
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྡོད་བ་ལ་འཇུག་བ་བལྟགས་སོ་

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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

You have just meditated on the Giving and Taking practice, and I am sure you have done it to the best of your ability. With the 'taking' you imagine taking in three types of phenomena from all sentient beings: all their sufferings; the causes of their sufferings, which are the afflictions and karma; and the imprints or latencies of those afflictions. In the 'giving' part of the practice, in return you imagine giving three of your most valuable objects: your body, your possessions and all your virtues of the three times. It is important to recollect these main points when you engage in the meditation practice and apply them to the best of your ability. That will make the practice really worthwhile.

2.2.3.2.2. The benefits of striving to destroy the afflictions

We have covered the first subdivision Being the Cause for One's Welfare Austerities Are Suitable to Bear. Now comes the second subdivision.

2.2.3.2.2.2. Being the cause for other's welfare, austerities are suitable to bear

The verse reads as below and is accompanied by examples in the root text:

40. *Fishers, butchers, farmers and the like
Are bearing cold, heat and such
Solely with thoughts for their livelihood.
Why can one not bear this for the happiness of
migrators?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Fishers, butchers, farmers and the like kill fish, do lowly work, work on the fields and so forth, and are bearing difficulties like cold or heat and such, all this solely with the thought of their livelihood.

If that is so, then why can one not bear similar sufferings to accomplish the happiness of all migrators? It would be appropriate to bear them.

The message from the commentary and the verse is quite easy to understand: if one is able to bear hardships to achieve trivial purposes in life, then why shouldn't one strive to bear some hardships to achieve the highest purpose for oneself?

Beings who exert a lot of effort and bear hardships for trivial purposes, like *fishers* and *butchers* who take the life of other beings merely to sustain themselves in this life, or *farmers* who toil year round in the *cold*, *the rain*, and in the *heat of the sun*, do this *lowly work* and bear difficulties solely to sustain themselves for this life. These examples show how some people have to put in so much time and effort, and endure so many hardships just to sustain their basic needs. When we see examples of this around us, we should be inspired not to complain about our lives and ready to bear some difficulties ourselves for our own welfare.

Individuals who expend effort and bear hardship to achieve their goals, even if they may be temporary ones, do achieve significant results. Of course, whenever one endeavours to achieve something, one should understand that there are always some necessary conditions that are required, as well as some obstructions that need to be overcome. As such, the method for achieving one's goals should encompass strategies for establishing the conducive conditions and eradicating any obstructions. This requires a significant amount of time and effort, and bearing hardships. So we can learn from others who expend energy and bear hardships to achieve their goals. In order to achieve the great purpose, one needs to make this resolve, *if that is so, then why can one not bear similar sufferings to accomplish the happiness of all migrators? It would be appropriate to bear them.* To accomplish the happiness of all migrators one needs to achieve the ultimate goal of enlightenment. That is the highest aspiration and goal for anyone who has taken bodhisattva vows. Since many of you have taken the bodhisattva vows and promised to work for the welfare of all sentient beings until achieving enlightenment, it is important for you to continue your practices and willingly bear whatever difficulties and hardships that may occur. The phrase *it would be appropriate to bear them* has the connotation in Tibetan of being patient with them; that means to be patient when facing hardships. So, in order to achieve the great purpose one needs to apply the patience of willingly enduring hardships. This is the resolve we need to make when engaging in Dharma practice.

Of course the advice here is mainly directed at the practices of a bodhisattva. While we aspire to do these practices, in reality we may not be able to apply our practices at a bodhisattva's level right now. However, the personal instruction here is to generate a strong aspiration to be able to practise *like a bodhisattva*. Bodhisattvas bear hardships with farsightedness, engaging in the practices over long periods of time, withstanding many adversities, and continue to practice whilst not giving up their bodhisattva vows or bodhicitta. This should inspire us to generate a strong veneration and genuine respect for them, along with an aspiration that we may also practise in a similar way.

The point here is that it is most fitting to bear sufferings by applying the patience of willingly enduring hardships. The definition of patience is not to allow one's mind to become disturbed in the face of adversities such as harm and sufferings. We should apply this understanding of *willingly bearing hardships*, because if one is not able to bear hardships and difficulties, it will affect one's mind negatively, and one will become distraught and overwhelmed. When there is agony in one's mind because of hardships, those feelings will then cause anger to arise. Anger is always preceded by a feeling of discomfort or agony, which one is not able to bear. The best way for our mind not to feel overwhelmed is by willingly accepting and bearing hardships, and to regard them as being worthwhile.

The ultimate result of having born hardships and difficulties on the path is to become an enlightened being. An enlightened being, such as Buddha Shakyamuni, is an individual being who has willingly born many hardships as a practitioner, and having completely traversed the path, finally achieved the state of enlightenment. If we aspire to become like Buddha Shakyamuni, how can we expect to succeed if we easily become distraught and willing give up our practices when faced with the slightest difficulty or hardship? We may not be able to practise on a bodhisattva's level right now, however we can definitely generate the

aspiration to practise like a bodhisattva. Admiring the bodhisattva's deeds leaves very positive imprints on our mind, which helps to develop our capacity to practise just like a bodhisattva in the future. So, these are significant points to keep in mind.

2.2.3.2.3. Why one needs to complete the earlier given promise

The verse is preceded by a doubt:

Doubt: One has made the promise to destroy the afflictions in the continuum of others and it is unsuitable to strive in destroying the afflictions in one's own continuum, because one would fall into the extreme of peace.

To explain the hypothetical doubt: having *made the promise to destroy the afflictions in the continuum of others*, the doubt is that it would be *unsuitable to strive in destroying the afflictions in one's own continuum because one would fall into the extreme of peace* i.e. the peace of self-liberation or nirvana. The doubt is that if one works towards *destroying the afflictions* or the delusions *in one's own mental continuum* then once destroyed this would imply that one would reach the state of self-liberation, with the risk of abiding in a state of personal peace. This reminds me of a similar doubt raised some time ago by Vanessa. She said that as Mahayana practitioners "if we are striving to overcome our personal sufferings, wouldn't that contradict the Mahayana attitude that we should be developing?" These are significant doubts.

When you really think deeply about the meaning of the teachings, doubts will arise. This is significant because they arise as a result of contemplation and investigation of the topic. In relation to the earlier doubt, for someone merely seeking self-liberation the main object of abandonment is the afflictions, and the main purpose for abandoning them is to attain personal liberation. So when the afflictions have been abandoned they reach the state of self-liberation, a state where one abides in perpetual bliss. An arhat or foe destroyer is an individual who has abandoned the afflictions and has reached that blissful state and remains in a blissful state of meditative equipoise. That is what is being referred to here as *the extreme of peace*.

The corresponding verse and a half read:

41 *When one made the promise to liberate
Migrators equalling the expanse of space
From the afflictions,
Oneself was not free from afflictions.*

42ab *As one did not know one's abilities
How was it not crazy talk?*

Gyalsab Je's commentary explains the meaning:

Answer: At an earlier time when one generated the mind and made the promise to liberate all migrators equalling the expanse of space from their afflictions, if oneself is not free from afflictions, then not to mention the welfare of others, one cannot achieve even one's own welfare. Being under the control of the afflictions one does not know one's own measure. How is it not crazy to say that one will liberate others from their afflictions?

If one is bound by cyclic existence, one cannot complete the welfare of others and therefore one should strive to abandon the afflictions in one's continuum.

What is being explained is that since one has earlier *generated the mind of bodhicitta and made the promise to liberate migrators equalling the expanse of space from their afflictions, then*

in order to fulfil this promise one must abandon one's own afflictions. Otherwise one cannot achieve the welfare of others.

The verse explains that *being under the control of the afflictions one does not know one's own measure*, or state of mind, so how can one *liberate others from the afflictions*. What is being presented here is that to claim that one would free all beings from their afflictions while doing nothing about abandoning one's own afflictions would be similar to a *crazy person's* approach. The commentary goes further: *if one is bound by cyclic existence, one cannot complete the welfare of others and therefore one should strive to abandon the afflictions in one's continuum*. The conclusion is that one definitely needs to strive to abandon afflictions.

This relates to the meaning of the outline Why One Needs to Complete the Earlier Given Promise, which is that in order to complete an earlier promise to work for the welfare of all sentient beings and ultimately free them from all afflictions and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, one needs to abandon the afflictions within one's own mental continuum. That is why the conclusion here states: *one should strive to abandon the afflictions in one's continuum*. This is similar to an analogy presented in the Lam Rim teachings of the father of a starving family who finds a piece of meat. He reasons that if he were to share the piece of meat with his family there will be little benefit for each of them. So he decides to eat it all himself in order to gain enough strength and energy to find sufficient food to feed the whole family.

The analogy illustrates the importance of first freeing oneself from the afflictions; otherwise there is no possibility to help free others from the afflictions. This is why one needs to achieve enlightenment and become a buddha oneself before one can lead others to buddhahood. When one practises developing bodhicitta, one first practises developing the aspiration to benefit others, and then based on that, one generates the aspiration to achieve enlightenment oneself in order to achieve that purpose.

This is how one trains one's mind and how the path is traversed; another key point to keep in mind.

2.2.3.2.3. It is appropriate to strive in the trainings that destroy the afflictions

An earlier verse explained that it is appropriate to abandon the delusions or afflictions. The verses below explain the appropriateness of striving in the trainings which destroy the afflictions.

This is subdivided into two:

2.2.3.2.3.1. Strive in the antidote to the afflictions

2.2.3.2.3.2. Strive to never let the mind fall under the control of the afflictions

These are really significant points to apply to our own practices. **Striving in the antidote to the afflictions** means to work towards developing the antidotes in one's mind to overcome the afflictions. The next point, **striving to never fall under the control of the mental afflictions**, means working towards control over one's mind, so that one does not fall under the dominance of the afflictions.

In our daily practice bring to mind the importance of applying the antidotes. Whatever antidotes one has not yet developed, one should strive to develop as a means to overcome the afflictions within oneself. And whatever antidotes one has already developed, one should ensure that one further strengthens them. Likewise with the afflictions: whatever afflictions one has not yet abandoned, strive to

abandon them. And whatever afflictions one has successfully controlled or has reduced, ensure that one applies continual measures and diligence to keep those delusions at bay so that they don't arise strongly again.

It is similar with virtue: whatever virtues one has not yet developed, strive to develop them, and whatever virtues one has already generated, strengthen and further develop them. Try to bring these to mind as an aspiration: "May I be able to overcome the afflictions which I have not yet overcome and apply the measures to overcome them; and may I be able to develop the virtues that I have not yet developed and maintain the virtues I have already developed".

This becomes a really significant aspiration. When one applies this, the aspiration itself can bring solace and ease to the mind. It is good for us to relate to these seemingly simple practices which we may easily neglect, thinking we should be doing some grander practices. I feel that often our shortcoming is that we neglect practices within our own reach and try to aim for something higher or grander; we need to pay attention to this.

A key point from the outlines is that when an affliction arises in our mind, rather than just leaving it and doing nothing about it, we need to recognise that this only creates a condition for the affliction to increase in intensity. What we are being encouraged to do here is that as soon as an affliction arises, we need to immediately remember to apply an antidote to overcome it. Next, since the afflictions arise at any given moment, when they do arise, we should not allow ourselves to fall under their dominance or control. These are both things that we are able to do. We can take measures to apply antidotes and ensure that we are not under the complete control of the afflictions. These are reasonable practices that we can apply in our daily lives.

2.2.3.2.3.1. Strive in the antidote to the afflictions

The parts of the verse which relate to this are the second two lines of the earlier verse and the first two lines of the next verse.

*42cd Therefore I shall never reverse
From destroying the afflictions.*

*43ab One should hold onto it
And meet them in war with a vengeance.*

The last two lines of verse 43 will be explained later on.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Since they are suitable to be abandoned one should never reverse from the thought and action of abandoning them. One should hold onto the antidote and destroy the afflictions by meeting them in battle with a vengeance.

The commentary highlights that *since they are suitable to be abandoned* (having given reasons earlier) *one should never reverse from the thought and action of abandoning them*. One needs to be committed to never reversing from the thought and action of abandoning the afflictions. Having seen their faults and disadvantages, one needs to develop the determination never to reverse, never to waiver from the thought of abandoning the afflictions. The next line explains the extent to which one makes that commitment: *one should hold onto the antidote and destroy the afflictions by meeting them in battle with a vengeance*. 'Battle' here is used as an example to illustrate the forceful extent to which one needs to engage in the application of an antidote.

A second doubt is raised here:

Doubt: That which is to be abandoned and the antidote are attachment and anger, and revenge for that to be abandoned is an affliction, and therefore to be abandoned too.

The hypothetical doubt raised here is: isn't being attached to the antidote, generating anger and a vengeful attitude towards what has to be abandoned, i.e. the delusions, an affliction in itself? Doesn't that have to be abandoned too? In other words, attachment to the antidote and anger towards that which is to be abandoned would be an affliction in itself, so wouldn't that have to be abandoned as well?

The next two lines of the verse relate to this:

*43cd Afflictions with such an appearance
Are the destroyer of afflictions, nothing else.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

Grasping on to the antidote and the vengeance to that which is to be abandoned, appear like afflictions but they actually belong to the side of the antidote that destroys the afflictions. Thus they are not contained in that to be abandoned.

What is being explained here is that grasping at an antidote and generating vengeance towards that which is to be abandoned may appear to be like afflictions, but actually they help to destroy the afflictions. Generating a vengeful attitude towards the afflictions (which are to be abandoned) is having thoughts such as, "I have recognised you, afflictions, to be the one that constantly harms me; I will definitely overcome you now. I will not rest until I have destroyed you". So when one targets the mind at overcoming the afflictions in such a way, that is the type of vengeance needed. As mentioned here, *it belongs to the side of the antidote*.

2.2.3.2.3.2. Strive to never let the mind fall under the control of the afflictions

The next verse is preceded by this query:

Query: Is it not better to follow the afflictions since to abandon the afflictions brings hundreds of sufferings with it?

These are exactly the kinds of doubts we have when being wary of applying the antidotes to the afflictions. We find that "it is so difficult to overcome these afflictions, so maybe it is better to just follow them". It is this kind of attitude which has kept us in samsara for so long, and which prevents us from making any genuine attempts to overcome the afflictions. A very significant doubt has been raised here.

The verse which relates to this reads as follows:

*44 Dying due to being burned,
Or even being decapitated is easy.
But one should never submit
To the enemy of the afflictions.*

The point to examine here is which is better: the difficulties and hardships in overcoming the afflictions, or waiting for the afflictions to completely control our mind so that we must experience their more serious consequences at a later time? This is the choice we need to make.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of the verse as follows:

Regardless of whether one dies by being burnt or whether one is decapitated, it is still easy, because at that time one is only separated from this life's body.

But one should never submit to the enemy of the afflictions that causes us to take birth in the great sufferings of the hell realms, and is an obstacle to

attaining our wishes. We should never fall under their control.

The explanation: *regardless of whether one dies by being burnt or whether one is decapitated, 'it is easy', implies that being burnt or consumed by fire or experiencing death from decapitation is merely a suffering one experiences from being separated from this life's body, and this will not in itself lead one to the lower realms e.g. the hell realms. These are regarded as easy in comparison to the great sufferings one would have to experience being under the influence of the afflictions. The commentary continues: but one should never submit to the afflictions that cause us to take birth in the great sufferings of the hell realms and is an obstacle to attaining our wishes. If one were to give power to the enemy (the afflictions), this is what causes one to take birth in the great sufferings of the hell realms and so forth, as well as being an obstacle to attaining our ultimate goal of enlightenment. The conclusion here is that one should never fall under the control of the afflictions.*

2.2.3.3. MEDITATING ON JOY KNOWING THAT IF ONE MAKES AN EFFORT IT IS POSSIBLE TO ABANDON THE AFFLICTIONS

This heading presents the meaning of the next few verses, which is that one should generate joy in one's mind; one should not feel daunted by the difficulty of overcoming the afflictions but rather generate joy; and that if one makes an effort, it is definitely possible to abandon the afflictions which should cause some joy. This heading is subdivided into three:

2.2.3.3.1. Once the afflictions are expelled from one's continuum they have no other basis in which to abide

2.2.3.3.2. If one makes an effort they can be abandoned because they arise from a mistaken cause

2.2.3.3.3. If they are abandoned from the root, there is no other basis on which they can abide so they are suitable to abandon!

2.2.3.3.1. *Once the afflictions are expelled from one's continuum they have no other basis on which to abide*

This verse is preceded by another query:

Query: Afflictions are like worldly enemies in that, after having been expelled from one's place, they find again strength and harm again. So it is appropriate to follow them likewise.

The doubt here is that one may feel daunted in overcoming the afflictions if one perceives them as external enemies, because with external enemies, even if you overpower them for the time being and expel them from your area, they might congregate in another area, regain power and strength and again come back and cause you more harm. So if one uses an external enemy as an example for one's afflictions, one may have that doubt that "even if I were to overcome the afflictions now, they might reoccur later and affect me and harm me, so what is the point in trying to overcome them; I might as well just follow them".

The verse relating to this reads:

45 *When the ordinary enemy gets expelled from one place
They conquer another place and remain there.
Having regained strength they return.
The way of the enemy of the afflictions is not like that.*

The commentary provides an answer to the query:

Answer: It is not the same. When the ordinary enemy gets expelled from one place they conquer another place, regain their strength there and then return to

take their revenge. The way of the enemy of the afflictions is not like that. Once they have been expelled from the root they cannot remain in another place and they cannot return.

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains, external worldly enemies and the afflictions do not have the same meaning. When an ordinary enemy gets expelled from one place, they conquer or reside in another place and regain their strength and return to take their revenge. That is what an external enemy is capable of doing. As explained further: *the way of the enemy of the afflictions is not like that because once they have been expelled from the very root they cannot remain in another place and they cannot return to harm oneself.*

If one makes an effort, afflictions can be abandoned because they arise from a mistaken cause. If the causes were based on a valid basis then one would not be able to abandon them because they would have a substantial base. But because the very causes of the afflictions are mistaken there is no sound basis for them and therefore one is able to abandon them. Understanding this gives one further encouragement to apply the antidotes to overcome the afflictions.

With the cause, we can again reflect upon the explanations in the *Abhidharma* which outlines three main conditions for afflictions to arise: When the afflictions have not been abandoned; when one is in close proximity to objects; and when concepts based on inappropriate attention is applied then all the conditions for the delusions to arise in one's mind are present. Inappropriate attention is in itself a mistaken consciousness which is one of the causes for afflictions to arise. It is precisely because inappropriate attention arises based on a mistaken consciousness that it can be eradicated, because a mistaken consciousness is not based on a valid basis.

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

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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