
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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If, prior to taking refuge, you generate the following motivation, 'in order to liberate all beings from all sufferings and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness I need to achieve enlightenment myself, so for this purpose I take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha', this then becomes what is called 'special refuge'.

When we add to this special refuge the intention to achieve enlightenment quickly, very quickly, then it becomes what is called a 'special bodhicitta' intention.

I convey this to you now so that when you come across practices where it indicates taking special refuge and generating special bodhicitta, you will know what it means.

So, based on the refuge and bodhicitta motivation we generated earlier, along with this profound understanding, we can now engage in the practice of meditation.

[meditation]

We can now generate the following motivation for receiving the teachings: In order to free all sentient beings from all sufferings and lead to them to the ultimate state of happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So, for this purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

The very meditation practice that we engaged in earlier is a practice to further enhance and develop the love and compassion within ourselves. If we were to really take the initiative to put this into practice rather than leave it as a mere wish, and really develop practising love and compassion within ourselves, the benefit would be unimaginable. It is incredible benefit for oneself as well as for others. There is only a positive result to be gained from developing love and compassion in one's heart.

You might find it hard to detect how extending love and compassion to all living beings actually directly benefits them or yourself. The positive effects take place over a long period of time, so the benefits are experienced more in an indirect way. However we can relate to the more direct experiences with our immediate relations, who we deal with on a daily basis. If one has really taken the initiative to cultivate genuine love and compassion, then due to familiarity with the practice, and the positive impact it has on one's mind, it will definitely contribute to less agitation and less anger—particularly with our close relationships.

In relation to close relationships we have now, or from the past, we are easily affected by what they say and what they do. As such, anger can arise if we have not taken the initiative to develop a genuine sense of love and compassion towards them. The way to develop love and compassion towards them is to really understand that

when they express inappropriate gestures or words etc. it is because they are influenced by the delusions, and thus affected by a troubled state of mind. When one understands that they don't have control over what they are saying and doing, and that their mind is completely confused (which is why they are expressing inappropriate gestures and so forth), one doesn't take it too personally. Instead one can feel a sense of love and compassion towards them.

We can notice that when inappropriate gestures are laid upon oneself, or *vice versa*, it is because of the fact that we have a close relationship with the other, now or from the past. It would be quite unlikely that we would express our feelings openly, especially feelings of agitation etc., to strangers. If we were to approach strangers and start relating what we have on our mind, we might even get punched and start a fight. So we usually express what's on our mind to those with whom we are closest, which at times may be agitation and unease, and this can create discomfort between oneself and the other.

Knowing that it is because we have a close relationship with the other, it is most appropriate that one generates genuine understanding based on a sense of love and compassion. If one practises in this way then it becomes a supreme method to transform agitation and anger into love and compassion. If one takes the initiative to practise love and compassion then, if the other was to utter inappropriate words or make inappropriate gestures, one would not take it personally and it would be able to express even more understanding and concern for them. This is how their negative attitudes or gestures can be transformed into something more positive due to the love and compassion in our heart.

As we know from the Buddha's life story, when the Buddha was in the indestructible concentrated state of meditation, and evil forces such as demons attempted to harm the Buddha out of jealousy, their arrows and spears transformed into flowers. The deep concentration and love and compassion in the Buddha's heart overpowered the destructive weapons, and transformed them into something beautiful. We need to understand the significance of the Buddha's great feats, and be encouraged to practise similarly oneself.

When we really take the initiative to practise in this way, with the understanding that inappropriate gestures and words are due to the negative emotions or delusions in the other's mind, one should not take it personally but rather think of the other as an object of compassion, because of the afflictions in their mind. When we practise in this way, what would otherwise be a very uncomfortable situation can be transformed into something more meaningful, and becomes a means to enhance our love and compassion towards them. So turning unwanted things, such as difficulties and problems into the path means precisely this practice. Otherwise what other practice would there be? Beginning with the hardships and unwanted things we experience now, we can learn to transform anger into love and compassion. This is the practice: in a situation where one would have otherwise reacted out of anger, one feels love and compassion instead. Doing that shows how our mind has been transformed.

We need to understand that this is the very foundation of the mind training teachings. The main emphasis here is turning unwanted situations, difficulties and problems into the path. So we need to understand that.

It is as presented in this verse from the *Guru Puja* practice:

Should even the environment and the beings therein
Be filled with the fruits of their negative actions
And unwished-for sufferings pour down on me like
rain,
I seek your blessings to take these miserable
conditions as a path
By seeing them as causes to exhaust the results of my
negative karma.

So when one next recites these lines from *the Guru Puja*, it is good to reflect on the meaning.

1.3.2.1.5. Because the body disintegrates quickly it is suitable to practise virtue

From the heading itself we can derive a sense of the profound advice being presented here. Since death is inevitable, and our body disintegrates and nothing is left behind, then while we have this body, it is suitable to employ it in order to accumulate virtue as much as possible.

The practice here is to contemplate the certainty of death. The time of death is uncertain, and that time our body can't help us, as it will be destroyed. The Lam Rim teachings explain in detail that when death occurs none of the things we cherish now can protect us, e.g. our body, our possessions and relatives. None of that can help us at that time. So if we can really contemplate on death and impermanence, and take it to heart, then the practical benefit will be that our attachment to our body, possessions and relatives will reduce to the point of having no attachment to them at all. If one has not even the slightest attachment to these cherished objects, then this will be a cause for so much relief and ease in our mind—not only at the time of death but even in our daily lives now. If we don't take the initiative to let go of the attachment to our body, possessions and relatives, then this can cause a lot of mental agony. When one has strong attachment to close and dear ones in particular, and if they let go of us first, prior to us having trained our own mind to let go of the attachment to them, then that will cause so much agony in one's mind. So to prevent a painful situation like this from happening, you need to take the initiative to train your mind to let go of attachment to these objects. Then you will have great solace.

Most of you would have the experience of being abandoned at one time or another by someone who is close and dear to you. If you can recall the pain and hurt you felt at that time this will be a good impetus to practice the Dharma.

Apparently psychologists have stated that one of the greatest sufferings someone can undergo is the suffering of being abandoned by loved ones. This suffering can be so great that someone who is experiencing that kind of hurt would even consider taking their own life, because they are not able to bear it. Many of you might already be familiar with psychology, and may have heard those explanations. I would say that it is definitely true. The

suffering of being abandoned and unloved is a great suffering. So if situations like this were to occur, then the best way to avoid experiencing the sufferings is to train our mind now to let go of the attachment to others. It is in this way that we can see how we can derive practical benefit from these practices: letting go of the attachment to these objects and possessions (particularly other beings) will be of benefit even in this very life.

The point of this subheading is that the body disintegrates quickly and death occurs quickly. Reflecting on the inevitability of death is something which really becomes a strong impetus for one's practice of Dharma. As the teachings and some of the great masters have mentioned, we need to practise to the extent that we generate fear of death now as a way to prevent fear of death at the actual time of death. In other words, cultivating a fear of death now can become the impetus for us to practise the Dharma in a way that actively prepares us for the actual time of death. When there is no fear at that time then there is no hesitation in our mind, and we will be able to joyfully or peacefully go on to the next existence. The fact and reality is that none of us will survive forever—death will definitely occur. The longest one could possibly hope to live for would be 120. Apparently in the past some have lived up to 140. I am not sure of this, but no-one could live much longer than that.

We might aspire to live up to 100, but even that is not a very long time. In terms of the number of years we live, no matter whatever significant older age we might hope to live for, the reality is that the years go by very quickly. In relation to my own experience, it doesn't seem long since I arrived in Australia. When I look back, the time seems to have gone quite quickly, but it is over 30 years. As a reminder of that, someone came to a Geelong teaching last month and showed me pictures saying 'Remember this picture?' It was a picture of this individual taken with me 30 years ago. He told me that the photo was taken in his kitchen, and he has it with him all the time. When he showed the picture, I actually couldn't even recognise the person right away, and that was a reminder of how much time has passed since then.

He had lived in Japan for many years and that is why he was not around here. Apparently he had come to His Holiness' event last year at the Quang Minh temple and he said that he noticed me from a distance, and immediately remembered 'Oh, that is Geshe Doga'. He said he could recognize me right away from a distance.

Referring back to the point about generating fear of death as an impetus to practise the Dharma, if we can really improve our Dharma practice so that we are prepared for the time of death, then this will be of great benefit at the inevitable time of death. In the number of years that I have associated with others here, there have been a few examples of individuals who have faced death with great ease and peace of mind. So there is real significance in this point that we need to pay attention to.

Under this heading *Because the body disintegrates quickly it is suitable to practise virtue* there are four subheadings.

1.3.2.1.5.1. A body that will soon be destroyed by death is suitable to be ordered to practise virtue

1.3.2.1.5.2. An example of how it is inappropriate to do nothing and procrastinate due to grasping

1.3.2.1.5.3. Having given a wage one should get what one wants

1.3.2.1.5.4. It is appropriate to work for sentient beings by adapting the recognition of a boat

1.3.2.1.5.1. A body that will soon be destroyed by death is suitable to be ordered to practise virtue

The verse reads:

*66cd. This human body
Is only to be used.*

*67. Even if you protect it,
The lord of death, without any mercy,
Will take it away and give it to the birds and
dogs.
At that time what can you do?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning of the verse.

There is no real purpose of the body from the point of view of its nature. This human body that is intact with its freedoms and endowments is only suitable to be put to work to accumulate virtuous karma.

Although you protect it without achieving this purpose, the merciless lord of death will take it from you and, having separated it from life, will offer it to the birds and dogs. Mind, at such a time what will you do, as you do not have the slightest power to prevent that separation.

The main point the commentary expresses is that there is no real purpose for the body from the point of view of its nature. Its actual composition is a contaminated aggregate so there is no real, substantial pure nature. However the human bodies that we have obtained are intact with the freedoms and endowments, enabling one to pursue the Dharma. Only this kind of body is suitable to put to work to accumulate virtuous karma. This is the only purpose of having obtained a precious human body.

Verse 67 explains that if we were to try to protect our body, without trying to achieve a virtuous purpose, the reality is that the Lord of Death, (which is a mythological being used as a euphemism for death) is merciless and will separate our consciousness from our body. One has to experience death, and once our bodies are separated from this life, it will be offered to the birds and dogs. The point is that our bodies will naturally decompose and be of no use for oneself. So, if we don't reflect on this now, then at the time of death we won't have the power to do anything.

We put great measures into protecting our body by feeding and clothing it etc. If the body didn't age, decay and eventually disintegrate, then perhaps there would be some point to protect it in such a way. However the reality is that our body naturally starts to decay no matter how much we protect it. It will gradually fail us and eventually completely disintegrate, and we will have to separate from it. Taking this natural decay of our body into account, putting in all that time and energy just to protect it, without using it for any great purpose, would be meaningless.

The personal instruction to derive here is to contemplate the inevitability of death and really take the initiative to engage in a greater purpose. The mind, or the individual

self will go on, while the body will be left behind at the time of death. This is something that will definitely occur and trying to ignore it will not prevent it. It is better to acknowledge it and actually prepare for the time when it occurs by practising to the best of our ability. Then, when the actual event takes place, it will definitely lessen unnecessary anxiety and fears and benefit us at that time.

1.3.2.1.5.2. An example of how it is inappropriate to do nothing and procrastinate due to grasping

It is natural that we experience birth, aging, sickness and death. This is part and parcel of our existence. Ignoring this and not acknowledging it will not prevent it from happening. The very fact that we are born means that we have to experience death. This is part of our natural existence of suffering.

We can derive the meaning from the heading itself: *An example of how it is inappropriate to do nothing and to procrastinate due to grasping.* Doing nothing here refers to doing nothing to practice the Dharma, not doing nothing in general. This can be misunderstood if people think 'I am not just doing nothing and sitting around, I am actually very busy, I have a job and so forth, so I am really busy – this advice does not apply to me'. So to clarify, here, doing nothing means doing nothing to generate the causes for one's liberation and enlightenment, or more immediately, doing nothing to prepare for our future life. At the very least, Dharma practice involves practices to prepare oneself for one's next life. If we don't engage in any practice towards achieving the goals of our future lives, ultimately liberation and full enlightenment, then this would be referred to as doing nothing from the Dharma point of view, and this is inappropriate.

The verse reads:

*68. You would not give cloth and so forth
To servants that cannot be ordered around.
Hence, if this body leaves you despite your care,
Why do you build up your flesh to make it firm?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary quite clearly explains the meaning of this verse.

If in the world, for example, slaves and entourage are not able to do the work or if they do not serve food, clothing and so forth to their master, then they are punished.

As this body will leave you, without your control, despite having nourished and cared for it with effort, then why do you build up its flesh to make it firm?

It is unsuitable.

The example presented here refers back to ancient times when great kings or masters had slaves and an entourage of people (for example a king would have an entourage of ministers and so forth). If slaves who worked for the lords were not actually able to do the work, such as serving food or making clothing etc., then they would be punished or even expelled. Similarly if the ministers didn't do the work required of them, they could be punished or even expelled from their position. Even these days we can see people fired from their jobs if they don't work properly, so we can relate to this example.

The commentary further explains that: *as this body will leave you, without your control, despite having nourished and*

cared for it with effort, then why do you build up its flesh to make it firm?, implying this is unsuitable. What is being explained here again reflects the reality that we have to discard this body. No matter how much we nourish it and care for it, it will have to be discarded and left behind. With no intention to achieve a greater purpose with this body, merely eating and consuming as a way of protecting its flesh is futile and of no real benefit. The personal instruction here is that while we do need to protect our body by consuming, eating, clothing it, drinking and finding shelter for it etc., we should do it with the intention that the very purpose of feeding and clothing our bodies etc. is so that we can engage in the practice of the Dharma to benefit other sentient beings. With a sense of love and compassion in one's heart, one can perform the numerous normal daily activities as a practice of Dharma, by remembering to make appropriate offerings each time one eats or drinks. After that one should generate the mind that thinks, 'May consuming this now become a means to nourish my body so that I can use it to engage in Dharma practices to benefit other sentient beings'.

With this intention in our mind, our normal activities of drinking and eating become a great means to accumulate merit to further enhance love and compassion. In this way you can see that by just changing one's attitude towards normal activities, it can turn them into a great practice. These are the instructions for those who really want to take the initiative to try and engage in the practice of Dharma. Make it part of your life: turn whatever you do into a Dharma practice. This instruction is very, very valuable. I personally definitely try to remind myself of this point each time I drink and eat. I don't eat mindlessly, I try and use it for this purpose.

If we can remind ourselves of these points, then whatever activity we engage in to sustain ourselves will become an activity that acquires the conditions for the practice of Dharma. When we talk about the conditions for Dharma practice, we might think of something grand, or something which is beyond our normal activities, but if we can understand that the appropriate conditions for practising Dharma begins with a sound body, then whatever helps to nourish a healthy body definitely becomes the conditions for practising Dharma.

1.3.2.1.5.3. Having given a wage one should get what one wants

Again, using the example of work and wages, if you give a wage to someone to work for you then you expect them to do their service.

The verse reads:

69. *After giving the body its wage,
Put it to work for your purpose.
Without any return
Do not offer everything to it.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary clarifies the meaning.

Having given the body its wage of food, clothing and so forth one should put it to work now for one's purpose of creating virtuous karma. Without the slightest benefit one should not offer the body all this food, clothing and so forth, without getting any benefit in return.

The commentary explains that when we feed and clothe our body it is as if we are giving it its wage. For example, when you pay workers a wage you expect the work to be completed. Similarly, feeding one's body with food and clothing it, the body should then work for one's intended purpose—to create virtuous karma. Creating virtuous karma is in direct contrast to creating non-virtuous karma. Non-virtues of the physical body include killing, stealing and sexual misconduct, and if one used one's body to create non-virtue, then that would definitely have defeated the purpose of having such a body.

However, if one can refrain from these negative deeds and employ the body to create virtuous karma as a means to obtain a good rebirth next life, or better still, to become a cause to obtain liberation and ultimately enlightenment for the purpose of all living beings, then the benefit ranges from a temporary benefit to the ultimate benefit that one can use one's body to achieve. *Without the slightest benefit one should not offer the body all this food and clothing without getting any benefit in return* means if we were not to get anything in return, then it is meaningless to serve this body. There is another connotation here too. If, instead of benefit, one generates harm with one's body then there is no point supporting it. In this case it would be better not to feed it and give it care. A contemporary example of this may be individuals who have fed their body to the point where it becomes so obese that they can't even stand up or walk around. What benefit is the body in this situation? This is an implication that one needs to also understand.

1.3.2.1.5.4. It is appropriate to work for sentient beings by adapting the recognition of a boat

This heading presents the example of a boat as a means of ferrying passengers from one side of a river to the other. Similarly, we need to use our perfect conditions to bring ourselves from the shore of samsara across to the other shore, which is the state of liberation and ultimately enlightenment—just like the boat.

The verse reads:

70. *Regard the body as a boat
Merely for coming and going.
Transform it into a wish fulfilling body
To accomplish the welfare of sentient beings.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the concept further.

This body is here, in this life, merely as a basis for striving in virtue as it is the basis for coming and going. In such a way, view it with the recognition of it being a like boat for crossing the ocean of cyclic existence, and transform it into the precious wish-fulfilling jewel of a Buddha's body, so as to achieve the welfare of all sentient beings.

The point explained here is to regard our body as the basis for striving in virtue. We use our body to come and go, but it should be the basis for actually striving in virtue. The analogy presented here: *In such a way, view it with the recognition of it being like a boat for crossing the ocean of cyclic existence*, which uses the boat as an example. Just as a boat is used to ferry passengers from one side of a river to the other, so we should use our body to cross the ocean of samsara, from cyclic existence to the shore of enlightenment.

As the commentary highlights, by using our body like a boat to cross the ocean of cyclic existence, having crossed to the other shore of enlightenment, we need to transform our body into the precious wish-fulfilling body of a buddha's body. By engaging in the practice and having generated the altruistic mind of bodhicitta, then the practice one engages in is the six perfections. So, through the combination of the altruistic mind of bodhicitta and the actions of the six perfections, we engage in the practices on the path to reach enlightenment. Thus we need to use our body now as a means to achieve a complete transformed state, where one achieves the two bodies of a buddha: the wisdom truth body and the form body of a buddha. This becomes the means to fulfil one's aspiration to benefit all sentient beings.

1.3.2.2. TO BE SKILFUL IN PRACTISING VIRTUE

The presentations under this heading are very practical and applicable advice for our everyday life, which we really need to take on board. There are three subheadings:

1.3.2.2.1. Making ordinary actions beautiful

1.3.2.2.2. Skilfully interacting with others in a virtuous way. The literal explanation is being skilled about engaging with others as a way to be free from misdeeds.

1.3.2.2.3. Being skilful in the actions of the three doors

1.3.2.2.1. Making ordinary actions beautiful

This is subdivided into three:

1.3.2.2.1.1. How to act when meeting others

1.3.2.2.1.2. How to handle one's possessions

1.3.2.2.1.3. Always perform actions in a courteous manner

1.3.2.2.1.1. How to act when meeting others

This addresses how to act when you encounter others. It reflects on what kind of gestures to express and so forth.

The verse reads:

71. *Thus those possessing control
Should always wear a smile,
Clear away wrathful grimaces and frowns,
Be migrators' friend and be honest.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary expands upon this:

Thus one should take control of one's body and mind and always smile at others. Clear away wrathful grimaces and frowns and be a good friend to migrators. When talking be gentle and truthful.

The line from the verse which says: *Thus those possessing control*, means having control over one's body and mind, particularly one's own mind. When one encounters others one should always have a smiling face and a pleasant gesture, and refrain from wrathful grimaces, like a dark face or frowns. By taking the initiative to be a good friend to migrators, one will always be close to others and have affection towards others. Further, the advice when talking is to be gentle and truthful. The Tibetan word translated here as *gentle* has the connotation of using words which are likeable and suitable for the others to hear. How to act when meeting others is something we need to take on board and try to put into practice.

1.3.2.2.1.2. How to handle one's possessions

This relates to handling things in our area, in our room, in our surroundings. It is very practical advice about how to

take things out from somewhere and how to put them back in an appropriate way. This affects immediate neighbours or people that live next to you. The main point is that we need to be considerate and not to disturb them in any way.

The verse reads:

72ab. *Do not throw beds and so forth
Around noisily without consideration.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary adds:

Do not throw possessions like beds and so forth noisily around because this harms others.

While the explanation here is quite clear, the verse relates to being considerate to others who are living with you, next to you, or close by, such as neighbours,. When the commentary says *do not throw* it means do not handle possessions roughly. For example, when you are opening doors, or when you are taking things out, be considerate. One might unintentionally have no consideration, but apparently there are those who actually do things noisily, like banging the doors or taking things noisily, as a way to annoy their neighbours or roommates. If you see them also showing a dark or sullen face, these are inappropriate gestures in relation to the handling of things.

1.3.2.2.1.3. Always perform actions in a courteous manner

The third subdivision refers to always being mindful not to disturb others when engaging in any activity. This means to be considerate of others' needs and acting appropriately in any given situation.

The verse reads:

72cd. *Also, do not open the door roughly
And always delight in being quiet.*

73. *Water fowl, cats and thieves
Go quietly and are inconspicuous
Thus achieving their goals.
The able ones always act in such a way.*

While this is quite clear we can go into a little bit more detail in our next session. Here we need to reflect on how Shantideva is presenting really practical ways of being considerate, and how to behave appropriately in accordance with others' needs and space and time. This is very appropriate practical advice that we need to apply in our daily life.

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

*Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Jill Lancashire
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version*

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