginningless time, and has not been destroyed by an antidote?

One should train in purifying negativity by way of the four powers.

When the commentary says, *If one has to remain in the hells without respite due to only one moment of anger at a bodhisattva*, it is referring to the impact of just one moment of negative karma. This is in contrast to the intense negative karma that is created over a long period in many previous lifetimes. Here, because the object of one's anger is a bodhisattva, a very superior object, the negativity created is a cause leading to the hells without respite, for a long period of time. We can also relate this to the fact that karma multiplies greatly, which is one of the four characteristics of karma. So the main point here is that even a short moment of negative karma such as anger can have heavy negative consequences.

The duration of the cause might only be *a moment of anger at a bodhisattva* but the result is that *one has to remain in hell without respite for eons*. Because of the short duration of the negative deed, one might think, 'Oh, this is a very small negative deed over a short period of time, so the consequences may not be too bad'. However, as explained here, if one were to create negative karma in relation to a supreme object such as a bodhisattva, even if it is of short duration, the consequence is that one will have to experience being born in the hell realms for many eons. Gyaltsab Rinpoche also explains this point very clearly in his other works, where he exhorts us to be mindful and particularly careful not to criticise and be judgemental of others with anger, because we cannot know who is a bodhisattva. So we need to protect ourselves from this grave misdeed lest we end up criticising and becoming angry with a bodhisattva.

The commentary then further explains that if one will remain in hell without respite for eons just from one moment of anger towards a bodhisattva, *then what need is there to mention that one will not go to the happy migrations due to the negativity in one's continuum that has been accumulated since beginningless times and has not been destroyed by an antidote?* As we have been in samsara since beginningless time, we have accumulated infinite negativities in the past. For as long as those negativities are still within our mental continuum, not destroyed by an antidote, there should be no doubt about the possibility of being reborn in the lower realms. The point here is that these negativities that have been accumulated since beginningless time can be destroyed when the antidote is applied. So *one should train in purifying negativity by way of the four powers*.

The four opponent powers were explained previously, and we need to take this advice to heart as a personal instruction. We need to remind ourselves again and again that we need to be constantly mindful of purifying the negativities that we have accumulated in the past by applying the four opponent powers. Then we need to guard ourselves from creating even more negativities. When we adopt this as our practice in our daily life then we will definitely be applying the antidote for overcoming these negativities. If we adopt the reverse of that i.e. keep virtues at bay and embrace the negativities, then the price will be rebirth in the lower realms.

However we also need to be mindful about not becoming disheartened because we have accumulated so much negativity in the past, or the fact that we find ourselves continuously engaging in negativities now, seemingly without control, which is due to our habituation with these negativities. While that prospect may seem quite daunting, we do have the ability to purify negativities. We have the knowledge and we have the means to firstly identify what is negativity, and when we find that we have engaged in some negativities, we have the means to purify them by applying the four opponent powers.

So it is not at all a hopeless situation because we do have that opportunity to purify our negativities. As I have mentioned previously, while an immediate negativity may be the trigger for a purification practice, when we actually engage in that practice it is very important that we also bring to mind any negativity that we have created in the past. In relation to this life we can definitely recall negativities that we had created in the earlier part of the day, last night, last week, last month, last year, and in the earlier part of one's life. By recalling them we can inevitably feel strong regret about accumulating those negativities.

As the teachings mention, when one develops a very strong regret then that suffices to purify a great amount of negativity. The four opponent powers entail being profoundly regretful that yet again one has been compelled to engage in these negativities; taking refuge, as a quick way of applying the antidote; and then resolving not to commit these misdeeds again. If we find that we have created negativity in the morning, we try to purify it by noon. If further on in the day one finds one has again created negativity then, towards the evening one again applies the four opponent powers of developing regret and so forth. In this way, by applying mindfulness we are able to apply the measures of purifying negativities through the four opponent powers, by taking refuge and so forth.

In fact, the practice of purification is, by default, also the optimum means for accumulating merit. So purification practice is incredibly worthwhile. When we conduct ourselves in our daily life by regretting negativities we have created in the past, then that regret will be the impetus to purify these negativities. Likewise, when we think about the virtues we have definitely created, we can rejoice. If we conduct our daily life in this way, rejoicing in good deeds and purifying our negative deeds, then we will secure a meaningful life. As we purify negative karma and engage in these practices the mind naturally becomes happier and happier, and there will naturally be

more joy in one's mind. That is a practical positive result of the purification practice.

A Dharma practitioner is one who, based on their understanding of karma, understands that virtue results in happiness and non-virtue results in unhappiness. Based on that simple principle, if we find that we have created some non-virtue, then, because we don't want to experience the result, which is unhappiness and suffering, we can take the initiative to purify those accumulated negativities. And then, in every possible way, we try to adopt a virtuous mind, and engage in virtuous deeds, because we wish to experience the positive result of happiness. When we conduct ourselves in that way then that constitutes a real Dharma practitioner.

Put simply, when we apply the purification practice with the four opponent powers then that very practice becomes the means to block the passage or doorway to the lower realms. And then, as when we engage in virtues and accumulate merit it opens the doorway or passage to a higher rebirth.

There are only two doorways and it is up to us to choose which one we want to enter. We have no other choice but these two doorways, so we need to make the right choice.

2.2.2.2. WHY A SINGLE SUFFERING IN THE LOWER REALM EXHAUSTS THAT KARMA, BUT DOES NOT EXHAUST THE KARMA OF THE LOWER REALM

The next verse is explained in the context of overcoming another hypothetical doubt; we might again think, 'If experiencing the sufferings in the lower realms will exhaust one's karma to be in the lower realms, then I will be reborn again in higher realm'. However, by virtue of being in the lower realms one will be continuously creating more causes to remain there, which is why it is not easy to free oneself from the lower realms.

As will be explained, once born in the lower realms one will quite naturally and spontaneously create further negative karmas to remain in the lower realms, continuously propelling one from one unfortunate rebirth to the next. We can avoid that by using our current fortunate rebirth to apply the causes and conditions to be born again in the higher realms. That would be a crucial way to practice, for just experiencing the consequences of one unfortunate rebirth does not mean that the karma to be born in the lower realms will be completely exhausted.

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

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