

# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ལྷན་མེས་ཀྱི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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2 September 2014

As usual we can spend some time in meditation.

*(pause for meditation)*

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines—in order to benefit all sentient beings I will strive to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

## 1.3.2.2.3.3. Relating oneself only to virtuous actions (cont.)

This has three subheadings:

1.3.2.2.3.3.1. Practising generosity to the special field of offering

1.3.2.2.3.3.2. Creating virtue out of one's own power

1.3.2.2.3.3.3. Virtues are progressively superior, therefore think about the purpose before the action

*1.3.2.2.3.3.1. Practising generosity to the special field of offering*

This is similar to the explanation we covered in *Precious Garland* by Nagarjuna.

The verse reads:

81. *Whether arising continually through a clear wish  
Or through the antidote itself, in dependence  
On the fields of qualities, benefit and suffering,  
Great virtue is generated.*

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

Engaging in virtue on a continual basis motivated by a clear wish, i.e. a strong aspiration; and an antidote against the opposing side—such as attachment and so forth; in relation to the three supreme fields:

- Field of qualities: The Triple Gem and so forth.
- Field of benefit: One's parents and so forth.
- Field of misery: The destitute, sick, disenfranchised and so forth.

Making offerings to these objects in this manner creates great virtue, thus one should strive in it.

As the commentary explains, accumulating virtue is not to be done sporadically, but rather on a continual basis. There shouldn't be times when one accumulates virtue and other times where one leaves it out. If one wonders when the appropriate time to engage in virtue is, the answer presented here is, at all times, on a continual basis.

Furthermore, engaging in virtue must be accompanied with a clear wish, which is a strong aspiration, and serve as an antidote against the opposing side i.e. the delusions such as attachment and so forth. Thus, the accumulation of virtue has to be accompanied with a strong aspiration,

and ensure that it serves as an antidote to overcome the opposing side. For example, when one engages in practising the virtue of generosity, one needs to ensure that it becomes an antidote for overcoming miserliness, and when practising morality ensure that it serves as an antidote to overcome corrupt ethics and so forth. The emphasis here is that when one accumulates virtue, one needs to ensure that it actually becomes an antidote to overcome an opposing non-virtuous state of mind, specifically the delusions. If you do not apply the practice in this way, you will find that there is not much transformation taking place in your mind. As the great Kadampa master advised: one needs to engage continuously in practising virtue and ensure that it serves as a means to subdue one's mind, by overcoming the delusions in one's mind. So that should be the main purpose of accumulating virtue.

In this explanation three particulars are being pointed out:

- The particular of time or duration for accumulating virtue—which is on a continual basis;
- The particular of an antidote—which is to overcome delusions in one's mind; and
- The particular of relying on the three supreme fields—which are the fields of qualities i.e. the objects of refuge; the fields of benefit i.e. one's parents; and the fields of misery i.e. the destitute, sick, disenfranchised.

One should strive to make offerings to these objects in the manner described, thus accumulating great virtue. You need to also understand that in relation to the three supreme fields the opposite is also true; that if you create negativity in relation to any of these objects then it will be a grave negativity. You need to be mindful when relating to the three supreme fields, so that you protect yourself from creating heavy negativities.

As you have noticed, I regularly emphasise the need to be kind to one's parents, particularly one's aging parents. So, you can see that this presentation is supporting me.

*1.3.2.2.3.3.2. Creating virtue out of one's own power*

This indicates that engaging in virtue should occur from one's own side. In other words, one needs to take the initiative to create virtue oneself and not rely on others to create virtue for you.

The root text and commentary both present the meaning for this heading, which is quite clear and easy to understand. However the emphasis is that we need to take the initiative—to try and put this into practice by being mindful in our daily life.

The verse reads:

82. *Having become proficient and faithful  
I will continuously engage in the actions.  
In all my actions I will not  
Depend on anyone.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Having become proficient in what has to be adopted and what has to be abandoned, and in what one should engage in and what one should not, as well as having generated faith in virtue, I shall now continuously practise virtue.

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I shall not depend on anybody in my actions of virtue in the sense that I will not order others to do them.

In relation to *having to become proficient in what has to be adopted and what has to be abandoned*, one needs to know the clear distinction between what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned. Without a clear understanding, one will not be able to adopt certain necessary qualities and abandon certain detrimental faults. This would be a drawback to our spiritual progress. Although on the one hand one may be putting some effort into adopting virtues, on the other hand one could be failing to discard certain faults detrimental to our progress (e.g. negative behaviours and so forth). If one fails to recognise what the faults are from the very beginning, then it will be hard to take the initiative to overcome them. While adopting positive qualities ensures progress in one's Dharma practice, this can only happen when the opposing faults and negativities within oneself begin to decrease. When, by adopting qualities the faults naturally decrease, then that is a true mark of one's Dharma progress, and a sign that a real transformation is taking place.

Again, a clear distinction between what one should engage in (virtues), and the negativities one should avoid should be clearly understood. This, along with generating faith in virtue, becomes a proper way to engage in the practice of accumulating virtue. Generating faith in virtue specifically means having faith in the infallibility of virtue; that by engaging in virtue positive consequences are definitely experienced. In contrast, if one were to engage in non-virtue, then the infallibility of the consequences of an unwanted result, such as various types of sufferings, also occur. Basically the infallibility of karma is applied here. So, when one has faith and a strong conviction in the infallibility of virtue, then one will develop a natural, keen wish to generate virtue. One will actually be motivated to create virtue, because one has a strong conviction in the positive consequences, so one is inspired to continuously engage in virtue.

The essential points here are twofold: to become proficient, that is to gain a good, clear understanding of what is to be adopted and what is to be abandoned; and on top of that, generating strong faith in the very virtue that one wishes to engage in. When sound faith and conviction are developed, one will develop a strong, keen initiative to continuously practise virtue. The commentary states the resolve one needs to develop: *I shall now continuously practise virtue*. Again this is not a casual approach, but rather taking the personal responsibility and resolving to accumulate virtue at all times. These points are really pertinent guides for our practice. I find these verses very helpful for my mind. When you read these verses and pay attention to their meaning, not just to gain an intellectual understanding, but with the intention to implement them in one's practice, then they will be very helpful for your mind.

The commentary emphasises: *I shall not depend on anybody in my actions of virtue*. This implies that one will not order others to accumulate the virtue for oneself; rather, accumulating virtue is dependent on one's own resolve. This is similar to other sutra teachings where Buddha says that liberation is dependent entirely upon oneself.

That means attaining liberation is not dependent on someone else but entirely dependent on oneself.

1.3.2.2.3.3.3. *Virtues are progressively superior, therefore think about the purpose before the action*

In relation to the six perfections, the later practices are progressively superior than the earlier, which means the later practices are of greater virtue than the earlier ones. However when engaging in the practices, one needs to be mindful to adopt practices of greater purpose in accordance to the time and need to benefit other sentient beings. The verse reads:

83. *The perfections of giving and so forth  
Increase them one after the other.  
Do not abandon the big for the small,  
Mainly think towards the purpose of others.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

The perfections of generosity and so forth up to the perfection of wisdom, are progressively developed and increased.

Do not give up the practices of generosity, morality and so forth that are smaller from the point of view of purpose and virtue, to the generosity and so forth that are bigger. Strive in the bigger.

This shows implicitly that if we cannot practice both together and have to choose, then we should abandon the smaller for the bigger.

Query: How does one posit small and big?

Answer: For example, if in this life, out of the purpose of self and the purpose of other, practising one affects the other to decline, then one should make the purpose of other the main practice.

In relation to the six perfections, Gyaltsab Je states that the practice of morality for example, would be of higher virtue than the practice of generosity. With this explanation, one would create far more virtue practising morality for one day, than practising generosity for many days or weeks.

Those who have done the *nyung nye* practice would have noticed the description of the merit for keeping the eight Mahayana precepts even for one day or 24 hours, is incredibly high.

The commentary explains: *Do not give up the practices of generosity, morality and so forth that are smaller from the point of view of purpose and virtue to the generosity and so forth that are bigger. Strive in the bigger.*

Practising morality in the sequence of the six perfections would generally be considered a greater virtue than generosity. However, when there is a greater purpose for practising generosity to benefit others, then one should not pass up this opportunity in favour of the practice of morality. To understand it in its proper context, if one were to practise morality with a strong self-interest, then if an opportunity arose to practice generosity with total dedication to the benefit for others, then the practice of generosity would be greater than the practice of morality which is contrived or stained with mere personal interest.

The commentary explains that *if we cannot practise both together and have to choose, then we should abandon the smaller for the bigger*. The emphasis is that one should abandon the smaller practice and adopt a bigger practice. The hypothetical query is *How does one posit small and big?*

The answer asks you to consider two choices: engaging in the practice merely for one's own purpose and concern for this life, and engaging in the practice for the purpose of others. If by practising one the other declines because they oppose each other, then one should make the purpose of others the main practice. The emphasis here is that if one engages in practices with the intention to benefit just oneself, such as benefit for this life, compared to a practice where the main focus is for the purpose of other beings, then the practice focusing on other beings is the greater practice. One needs to make the distinction between the two, and adopt the practice which is for the purpose of others. As other teachings have emphasised, when one fully dedicates a practice for the purpose of others, then one's own purpose will be fulfilled naturally.

What is being emphasised here is that one needs to ensure that the practice one does is really for the purpose of others. Otherwise, if it is done merely for one's own interest or short-term goal, it will not ultimately fulfil even one's own purpose. One needs to have a clear understanding to derive the main point here. We can see how skilful the advice is here in making the clear distinction between what is a great practice and what is a small practice. And of course, when there is a choice, we would naturally want to choose something which is of greater benefit.

We need to think about our own practice; we might be in the category of those who are choosing small practices instead of bigger ones. Practices that involve mere self-interest for this life's benefit, and practices where the sole intention is to benefit others, are mutually exclusive, and cannot be practised at the same time. If these two practices were presented to you, which one would you choose? As they cannot be practised together, which one would you choose? If one has a bodhisattva motivation one needs to choose the practice which is for the purpose of others. This is also in the motivation for tantric practices.

### **1.3.3. Training in the morality that accomplishes the welfare of sentient beings**

This subdivision has three subcategories:

1.3.3.1. Diligence in the welfare of others

1.3.3.2. The action of gathering others without incurring a fault

1.3.3.3. Protecting sentient beings' minds and training in the action of not incurring fault

#### **1.3.3.1. DILIGENCE IN THE WELFARE OF OTHERS**

The two first lines of the next verse relate to this heading.

The verse reads:

*84ab. Having understood this, they abide always  
Striving for the welfare of others.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary presents the meaning by beginning with a query:

Query: Bodhisattvas strive to always abide in working for others, on the basis of having understood what needs to be practised and what needs to be abandoned. But since they need to engage into a variety of actions to achieve the welfare of others, do they not receive faults?

This reflects a question raised previously in a Wednesday night teaching which asked whether bodhisattvas incur faults or not. This is exactly the same point.

The query is a reasonable doubt which comes when one witnesses a bodhisattva engage in various different kinds of actions. The question raised a few weeks ago by Vanessa was about the example of when a bodhisattva had to kill someone in order to save the other four hundred and ninety-nine people.

An answer is presented in the next two lines of the verse:

*84cd. Those with compassion have the long view  
and allow them the forbidden*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Answer: The compassionate buddhas also see directly the phenomena hidden very far in the future. Out of this knowledge they permit the seven non-virtuous actions of body and speech, which they prohibited for hearers and self-liberators who work primarily for their own purpose, for bodhisattvas when necessary. As a result, bodhisattvas do not only not incur a fault, but for them it becomes a great accumulation when they engage in these actions.

Within the ten non-virtues, the first seven, i.e. the three of the physical and four of the speech, were completely forbidden for hearers and solitary realisers. Under no circumstances were practitioners of the Lower Vehicle permitted to do these actions. However, bodhisattvas are permitted to do these actions when it is deemed necessary for the benefit of other sentient beings. What will be presented next is a story where, if it were necessary to benefit a greater number of sentient beings, even engaging in an action of killing does not incur negativity, but in fact becomes a means to accumulate large amounts of merit.

As an example the commentary quotes from the *Sutra of Being Proficient in the Great Secret*, which reads:

From the *Sutra of Being Proficient in the Great Secret* it is taught that because the captain killed the evildoer, his time in cyclic existence was reduced by many eons. It is also like it was taught to the Brahmin's son Karma'i Jungwa.

This refers to the bodhisattvas who were permitted the seven of body and speech by those with great compassion, who see far ahead.

This story is from ancient times when merchants had to travel on ships for long distances. The earlier part of the story tells that a ship was carrying 500 traders and merchants with an evil person amongst them, referred to here as an evildoer who had the intention of taking the lives of the rest of the merchants as a way to gain the profits for himself. The captain of the ship, who happened to be a practising bodhisattva, understood the evildoer's intention. So out of great compassion, as a way to protect the evildoer, and out of great compassion for the rest of the merchants whose lives would be taken, the captain of the boat took upon himself the action of taking the life of the evildoer. This protected the evildoer himself from committing a negative act, which would result in him being reborn in the hell realms, as well as saving the lives of the rest of the merchants. It was said that instead of creating negative karma, the Captain's act became a means for him to accumulate a great amount of merit, to

lessen his time in samsara by many aeons. The benefit was to protect the four hundred and ninety-nine merchants from imminent death and protect the evildoer person from incurring negative karma.

One should note that while this is one example of where the seven non-virtues forbidden for practitioners of the Lesser Vehicle whose main practice is for self-liberation are permitted for practitioners of the Great Vehicle, who only have the intention to benefit other sentient beings. So whatever activity they engage in is solely for the benefit of other sentient beings; even acts such as killing—otherwise a great misdeed—are permitted and become a means to accumulate great virtue. However, bodhisattvas with the ability to engage in such negativity only with the intention to benefit other beings with understanding and clairvoyance, would only be high-level bodhisattvas, not lower-level bodhisattvas.

Another example is an account of the Brahmin's son Karma'i Jungwa. In this story the Brahmin's son had adopted the practice of abstaining completely from sexual intercourse. For 12 years he had practised chastity, but there was a young maiden whose life was endangered because of a condition which could be cured only by sexual intercourse. Apparently, with this condition if sexual intercourse was not done the lady would have died. So out of great compassion for this young maiden, he broke his vow of chastity to save her life.

So the example of misdeeds such as killing, forbidden for practitioners of lower vehicles, becomes a means for accumulating great merit when done with the sole intention to benefit other sentient beings. For a lower-vehicle practitioner, sexual activity would be a misdeed, but when engaged in by a bodhisattva with the intention to protect someone from imminent death, it becomes a means to accumulate great merit. These are particular examples from accounts in the past and there are likely other accounts of stealing and lying etc. done solely for the benefit of others, out of compassion.

These accounts are presented in answer to the query as examples of acts actually becoming a means for them to accumulate great amounts of merit, rather than incur negativity.

Gyalsab Je's commentary highlights that:

This refers to the bodhisattvas who were permitted the seven of body and speech by those with great compassion, who see far ahead.

It explains that permission to act on *the seven of body and speech* are only to bodhisattvas who are practising great compassion and who have farsightedness.

One needs to understand committing these acts in the proper context. Non-virtues are permitted to bodhisattvas with the ability to practice extensive benefit for other sentient beings, but beginner bodhisattvas who do not yet have the ability to engage in such extensive benefits for others would not be permitted to do them.

### 1.3.3.2. THE ACTION OF GATHERING OTHERS WITHOUT INCURRING A FAULT

This is divided into two subcategories.

1.3.3.2.1. Gathering with the mundane

1.3.3.2.2. Gathering with the Dharma

#### 1.3.3.2.1. Gathering with the mundane

This in turn is subdivided into three:

1.3.3.2.1.1. The difference between offering food and not offering food

1.3.3.2.1.2. Do not harm the body for small actions

1.3.3.2.1.3. Explaining the time and necessity for offering the body

#### 1.3.3.2.1.1. The difference between offering food and not offering food

The verse reads:

*85. Share with those fallen into the wrong direction,  
With the protectorless and those abiding within austerities.  
Eat only in a measured fashion and  
Offer everything apart from the three robes.*

In response, Gyalsab Je's commentary reads:

Whilst using food, share with those fallen into the wrong direction, i.e. animals and hungry ghosts, with the protectorless sick, and with those that practice pure action and abide in austerities, if they are there as well.

As it is said, *It is appropriate for oneself to measure everything*, oneself should eat just enough according to the correct portion, without incurring faults in relation to food, and with the motivation for eating that is explained in the *Letter to a Friend*.

An ordained bodhisattva should offer everything apart from the three robes or *nam-jar, la-go* and *tang-go*. If one has more of the three robes then one should also offer these, but if one has only one set, then one should not offer one's robes. It becomes an obstacle to the practice of pure action.

The literal translation of *the distinction between when to offer food and not to offer* might relate more to sharing food with those falling into the wrong directions i.e. animals and hungry ghosts etc. In the normal practice of eating, a fully ordained monk separates some of their food, offers it to the objects of refuge, then a portion to the hungry ghost, and a portion to the animals, and dedicates it. In this way one actually divides the food to be consumed with the intention to offer it to others as well.

Having presented how to divide one's food with others such as animals and those who abide in austerities, in relation to oneself, the text quotes *Precious Garland*:

It is appropriate for oneself to measure everything,

The right measure of what one can consume should be likened to prescription medicine: if one takes too much, then rather than curing one's disease it could actually aggravate it and create harm. But if one does not take enough of the medicine, it will not help to cure the disease. Likewise, when consuming food, if one eats too much one can make one's body feel heavy and bring about a feeling of slothfulness and the onset of sleep, thus not being productive for one's practice. Whereas if one eats too little, and the body is not well nourished, it can become weak and one will not be able to engage in it properly.

Gyalsab Je's commentary further explains that:

...oneself should eat just enough according to the correct portion without incurring faults in relation to food,

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*Without incurring faults* means ensuring that one does not incur misdeeds in relation to food, e.g. eating food just for the sake of vanity, of beautifying oneself (e.g. I might look beautiful if I eat this kind of food), or just for the sake of filling oneself up for the pleasure of feeling full with food etc. In accordance with the explanation from the *Letter to a Friend*, one should avoid such motivations when eating and consuming food, and eat the correct portion: not too much, not too little and for the purpose of sustaining one's body to practise the Dharma.

Gyaltshab Je's commentary provides more explanation in relation to knowing the distinction between what is to be given and what is not to be given:

An ordained bodhisattva should offer everything apart from the three robes or *nam-jar*, *da-go* and *tang-go*. [which are particular robes for the fully ordained] If one has more of the three robes then one should also offer these, but if one has only one set, [that means if one has like two or three sets then one could offer the extra set to others] however if one has only one set then one should not offer one's robes. It becomes an obstacle to the practice of pure action.

*It becomes an obstacle to practice pure action* or pure conduct would be in relation to e.g. an ordained monk who has these robes intact. If one gave away everything there would be a fault from a fully ordained monk's perspective, as they should not be separated from one particular robe, even for a day, as being separated from it incurs a fault. But in terms of maintaining oneself e.g. if one is too cold etc. then it would harm one's practice as one would not be able to continue to practise. So it is important to know the distinction between what to give and what portion, how much to give and when not to give. Of course, how to offer the food was also explained clearly in the *Letter to the King* or *Precious Garland* as well by Nagarjuna. So it would be good for you to familiarise yourselves with this explanation, and read other commentaries as well. It is not too obscure and hard to understand, but to get a better understanding it is good to refer to other commentaries as well.

As presented earlier, there were particular ways of offering the food, and the intention held when offering it. These you can also revise. You also need to be mindful of ensuring that you are free from misdeeds in relation to consuming food, because if one is not mindful, the very process of consuming and acquiring food to sustain oneself, one may incur misdeeds. One needs to be mindful of that as well.

We can see how the advice presented here is very practical. In terms of consuming food, how to consume it when sharing with others. When consuming by oneself: how to consume it; knowing the right portion; not having too much or too little as it can harm oneself. This advice is given like a parent would give their child; very detailed advice on how to conduct oneself properly. Here, this advice is given to us by Shantideva.

In summary, the presentation is about how to engage in normal daily activities such as eating and drinking, and use them to serve as a means to accumulate virtue, and not become a cause for non-virtue, and incurring misdeeds. This is the value of the advice that we need to take in.

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

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