
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

1 April 2014

When we recite the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* at the beginning of any practice, it is really good to reflect on it as an opportunity to generate the optimum motivation for doing the practice. We need to remember that taking refuge is the essential criteria for ensuring that the practice is a Buddhist practice, whilst generating bodhicitta ensures that the practice is a Mahayana practice.

It seems that every religion has its own form of refuge prayer that is recited at the beginning of every ceremony.

So, based on the motivation we have generated during the recitation of the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we can now engage in our meditation practice.

[meditation]

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

For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teaching, and put it into practice well.

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

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on this section of the text with this query:

One may think: It is not difficult to become liberated from the lower realms because after the result is exhausted I will take rebirth in the happy migration.

This query is yet another excuse to procrastinate in one's Dharma practice, where one thinks, 'If I were to be reborn in the lower realms, then when that karma is used up I will be able to take a higher rebirth, and I'll be able to achieve liberation then'. This thinking is based on the fact that the karma to be reborn in the lower realms occurs as a result of previous karma, and that karma exhausts itself. Reasoning that rebirth in the lower realms means using up negative karma, thus leaving it possible to be able to take rebirth in the higher realms sooner rather than later, and then achieve liberation, can lead to laziness and procrastination about practising the Dharma.

The verse relating to this outline reads:

22. *Only through the mere experience
One will not be liberated, because
During the experience
One generates other negativities.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

A person will not be liberated from the lower realms merely through experiencing the result of only one negative action, because while one is experiencing the suffering result of previous karma one adventitiously

creates other negativity that brings forth powerful suffering.

As explained here, merely experiencing the results of previously created negative karma does not mean one will be *liberated from the lower realms*. The commentary further explains that *while one is experiencing the suffering result of previous karma, one adventitiously creates other negativity that brings forth powerful suffering*. In addition to experiencing the sufferings of the lower realms, the conditions there are a cause to repeatedly create even more negative karma, which brings about even more suffering. Here we can use the example of the animal realm, a lower realm with which we are very familiar. We can see that most animals have to constantly engage in negative actions for their very survival. They cannot recognise their actions as negativity, let alone know that they can be purified. Due to their state of ignorance they have no knowledge of the ways to create virtue, or to shun negativity. Even we humans, who do have that intelligence and knowledge, find it difficult to avoid negativity and adopt virtue. Animals have no such choice.

The personal instruction here is that being reborn in the lower realms will be a perpetual cause for creating further negative karma, and thus continuous rebirth in the lower realms over a long period of time. To avoid that situation we need to use the good conditions we have now to avoid the negative causes that will lead to rebirth in a lower realm, and adopt the positive causes or virtue that will ensure that we have a good rebirth. Then we can continuously go from one fortunate rebirth to the next, continuously engaging in creating virtue and merit until we reach the ultimate goal. Just as the result of previous negative karma is to be reborn in the lower realms, rebirth in the fortunate realms is definitely the result of positive, virtuous karma.

Since we have now achieved that fortunate rebirth, we need to ensure that we do not use up our positive karma. Just as the karma of lower realms can be exhausted, our karma in the fortunate realms can also be used up. If we don't seize the opportunity to create further virtuous karma, then there is no other possibility than a lower rebirth. Then the situation of repeatedly creating negative karma will befall us. Therefore, we need to really understand that we are responsible for our own future, and whether we have a fortunate rebirth or an unfortunate rebirth lies entirely within our own hands. So we need to take the initiative if we are to achieve our goal.

On a personal level, the advice here is that we should not relate being reborn in lower realms to external circumstances, i.e. as only happening to others. Rather, we need to personalise this advice and keep in mind the fact that it relates to oneself. So, one needs to be thinking, 'If I were reborn in the lower realms then it will be extremely difficult for me to escape from that'. That will be an impetus to really take this advice to heart for the need to practise the Dharma.

Then Gyaltsab Je concludes his commentary on the verse:

On the basis of the lower realms, virtue is weak and negativity is continuously accumulated. Therefore one should strive to stop the cause of the lower realms.

Here Gyaltsab Je is re-emphasising Shantideva's advice. If one were to be reborn in the lower realms there will be hardly any opportunity to accumulate virtue, because the conditions for accumulating virtue are very minimal. Furthermore, because of the conditions in the lower realms we would be continuously creating negativity. We see the truth of this when we look at the animal realm. What opportunities do they have to accumulate virtue? We might help a pet to create some virtue by taking them around a holy object like a stupa, or say some mantras, but apart from that they don't have any opportunity to willingly create virtue. When we think about the prospect of having to experience those kinds of conditions ourselves, we will see why we need to *strive to stop the cause of the lower realms*. We need to take this as a personal instruction to constantly remind ourselves, 'Be careful, be careful. Now that I have these good conditions I have to use them wisely and not waste them'.

The crux of the advice is in the words *the cause of the lower realms*—we need to reflect on the causes for rebirth in the lower realms. Here we consider the ten non-virtues. Killing, such as taking the life of another being, is a cause for the lower realms; taking what belongs to another is a cause for the lower realms; and engaging in sexual misconduct is a cause for the lower realms. We need to take note here that sexual misconduct applies to lay people, who don't have the vow of celibacy.

We can see here how kind and skilful the Buddha was in his advice on accumulating virtue and abandoning non-virtue. It would be extremely difficult for lay people to completely abstain from sexual activity, so here the advice is to abstain from sexual misconduct. If one wishes to practise on a higher level one can take the self-liberation vows of an ordained monk or nun, which include the vow to completely abstain from sexual activity, i.e. the vow of celibacy. So the Buddha meticulously presented many opportunities for engaging in virtue and abstaining from negativity on various different levels, in accordance with the capacity of his followers.

Further causes for rebirth in the lower realms are lying, slander, harsh words, idle gossip, covetousness, ill will and wrong view. Engaging in these non-virtues is a cause to be reborn in the lower realms, whereas willingly abandoning the ten non-virtues and thus adopting the ten virtues is the cause for a fortunate rebirth. None of these ten virtues are beyond our capacity. We can all abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and so forth, while engaging in virtuous deeds such as protecting the life of others, practicing generosity and so forth.

Here we need to engage in a personal dialogue. 'If you have the choice, would you rather go to the lower realms or take a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime?' The natural answer should be, 'I definitely want to have a fortunate rebirth'. 'So, if you want to have a fortunate rebirth and avoid an unfortunate one, then you need to create the causes for it. If you just lie back and do nothing, then how could you possibly create the causes for a fortunate rebirth?' Reprimanding oneself with a personal dialogue like this is a good method to encourage oneself to accumulate virtue. It is in this way that we gradually develop more faith in the Dharma and an

aspiration to engage in the practice. Adopting a life of accumulating virtue and shunning negativity will gradually become more stable for the sublime Dharma to take root in one's life.

As I mentioned previously, while we acknowledge that we should avoid negativity and adopt virtue, we may still find ourselves uncontrollably engaging in non-virtues. You might find yourself (accidentally or intentionally) taking the life of another sentient being, or taking something without permission, or engaging in sexual misconduct. These things may occur from time to time because we are habituated to them. With a proper understanding of the Dharma that should not become a cause for despondency and feeling that things are hopeless. Rather you should remind yourselves again and again of the teaching that purification is a powerful means to purify negative karma.

When you remember that you can purify negative karma, then the great privilege of understanding the Dharma means that you will be able to apply the antidote to any negativity immediately. When you find you have created some negativity, rather than feeling hopeless and depressed, and thinking, 'Oh, I have created so much negativity I am definitely going to the lower realms. There is no hope for me anymore', one should immediately remember, 'OK, I have created some negativity but negativity can be purified'. That is why the kind Buddha presented us with the means for purification. The first part of purification is feeling regret, and based on regret one applies the appropriate antidotes.

By taking the Dharma to heart in this way, when you do find yourselves unwillingly creating some negativity out of habituation, you can rest assured that you can still purify that negative karma; that will prevent rebirth in the lower realms. We need to also use that as a reminder to ensure that we are creating the causes for a fortunate rebirth.

This is how we need to apply ourselves if we want to take the Dharma practice to heart. If one thinks, 'Oh, I don't care anymore' then one has definitely fallen victim to one's own negativity; one will not purify negativities because one does not care about it. In fact, one may even start to feel joyful about creating negativity and regretful about creating virtue. When we think about it we will see how, even though we have this incredible, fortunate rebirth with the freedoms and endowments intact, somehow there are times when we regret not having been able to create some negativity, and feel hesitant about opportunities to create virtue. Feeling glad that we have had the opportunity to create non-virtue and sad that we have missed an opportunity to create non-virtue or negativity would be a really pitiful situation, to say the least, given the great conditions we have now.

In summary, the main point to consider is that we definitely have the capacity to obtain a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime. The causes to obtain such a fortunate rebirth, as well as taking another fortunate rebirth from a higher rebirth are not difficult or obscure. What is difficult, is obtaining a higher rebirth from the lower realms. Thus, we must take matters into our own hands. There is no-one who puts us into a lower rebirth but

ourselves. Likewise, no-one else can obstruct us from taking a fortunate rebirth except ourselves. Who creates the causes for a fortunate rebirth? Again, it is none other than ourselves. The causes definitely lie within our hands as we have the capacity and we have the means. The main thing to consider is that this explanation is a way to encourage us to use these good conditions we have now to create the appropriate causes for a good rebirth.

In simple terms, Shantideva is saying, 'You have the full capacity and the appropriate conditions to create the causes for a fortunate rebirth. If you go to the lower realms it will be very difficult freeing yourself from that. Now, when you have those good conditions to create a cause for a fortunate rebirth, is the time to create those causes'. These incredible conditions that we all possess right now are such that we can create extensive merit even in just a second. As you would have heard many times, if an ordinary person generates the mind of bodhicitta, even for just a second, the amount of merit they accumulate would be difficult for all the buddhas to articulate.

2.2.2.3. WHY IT IS APPROPRIATE TO STRIVE IN THE ANTIDOTE TO NEGATIVITY

We can relate this section to Nagarjuna's definitions of negativity and non-virtue, which have been explained in past teachings. Nagarjuna defined negativity as that which is an onset to rebirth into the lower realms, whereas non-virtue is defined as that which is shunned by the noble ones. Here Nagarjuna is making a distinction that is very pertinent to this outline.

This outline is subdivided into four:

2.2.2.3.1. If one does not strive in virtue upon having obtained the freedoms and endowments, then one is deceiving oneself

2.2.2.3.2. One will experience suffering in this life

2.2.2.3.3. Later one will be tormented by the sufferings of the lower realms

2.2.2.3.4. Why it is appropriate to abandon negativity and practise virtue

2.2.2.3.1. If one does not strive in virtue upon having obtained the freedoms and endowments, then one is deceiving oneself

The point here is that no-one is depriving us of this opportunity to create virtue but ourselves.

The relevant verse reads:

23. *If, upon having found this freedom,
I do not meditate on virtue,
Then there is no greater deception,
There is no greater ignorance.*

With respect to this verse Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Having found this freedom which is difficult to find, and when found has great meaning, if I do not strive in and meditate on the cause for higher status and liberation, then there is no better method of self-deception.

There is also no greater ignorance than the ignorance concerning what has to be practised and what has to be abandoned.

The commentary gives a very clear explanation of the verse. *Having found this freedom which is difficult to find*

refers to the freedoms and endowments that we enjoy now. We had to create many virtuous causes in the past to obtain these great conditions, and having found this life *there is great meaning* refers to the great capacity one has to obtain the causes for one's future goals.

This not talking about goals like finding the necessities for survival. Rather, it is referring to the great potential we have to obtain the causes for a fortunate rebirth. Based on the conditions we have now, we have the full capacity and means to avoid the ten non-virtues and to engage in the ten virtues. That then becomes the cause for a fortunate rebirth in the next life. Furthermore, on the basis of the conditions we have now, we have the full capacity and potential to generate renunciation, which becomes a cause to obtain liberation, becoming free from rebirth in cyclic existence. And finally, with these conditions we also have the full capacity to generate bodhicitta and gain the realisation of emptiness, which are the causes to obtain the ultimate goal of enlightenment.

Because we have these freedoms and endowments we can create the causes for these three goals. So, *if I do not strive in, and meditate on, the cause for higher status and liberation, which includes enlightenment, then there is no better method of self-deception.* As I have mentioned previously, if we do not utilise the good conditions we have now, and just focus on our survival and worldly concerns, then that would be a great deception. Indeed, the greatest deception is to waste this incredible opportunity and potential we have to obtain these supreme goals. Furthermore, there is no greater ignorance than to be ignorant of what is to be adopted and practised, and what is to be abandoned. So we are being encouraged to use these great conditions to ensure that we do not fall victim to self-deception, and apply these good conditions to creating the causes to obtain our goals. While it is easy to understand what is being explained here, we need to take it to heart and really try to implement it in our daily life and practice.

2.2.2.3.2. One will experience suffering in this life

The verse relating

24. *Should I, after having understood this,
Still be indolent due to ignorance,
When the time to die comes
Great misery will arise.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads,

Should I, after having realised that I have to strive in achieving virtue and abandoning negativity, still be indolent with regard to the mind of enlightenment, the practice of the perfections and so on, then at the time of death, when I know I am going to the lower realms, great misery will arise. Therefore I should strive with great effort.

The meaning of the commentary is quite clear. The significant point is that when, if one has realised that one must adopt virtue and abandon negativity but disregards this and continues to engage in frivolous activities, or if one has not adopted the mind of bodhicitta, not practising the perfections such as generosity and so forth, then at the time of death one will generate great sorrow and misery. Realising at that time, when one reflects upon one's life, that negativity is the cause for rebirth in

the lower realms, and that one has mostly engaged in negativity and not accumulated virtue, one will be tormented and have great regret in one's mind.

It is a fact that when people are in the last stages of death appearances occur to them that are linked to what they have done in their life. Some appearances cause them real joy because they have accumulated virtues. However, for those who recognise they've mostly engaged in negativity, the appearances bring great fear and unease in their minds. This definitely occurs. Here in the west, dying people who are in pain are often sedated with morphine which seems to numb their mind and senses, so even if they have some experience of these appearances they may not be able to express it. However, when body and senses are not numbed there are clear signs of anxiety at the time of death from those with strong regret.

For yourself, the advice here is *to strive with great effort*. By bringing to mind the great misery that will occur at the time of death, and wanting to avoid it, one will create the causes for a fortunate rebirth. One needs to apply great effort to adopt virtues and refrain from negativities. The crucial point is realising that one has to strive to adopt virtue and abstain from negativity. If one does not apply the practice, one becomes complacent. There is a Tibetan term describing this which has the connotation of becoming immune or desensitised to the Dharma. This is a very dangerous situation to be in, and one to avoid, so take it to heart and apply the practice of Dharma sincerely now.

The teachings explain that great practitioners have only joy in going onwards at the time of death. A medium-level practitioner has no hesitation in facing death and the lowest-level practitioner will not have any regrets in their mind. Thus, one needs to ensure that at the very least, one can prevent strong regret arising at the time of death. It would be a good achievement to know one has done one's best to adopt virtues and purify negativities, and that there is no need for regret at the time of death. It is important to ensure that we practise the Dharma wholeheartedly now, when we have the opportunity.

We can see how Nagarjuna's definition of negativity, which is that it is the onset to rebirth in the lower realms, is very relevant here. This means that creating negativity is like being in the state that is one step away from the lower realms. For individuals who have created a lot of negativity, there will be fear, anxiety and sorrow at the time of death, due to the prospect of what will come next. In relation to that, we can see that Nagarjuna's precise definition of negativity is very pertinent. Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti were great masters. His Holiness mentioned recently that Lama Tsong Khapa clearly matched their attributes and their capacity for reasoning and discernment. In both ancient and modern times there are hardly any other masters who equal them. As their explanations and advices are extremely clear and precise, we really need to take heed of them.

The first Dalai Lama said that the real enemies to overcome are the delusions, and these lie within oneself. Take this advice to heart and recognise that the real enemy lies within; as such, the delusions are the main culprit that cause all the turmoil and harm for oneself.

Recognising this means that we need to protect ourselves from the intensity of the negativities. It might be difficult for us to completely prevent negative states of mind such as anger, jealousy or attachment from arising occasionally, but while they are difficult to prevent, we can stop them from escalating. We can stop anger becoming intense anger such as hatred; we can stop intense jealousy that harms our mind and causes harm to others, and we can stop attachment from becoming obsessed with the object.

We have the means to overcome strong emotions, so we can apply antidotes to anger etc. But if one doesn't apply them and holds onto the anger, one is then befriending anger. Again, with attachment, if, rather than applying the antidote, one actually befriends attachment, one makes oneself a slave to attachment, listening to whatever attachment (or anger) says. One might find it hard to listen to the advice of one's gurus, but when it comes to listening to our anger and our attachment we have no hesitation. We become completely submissive to our attachment, anger and ignorance and allow them to be our masters, who we willingly serve. In summary, the delusions, which are the real cause of harm and destruction, lie nowhere else but within oneself, so we need to recognise and overcome this.

Although it will be explained further in the text, I want you to prepare yourself now and to familiarise yourself with identifying the delusions, particularly the six root delusions and the 20 secondary delusions.

2.2.2.3.3. Later one will be tormented by the sufferings of the lower realms

In case one feels that one could enjoy oneself in the lower realms, what is being explained here is that one will be tormented by the sufferings of the lower realms.

The next verse in the outline reads:

25. *When my body is burned by
The difficult to bear fires of hell for a long time,
The fire of terrible regret will light up,
And the mind will be despondent, this is
certain.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains :

Through the faults of degenerating the mind of enlightenment and so forth one will take rebirth in the lower realms. When then the difficult to bear fires of hell burn my body for a long time, the fire of terrible regret will light up and my mind will be tormented. Since this is certain, make an effort to not incur any faults and downfalls.

The commentary explains here that the fault of allowing the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta to degenerate is one of the heaviest of the downfalls. Previously, this was explained extensively. What is being explained here again is that *through the faults of degenerating the mind of enlightenment, one will take rebirth in the lower realm*. If one were to be born in a hell realm, such as the hot hell realm, one's body and fire become inseparable, and it is as if one's body and the fire is of one entity. So in that kind of situation, how could one even imagine that one's mind will not be tormented; there is no question about how much unceasing torment one would experience in both body and mind. The commentary explains here that this

outcome is certain and that such consequences definitely have to be experienced.

What one needs to take to heart now is to make an effort not to incur any faults and downfalls. The main point is that once one takes those pledges of practising, one should ensure that one does not incur faults and downfalls, and that as one has the ability to apply the antidote to negativity, one should do so, as this serves as the means to overcome negativity.

2.2.2.3.4. Why it is appropriate to abandon negativity and practise virtue

Having contemplated the consequences of negativity, what logically follows is that it is appropriate to abandon negativity and practice virtue. So this is again subdivided into two:

2.2.2.3.4.1. Having wasted the freedoms and endowments, if one goes to the lower realms again, then one resembles something mindless

2.2.2.3.4.2. It is appropriate to contemplate the cause of ignorance

2.2.2.3.4.1. Having wasted the freedoms and endowments, if one goes to the lower realms again, then one resembles something mindless

I have elaborated on the fact that if one does not actually put these incredibly good conditions of the freedom and endowments to use, and seize that opportunity to use them optimally to create virtue and abandon negativities, and if one lays back and engages in frivolous worldly activities, then one has wasted those good conditions. Thus, having wasted the freedoms and endowments one goes to the lower realms. It is as if there is no common sense at all. This is what is being reflected here.

The verses under this heading read:

26. *Having found somehow
This extremely difficult to find basis of benefit
If I return to the lower realms later again
Despite having knowledge,*

27ab. *Then, similarly to one confused by mantra,
This makes me someone without mind.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

This basis of benefit, the precious human rebirth with freedoms and endowments, is extremely difficult to find and, if found, is of great purpose.

Having found it somehow by chance, should I again go to the lower realms despite having knowledge of what is useful and what is harmful, then that makes me someone without a mind achieving just the purpose of the moment for self, similarly to a person confused by mantra.

The commentary explains here that the basis of benefit is *the precious human rebirth with freedoms and endowments*, and that this *is extremely difficult to find*. Reflect back on the explanations given in the Lam Rim teachings about why it is difficult to find the freedoms and endowments, where three reasons are given: the causes are difficult to accumulate; explaining with an analogy why it is difficult; and because of the number of precious human rebirths being minimal in comparison to the numbers of living beings in other realms.

As mentioned in the commentary, having *found this precious human rebirth is of great purpose*. As explained

previously, the great purpose is to achieve one's temporary and ultimate goals, and one can achieve all this having found, as if by chance, this precious human rebirth with freedoms and endowments. So, if one were to go back again to the lower realms, *despite* having known *what is useful and what is harmful, makes me someone without a mind*. This means that it is as if one does not have a rational mind that knows what is good and beneficial and what is harmful to oneself.

Achieving just the purpose on the moment for oneself, refers to being completely immersed in temporary gratification and goals, rather than thinking about virtuous actions, and the necessity for long-term achievements. The analogy for being mindless is that it is similar to a person who is under the spell of a mantra of another person. They would be completely confused, and do things that are completely irrational, because they are completely dominated or influenced by the spell of the mantra. Thus, wasting one's perfect opportunities now with its freedoms and endowments would be similar to one who is mindless (lacking any common sense), like being under the spell of a mantra.

2.2.2.3.4.2. It is appropriate to contemplate the cause of ignorance

In presenting the meaning of the next two lines of verse, Gyaltsab Je opens his commentary with a query:

Query: How did one become confused?

Then as a response to that query the two lines of verse read:

*27cd. I do not know how I got so confused
What is lurking inside of me?*

Then the commentary explains:

Answer: I also do not know due to which cause I got confused and thus deceived. What cause for confusion is lurking inside me? I think there definitely is something.

If one falls into laziness, then one should think in this way.

What is again being reflected upon here is that even though we have all the good conditions such as the eight freedoms and ten endowments, and the knowledge and understanding of what is to be adopted and what is to be shunned, one still finds that one is not taking full opportunity and wastes the opportunities with frivolous worldly activities that focus on oneself. 'What could be causing that? There must definitely be something inside of me that is causing that confusion. What could it be?' This is a means of recognising that it is the delusions within oneself that are causing the confusion.

This introduces the next verse which refers to *my enemies of anger, craving and so forth*.

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

*Transcript prepared by Adair Bunnett and Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett and Jill Lancashire
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe*

Edited version
© Tara Institute