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# *Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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As usual we can spend some time in our meditation practice.

*[meditation]*

Now we generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings, and put them into practice well.

## **1.1. Meditating on the patience that tolerates suffering (cont.)**

### **1.1.3. Contemplating how they are not difficult once habituated**

#### **1.1.3.1. EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION**

##### *1.1.3.1.1. It becomes easier with familiarisation*

This section of the text shows how, through becoming familiar with suffering, we are able to endure things that we may not have been able to endure previously. For example, suffering due to relatively minor ailments might be hard to endure initially, but if we familiarise ourselves with them, we will actually be able to tolerate them later on. Likewise, we may initially view harms inflicted upon us as unbearable or intolerable, but through familiarity with them we will come to tolerate them. The verse under this heading is a verse that is often cited to show that one of the characteristics of our mind is that it is possible to train it to manage things that we might previously have been unable to do. This is what *it becomes easier with familiarisation* means.

We really need to contemplate this point in relation to every aspect of our life. For example, even mundane tasks like work, or engaging in any kind of training, require some effort. If we don't develop the mind of being able to bear hardships and difficulties then we might easily give up because we think, "Oh this is too hard". All too often we see people give up their assignments, training and even their studies, saying, "Oh, this is too difficult". Thinking in that way can easily become a habit, leading some to give up as soon as there is some difficulty or hardship.

Developing a courageous mind that willingly accepts difficulties and hardships is part of the patience of willingly accepting hardship, as well as the patience that definitely relies on the Dharma. The patience of willingly tolerating harm is related to the harm that others may inflict upon us, whereas the patience of definitely relying on the Dharma can be applied to a range of different circumstances.

As the definition of patience suggests, a mind that does not become disturbed in the face of adversity or harm is definitely a calm and stable mind that is not prone to

agitation. When the mind is not disturbed then that prevents anger from arising. That is how we need to see patience as being a direct opponent to anger. When the mind is not disturbed we will be able to accomplish whatever we need to accomplish. Conversely, when the mind is disturbed then it hinders whatever one is trying to achieve, and creates many negativities as well. When we really think about what patience really means, its benefits and how it is essential for our wellbeing, then we come to the natural conclusion, "I must definitely develop patience—I cannot afford to be without it".

Just as developing patience is essential for one's own wellbeing and relationships with others, it is also true for all the practices of the six perfections. Each one of the six perfections is essential for both our personal development and as a means of benefitting others. That is why the six perfections are the core practices of the bodhisattvas. As they practise the six perfections, bodhisattvas willingly undergo hardships and difficulties with joy, rather than any sense of suffering. That is how we need to understand the significance of these practices.

The practice of patience also strengthens the capacity of the mind to face hardships and difficulties. Whenever there is an occasion where harm is inflicted, practising patience will further increase the level of our tolerance. So the harm actually becomes an impetus to further develop patience, and make it even stronger. So, once one is committed to practise patience, experiencing harm only helps to increase and further strengthen our patience, rather than decreasing it.

The verse relating to this section of the text reads:

14. *There is nothing that does not become Easier through familiarisation. Therefore, by meditating on small harm One will be able to tolerate great harm.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this oft-quoted verse begins with:

If one meditates on patience, then one will also tolerate suffering. All ways of apprehending arise through familiarisation, and therefore there is no object of the mind that does not become easier through familiarisation.

As the commentary explains, *if one meditates on patience then one will also tolerate suffering*. This is very succinctly pointing out that if one practises patience, then that will naturally enable one to also tolerate suffering. Conversely, one is unable to tolerate any kind of suffering when one lacks patience. These are very important points because as ordinary beings we are bound to experience some form of suffering or hardship at different times in our life. So if we don't develop a mind of being patient and tolerating suffering our minds will constantly be in a disturbed and agitated state. Then there will be no room in our minds to actually practise anything in depth. Indeed it is almost impossible to accomplish anything of significance when our mind is constantly in an agitated and disturbed state.

When we think about this we will come to the conclusion that patience is essential, and that we cannot function effectively without it. As the heading itself suggests, it is not beyond our capacity to practise patience because it is a matter of familiarising our mind with accepting and

tolerating suffering and harm. As we train our mind in this way it becomes possible for us to tolerate even greater hardship and suffering, because the nature of the mind is such that there is nothing that cannot be developed through familiarisation.

The commentary explains that *if one meditates on patience then one will be able to tolerate suffering*, because *all ways of apprehending arise through familiarisation*. The very basis of the mind is that whatever is apprehended by the mind is based on familiarity with it. So whatever the mind apprehends now is possible due to that familiarisation. For that reason, *there is no object of the mind that does not become easier through familiarisation*. The very basis, and hence potential of the mind is that it knows and apprehends things through familiarisation. This implies that, through familiarisation with an object, it becomes easier and easier for the mind to apprehend that object. This point supports the earlier reasons.

The main point can be summarised in this way: If one were to ask whether an ordinary mind has faults, then of course the answer is that yes, an ordinary mind does have various faults. But it also carries the inborn ability to familiarise itself with good qualities, and is thus able to develop those good qualities. In other words, while the mind possesses many faults, it also possesses the ability to develop qualities, and thus carries the ability to remove those faults.

These are essential points. We often feel despondent, thinking, "Oh, I am riddled with faults, and therefore I cannot achieve anything; I am good for nothing". All too often we just focus on our faults and feel despondent and discouraged. We give up things easily and don't really consider going further to improve ourselves. When we experience these feelings, we need to remind ourselves, "Yes, we might have faults as ordinary beings. But the very nature of the mind is that it naturally carries the potential to develop qualities, and that is done through familiarisation".

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary continues:

For this reason, having meditated on tolerating small harms such as hot or cold, or harsh speech by others and so forth, know that one can also be patient with great harms such as the fires of the hell realms.

The commentary indicates that because one can learn to tolerate *small harms such as hot and cold, or harsh speech by others and so forth*, one is therefore able to train one's mind to tolerate greater sufferings. Before we can even attempt to think of tolerating greater suffering, we need to train our mind in being able to tolerate small suffering. Compared to the sufferings of hell realms, the suffering of feeling hot and cold, or being the recipient of harsh speech—which, as mere words, do not physically harm us—is really quite insignificant. However if we don't train our mind to tolerate minor suffering such as feeling a bit hot or cold, and hearing harsh words, then the mind becomes habituated with not being able to tolerate any kind of suffering, no matter how small. Whereas if we can train our mind to tolerate natural suffering like being a bit hot, or a bit cold, or occasionally hearing some unpleasant words, then it is possible to be patient with greater harms, specifically the sufferings of fire in hell realms.

This explanation is, of course, in the context of the great deeds of bodhisattvas. There are many accounts of bodhisattvas willingly accepting great sufferings - even going to the hell realms - in order to benefit sentient beings. This shows the great courage of the bodhisattvas and the extent to which they have developed their tolerance and patience in order to benefit sentient beings. They initially developed that level of patience and tolerance through familiarisation with smaller sufferings. So the point here is that if we familiarise ourselves with tolerating small harms such as heat and cold and harsh words and so forth, then it is possible for us to slowly, slowly be able to tolerate greater harms.

The main point is that developing the practice of patience is a matter of going through stages from being able to tolerate and endure small sufferings, and then slowly, slowly increasing the level of our tolerance and patience so that we are able to endure great sufferings. As mentioned here, if it is possible for bodhisattvas to endure the sufferings of the hell realms, then it is possible for us as well.

As a way to back this up, the commentary quotes from the sutra called the *Sutra of the Meeting of Father and Son*. This sutra is an account of the Buddha's life, and *meeting the father* is a symbolic expression that indicates reaching enlightenment. The quote reads:

The Bhagavan possesses the concentration called *All Phenomena Become Happiness*. Whoever attains this concentration will experience all objects of bodhisattvas only as happiness and will not experience suffering ... should they receive the harm of the hell beings they will still abide in the recognition of happiness.

The sutra is quite clear, so we don't need to explain it much more. The point is that *should they receive the harm of the hell realms, bodhisattvas will still abide in happiness*. As the sutra clearly states, due to practising patience, bodhisattvas are not troubled when they encounter suffering. Rather than experiencing suffering and unhappiness, they experience joy and happiness.

#### 1.1.3.1.2. *Establishing this with an example*

This section presents an example of how patience becomes easier through familiarisation.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins with a hypothetical qualm.

Qualm: If we meditate on small sufferings, the patience will not have power.

This hypothetical qualm is to remove any doubt that the patience developed through meditating on small sufferings will not have much power. In response to that, the next verse is presented.

15. *Snakes and insects,  
The feelings of hunger and thirst,  
Rashes and so forth,  
Who has not seen it with these meaningless  
sufferings?*

The commentary goes on to say:

Answer: Why do you not see that if one meditates on patience for small and absolutely meaningless sufferings, such as the feelings of hunger and thirst, skin diseases, rashes and the like, that they then

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become tolerable, and if one does not meditate, they become difficult to bear. This is directly observable and it is therefore appropriate to meditate on patience.

This explanation is quite clear. The main point is *why would you not see that if one meditates on patience for small and absolutely meaningless sufferings, that they will become tolerable*. The commentary says that being hungry or thirsty or having rashes and the like are quite small inconveniences. They become tolerable if one practises patience, and they become difficult to bear if one does not practise patience. We can see how true this statement is from our own experience. If, when we are confronted with being hungry or a bit too hot, we allow our mind to become obsessed by that, and see that as a problem, then we start to become more and more uncomfortable. Whereas the moment we accept the discomfort and think, "Oh well, it's OK, I will tolerate it, and just deal with it", then it doesn't appear to be a big problem anymore. This reminds me that when we first went to India there were some who complained about the heat all the time. Other monks would say, "If you keep complaining about the heat, it will only get worse. Just forget about it. It is there anyway and you won't make it go away by complaining about it. Better to just accept it". When you accept something you don't think too much about it, and it doesn't bother you so much.

The main point is that if we develop a mind of accepting everyday difficulties and problems, and practise patience with them, then they become tolerable and not so much of a problem. Whereas if we don't practise the patience of tolerating them, then they always appear as problems, and the discomfort will become greater and greater. Think about today, which was a bit warm. If we have allowed our mind to accept it, then it will actually be quite pleasant. There are some who actually like the heat and don't see it as a problem. If we have accepted a warm day today and another warm day comes up tomorrow, then it will not be too difficult to bear, because you have already accepted it today. Whereas if you haven't accepted it today, and tomorrow is also a hot day, it will seem to be an even greater problem. We can definitely understand this from our own experience.

If we train our mind to accept a bit of heat, then, through that familiarisation, we will be able to tolerate heat, and it will not be a hindrance as we carry on with our lives. We will be able to do whatever we need to do, because we have trained our mind to accept it. Likewise, if we accept the cold then, through that familiarity, we will not be hindered when it is continuously cold. We will be able to carry on doing whatever we need to do. When we train our mind to accept things, then external conditions will not be a hindrance or an obstruction to our activities.

This reminds me of one time when I went to New Zealand. When I come out of the plane, the hostesses seemed very concerned that one of my arms was bare, but that's normal for me. It comes back to the practice of patience, particularly the patience of willingly accepting hardship. When one willingly accepts hardship, then through familiarity with accepting that hardship, it becomes easier to tolerate, and we will not experience any

mental suffering. So we need to reflect the great benefit of tolerating suffering.

### 1.3.1.3. THE OBJECT TO TOLERATE

This basically refers to the object of patience that is to be tolerated, and the relevant verse is:

16. *I should not be impatient with  
Heat, cold, rain, wind and so forth,  
Sickness, bondage and beatings,  
If I do so the harm will increase.*

Here Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verse as:

One should not be impatient with heat or cold, rain and wind, sickness, being bound by ropes or being beaten with a stick and so forth, because if one is impatient with small harms, this will only further increase the harm, as patience decreases.

We often experience heat, cold, rain, and wind, and there are definitely occasions where we feel too hot or too cold, and times when there is torrential rain or strong winds. And, of course, to different degrees we all have experienced some ailments and felt physical discomfort. Of course most of us would not have experienced being bound by a rope or beaten, but that does happen to others. These are some examples of the sufferings that occur on a regular basis.

It is because they occur so regularly that we should be patient with these relatively small discomforts. If we are not patient with them then our suffering will only increase. It won't be because the intensity of the actual harm increases, but because our mind does not accept it, and does not apply any patience or tolerance to the suffering. Then the suffering actually increases, by virtue of the sheer fact that our patience itself decreases. As we become less patient with the suffering, our discomfort seems to increase in our mind. Indeed, if we don't begin to practise patience with the small harms that we encounter regularly, then what else are we planning to be patient with? How else are we going to practise patience if we can't be patient with the regular suffering that we experience in our daily lives? We need to begin to develop a mind of tolerance and patience towards the regular discomforts we experience, which will then prevent our mind from becoming impatient with greater sufferings later on.

Of course there are many stories of how, through familiarity, things which may otherwise have been completely intolerable, are tolerated and accepted.

Recently I heard of a monk from the same province in Tibet that I come from, who was recently imprisoned because he had recited the *Prayer for the Long Life of the Dalai Lama*. While in prison he started to recite it even more, for which he earned more beatings. But the more they beat him the louder he shouted the long life prayer. It came to the point where the guards themselves were nonplussed. Rather than struggling and screaming, and begging the guards to stop the beatings, he increased the volume of his recitation of the verses of the prayer. The guards were amazed and came to a point where they didn't know what to do with him!

Willingly tolerating hardship and suffering is indispensable to our practice and wellbeing. If we don't tolerate them, it is as if the hardships and sufferings

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become our master and we, like slaves, are dominated by them. Once we willingly accept the hardships and difficulties, then we become the master rather than the slave. These are important points for us to consider.

#### 1.3.1.4. AN EXAMPLE OF HOW, THROUGH FAMILIARITY, THE STRENGTH OF PATIENCE INCREASES

The relevant lines of verse are:

17. *For some, seeing their own blood,  
Will increase their steadfastness and courage.  
Some, when seeing the blood of others,  
Faint and become unconscious.*

18ab. *This comes about due to natural  
Firmness of the mind and fear.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads

For some brave person, seeing their own blood upon being injured by a weapon will only increase their steadfastness and courage. Some cowards will faint and become unconscious even when they see the blood of someone else. This does not come about through the force of the external object, whether it is large or small, nor does it come about due to a soft or hard body. It comes about solely through the mind being either firm or timid.

Therefore, one should strive in meditating on the patience that tolerates suffering.

*Some brave people, even seeing their own blood upon being injured by a weapon will only increase their steadfastness and courage.* When, out of bravery, people go into combat and see blood, then that further intensifies their eagerness to overcome their foe. Rather than becoming discouraged, seeing blood actually gives them even more courage. There are also some cowards who, let alone not being able to tolerate the sight of their own blood, become despondent and lose courage and actually faint when they see the blood of others.

You might also have come across people who faint when they see blood, because they have a mind that is not able to tolerate that. As explained in the commentary, this is not dependent on external conditions and objects. For some, blood makes their mind even more courageous, while others become discouraged, and faint. The difference is solely in the mind that interprets the situation. *Therefore*, as the commentary explains, *one should strive in meditating on the patience that tolerates suffering.* As the illustrations in the verse and commentary indicate, the benefit of tolerating suffering is that it makes the mind much more courageous.

As illustrated in the commentary, bravery is very much related to the intensity of the mind wishing to go into combat. This reminds me of an account that was related to me by someone from my home town. When the Red Guards came in, one man, who was known for his bravery, showed great courage. Using his simple gun he tried to fight the Chinese. At one point he was shot and fatally wounded, but he didn't drop dead right away. He kept on trying, unsuccessfully, to stand up and face the Chinese. Those around him saw his condition, and knew that he couldn't do anything, but they could also see his determination to try to overcome the person who shot him. After a while they were able to tell him that the

person who shot him had been killed. Only then did the wounded man relax and pass on.

This story really shows the power of the mind. With intense determination it can even prevent immediate death and hold on to life. However, the moment someone lets go of such a mind then they pass on.

Then there is the situation of extreme fear. I heard another account of someone who was normally quite a skilled horseman, but in the face of the enemy coming, was so afraid that he was not even able to get onto his horse properly. In his haste, rather than putting his foot in the stirrup, he was trying to mount his horse by putting his knee into the stirrup! So, being really fearful can be a real disadvantage!

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

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