

# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྡོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བལྟགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual, let us spend some time in meditation.

[meditation]

As we have just attempted in our short meditation, it is definitely highly worthwhile to familiarise yourself with the practice of *tong len*, i.e. giving and taking.

This should not be restricted just to this short session of meditation but is something you need to train yourself in in your everyday life, at every occasion and in any circumstance you find yourself in. In particular, this relates to any happiness you may experience in your daily activities e.g. the joys of eating and drinking etc. As soon as you experience these normal enjoyments, remind yourself to give that joy and happiness to other sentient beings. Then, whenever you encounter some difficulties or hardships, in whatever form, the moment you feel discomfort at any level, immediately try and use that as a way of taking the suffering of other sentient beings upon yourself. Remind yourself: "Since I'm experiencing this hardship now, may it become a means to take the suffering of other sentient beings upon myself." When you train yourself in this way you become more familiar with the actual practice of *tong len*. Then due to that regular familiarity, your meditation practice will become more profound.

The practical benefit you get from this practice is that it helps to reduce the negativity of generating attachment and anger when facing everyday life situations. When you experience joys and pleasures, if you are not mindful, these can cause increased attachment. But if you give that joy and happiness away to other sentient beings, there will be less attachment involved, which will reduce attachment to the pleasures and joys regularly experienced. Likewise, when you experience difficulties, willingly taking on the suffering of other sentient beings prevents anger from arising in your mind. In this way, *tong len* is a highly significant practice.

In this way we can see and relate to the effect of this practice outside of the formal meditation session. It would be a little strange if the practice is restricted to a few minutes of sitting in some formal meditation. If that were the case, then when you come out of the meditation, it may appear that the practice is not relevant and unnecessary. But that shouldn't be the case—that is the complete opposite of the significance of that practice. Whatever practice you attempt to do in a formal sitting, you need to ensure that the effects of it are carried through to your everyday lives, and then the real benefits of the practice will be felt. You will then have a constant 'guide' with you, reminding you of what is appropriate to engage in, and what is inappropriate and to be avoided.

Now you may set your motivation for receiving the teachings. As usual, generate the motivation along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in the teaching and put it into practice well.

## 1.1. Meditating on the patience that tolerates suffering

### 1.1.3. Contemplating how they are not different once habituated (cont.)

#### 1.1.3.2. SUMMARY

The verse reads:

18cd. *Therefore one should disregard harms  
And not be influenced by sufferings.*

19ab. *The skilled, although receiving sufferings,  
Remain with the clarity of their mind  
unpolluted.*

The commentary then reads:

Therefore one should make one's mind stable, disregard any harm received and not be influenced by the suffering. Those who are skilled in meditating on the Mahayana path, although receiving sufferings, through meditating on patience remain with their mind clear and not polluted by anger.

Based on the reasons presented earlier, relating to the need to tolerate the sufferings etc. one should make one's mind stable or firm. 'Firm' in this context means not allowing the mind to become agitated or troubled, particularly in the face of harm or suffering that one may experience.

In *disregard any harm received and not be influenced by the suffering*, 'disregarding harm' means that while one may experience the difficulties of the harm, do not allow this to disturb one's mind and become influenced by the sufferings one experiences. What is particularly highlighted here is the way one needs to be able to willingly accept and tolerate the sufferings, which is the real mark of practising patience. As explained further on, those *who are skilled in meditating on the Mahayana path, although receiving sufferings, through meditating on patience remain with their mind clear and not polluted by anger*. This sentence explains that those who earnestly follow the Mahayana path are the ones who voluntarily accept the sufferings. Those *who are skilled* particularly refers to the bodhisattvas who are engaging in the Mahayana path. And while they experience suffering, by meditating on patience their minds remain clear and unpolluted by the faults of anger.

In summary, what is being presented here is that if one engages in the practice of willingly accepting suffering, then the mind will not be affected and become unhappy. Then, if the mind is not unhappy, there is no room for the pollution of anger to take effect. This is how one protects one's mind from the pollution of anger. In this way (with a clear state of mind) one's mind is undisturbed and protected from the negativity of anger. We need to understand that these are highly profound levels of practice, see their significance, and incorporate this approach into our lives now. If you relate to these passages and think, 'Oh it does make sense!', but then regularly leave it aside, you will never benefit from it. Whereas if you implement it into your daily life, you will see the real benefit and significance. These verses are actually speaking to us personally—they are a personal instruction. This is how we need to derive the benefit.

### 1.1.4. The benefits of striving to abandon afflictions

The relevant verses here are the second two lines of the previous verse:

19cd. *One wages war with the afflictions  
And while waging war there is much harm.*

20. *Disregard all sufferings  
And destroy the enemies of anger and so forth.  
They who win thus are heroes,  
The rest kill corpses.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary clearly presents the meaning of these verses:

The objects of abandonment, such as the affliction of anger, and their antidotes are at war, and during the time of waging war many sufferings arise. If in worldly terms someone who disregards the harm inflicted by weapons and kills the enemy is called a hero, then someone who disregards all physical and mental sufferings, destroys the enemy of anger and conquers the afflictions, should be definitely called a hero. The rest kill the ones who die anyway by themselves, which is just like killing corpses. They should not be called heroes.

As the commentary explains, *the objects of abandonment, such as the affliction of anger, and their antidotes are at war*. Using some examples, the antidote for attachment would be meditating on the imperfections of the objects of attachment. Therefore within one's mind, meditating on the imperfections of the object would be like a war (or battle) between the antidote and the affliction. Likewise, a mind meditating on the various categories of phenomena, and ultimately emptiness, would be at war with ignorance.

It is useful to use the analogy of an external battle to illustrate the internal battle of the antidotes overcoming the afflictions. Just as a lot of suffering (wounds and even death) is experienced with external wars, internal conflict also brings difficulties and hardships. What is being presented here is that it is worthwhile to endure those sufferings and difficulties when combating the inner enemies of the afflictions.

A further analogy given here is that *in worldly terms someone who disregards the harm inflicted by weapons and kills the enemy is called a hero*. This illustrates that if someone goes to war and vanquishes the enemy, they will be honoured as a hero upon their return, as they have willingly endured pain and suffering during the war. We can see for ourselves that elderly war veterans are proud to wear their medals! Using my own experience, I know that even when there is some suffering, it is easily disregarded during the time of conflict or fighting. When I was young and got into fights with another young monk, even when I had wounds on my head and was bleeding, I was still able to go forward and fight with him. So I can definitely say that it is true that one is able to disregard wounds and pain when fiercely attempting to overcome the enemy.

You need to derive an understanding of how this illustration fits the meaning of what is being explained. When ordinary beings go to war to overcome an enemy, there is a lot of hardship and harm inflicted upon them, but this is endured because of the willingness to do so. If one does not willingly accept the harms, one cannot go forth and overcome the enemy (and later be renowned as a hero). Being known as a hero is due to having endured the hardships and harms inflicted during combat. So it is not in spite of, but despite of the harms that one is later renowned as a hero. If it is the case that one who disregards the harm inflicted by weapons and kills the enemy should definitely be called a hero, then someone *who disregards all physical and mental sufferings, destroys the enemy of anger and conquers the afflictions, should definitely be called a hero*.

What is being explained here is that when in combat with the inner enemies i.e. the afflictions, applying antidotes such as meditating on imperfections to overcome attachment, and meditating on compassion to overcome anger, and meditating on emptiness to overcome ignorance, all require

repeated meditation, again and again. It is not something that is quick and easy to apply. One cannot meditate once on the imperfections of attachment, and then attachment is suddenly overcome! In fact, sometimes the more we try to overcome attachment, the stronger it seems to become, and the more difficult it is to deal with.

In a worldly sense, someone can destroy the enemy and return from combat as a hero. The commentary states that this is similar to *killing corpses* as the external enemies will die naturally anyway, even without being killed. However inner afflictions are the complete opposite. If you leave inner afflictions and don't do anything about overcoming them, they will only become stronger and stronger. For example, if you don't apply antidotes to overcome attachment, and allow it to remain in your mind, indulging it, it only becomes stronger, even to the point of becoming seemingly impossible to overcome. This is also true for anger, ignorance and all other afflictions. So, unlike the external enemies, the inner enemies of the afflictions will only become stronger.

If ordinary beings who destroy external enemies are regarded as heroes, then someone engaged in the combat of overcoming the inner enemy of the afflictions should definitely be worthy of being called a real hero, as it is much more difficult to overcome the inner enemies. The commentary concludes by saying those who destroy their external foes *should not be called heroes*.

To reiterate the main point: having recognised the inner afflictions as the real enemies that destroy one's happiness and peace, one must destroy the afflictions by engaging in combat, which means applying the antidotes. Without this the afflictions cannot be naturally overcome. In addressing the afflictions one will be faced with hardships, but the hardships are worthwhile, because one has applied the antidotes, and so will definitely be able to overcome them. Once overcome, one will be a hero in the true sense, and worthy of veneration.

#### **1.1.5. Extensive explanation of the benefits of suffering**

The literal translation 'the benefits of suffering' may seem awkward so it can be understood as 'the benefits of seeing the *faults* of the suffering.'

21. *Further, the qualities of suffering are:  
Through despondence it destroys pride,  
It generates compassion for those circling in  
samsara,  
Fearing negativities and joy for virtue.*

Four benefits which are defined. The commentary reads:

Further, meditating on suffering is a great summary of the key points of practice. As the benefits of contemplating the shortcomings of sufferings are:

Seeing that one is controlled by suffering one becomes disheartened, which destroys the haughtiness of pride and arrogance.

Seeing that others are under the control of suffering one generates the compassion that thinks: How wonderful it would be if sentient beings were free from suffering.

Seeing that the suffering is the result of non-virtue and since one does not want suffering, one refrains from negativity.

Since one does not wish suffering and desires happiness, and seeing happiness to be the result of virtue one generates joy in virtue.

As Gyaltsab Je mentions in the opening line, *Further meditating on suffering is a great summary of the key points of practice*. Earlier I related that meditating, thinking, contemplating on the sufferings, really embracing them and seeing their benefits as a way to overcome them, is actually the main point of the practice. It really is a highly significant practice.

Then Gyaltsab Je elaborates on benefits of contemplating the shortcomings of sufferings.

As one experiences the sufferings one will be able to reflect upon the reality that one is still under their control and not completely free. Because of this one *becomes disheartened* and experiences a little sadness due to the suffering, and by being confronted with the fact that one is still controlled by the sufferings. That in itself helps to destroy any sense of *haughtiness* or sense that everything is fine for oneself; also pride and arrogance can be overcome.

*Seeing others suffering* refers to other ordinary beings who are still under the control of suffering. So seeing those in a pitiful state, one generates compassion thinking, "How wonderful it would be if they were free from suffering."

Understanding *suffering as the result of non-virtue*, and seeing that *one does not want suffering*, one will refrain from non-virtue. This, again, is a highly significant point in relation to our own practice. When one experiences suffering, one should immediately try and see that, "the suffering I am experiencing now is none other than the results of the non-virtue that I have created in the past." Since one does not wish for any kind of suffering, seeing it as a result of one's non-virtue can become an impetus to refrain from creating more negativity. In this way, experiencing suffering can help to prevent one from creating negativities such as killing and stealing etc. Thus, one refrains from the ten non-virtuous deeds.

The significant point here is that for those of us who already have a conviction in karma—this will not really make much sense if one doesn't already believe in karma—one can immediately relate to the unpleasant experience of suffering as being the results of non-virtue. One can take the suffering itself as caution not to create further non-virtues, shunning negativity and non-virtue, because one does not wish to prolong the unpleasant experience of suffering in the future. This then becomes the impetus. Since one does not wish for suffering, but desires happiness, and seeing happiness as the result of virtue, one will aim to generate virtue. The commentary specifically mentions how all are equal in wanting happiness and not wanting any kind of suffering: *since one does not wish suffering and desires happiness, and seeing that happiness then is to be the result of virtue one generates joy or enthusiasm in creating virtue*. So from the presentation here we can incorporate an understanding of karma as well as refuge. By contemplating this one has a way to overcome the sufferings.

These few lines really carry great depth in meaning and are an impetus for practice. The words *one does not wish suffering and desires happiness* are simple words. When we contemplate them and incorporate them into a broad understanding of the teachings, then because one does not wish for suffering, one thinks "I need to avoid non-virtues and stop creating negativity", and because one desires happiness one thinks "I must create virtue" and so adopt virtues to create positive karma. Take the line *one does not wish for suffering and desired happiness* as an impetus for your own personal practice. Shun non-virtue and adopt virtue. It also becomes a strong motivator to generate compassion for others. When one sees

others experiencing suffering and deprived of happiness, this becomes a reason to generate strong compassion for them.

Thus one reflects, "just as I do not wish for any suffering and wish for every kind of happiness, it is exactly the same for others as well". When others are experiencing great suffering, one relates to that as being really unfortunate, and wishes that they experience happiness. When others are deprived of happiness, wishing them happiness becomes a strong motivator. So begin with yourself, relating to your personal experience, and then you can relate that to others. We can all immediately relate to the truth of these factors. Because of the great points presented in these few lines of verse Gyaltsab Je mentions they are *a great summary of the key points of the practice*.

As mentioned in recent sessions, there are many accounts of practitioners who, by having contemplated on suffering, and by experiencing it, have accumulated great amounts of merit and engaged in great practices of purification to achieve great goals. However there are no accounts of practitioners who have achieved these goals, or even engaged in these practices, by experiencing pleasures. When considering the benefits of contemplating sufferings, taken in the context of the entire path, it is definitely the case that practitioners of all three scopes—small, medium and great—experience significant results through not wanting to experience suffering due to seeing its disadvantages and faults. Therefore contemplating the faults of samsara is what leads you to liberation. Conversely, if one seeks the pleasures of samsara, then this is what keeps one in samsara, rather than being freed from it. If one voluntarily and intentionally seeks the pleasures of samsara, there is no way that one will be free from it. How can one possibly achieve liberation if one intentionally seeks the means to remain in samsara?

This is how we need to think in a broader sense: contemplating the sufferings is a highly significant impetus for the practices. If one can see that this is a way to ultimately become free from suffering, one can willingly take it on as a practice. Sometimes there are comments about people who feel a bit overwhelmed hearing about suffering again and again, who say "There is too much focus on suffering. I don't want to hear about suffering." This occurs when one does not see the benefits, or cannot relate to the purpose and real reason for meditating on suffering. While it may seem that hearing about suffering is unpleasant, when one thoroughly contemplates the disadvantages of suffering, such as remaining in samsara to experience birth, sickness, ageing and death, then one contemplates reality. That becomes the impetus to really generate a strong wish to be free from samsara, and then suffering has served its purpose. So if one does not want to think about the sufferings of samsara, and only seeks the pleasures of samsara, then the wish to be free from it will never arise in one's mind. If we don't see the benefits of being free from samsara then why do people long to be free? And why would we want to develop an aspiration for liberation?

This is how we need to understand the significance of meditating on the various types of suffering in samsara, as presented in the teachings in great detail. At the moment we may not immediately be able to relate to the various types of sufferings in different realms. But if we take the initiative to meditate on them, imagining we are experiencing those sufferings, then, through familiarity we can gain a real sense of what the sufferings would be like, even though we are not experiencing them now. One can imagine what it would be

like, how unbearable it would be, if one were to actually experience such suffering. When one reaches that level in one's meditation it has become a personal experience. In time, a strong longing to be free from such suffering, and to be free from samsara, will definitely arise. One does not just feel the conviction to be free from the suffering of samsara in theory.

While it is true that without experience, it is hard for us to immediately relate to the sufferings, with familiarity we can gain that experience. This reminds me of a remark made by a lama some time ago. He was an ordained monk and a good student for many years, but later disrobed. Then he led a normal life, had a relationship, got engaged and went through the normal ups and downs of life. Later on, he related to some of his students, "Now I can understand what your suffering is all about". So he was able to relate the sufferings of relationships and so forth through his own personal experience.

Another account that I have mentioned previously is about a German lady who received teachings from Geshe Ngawang Dhargey when he was at Atisha Centre. She related to me that it was very meaningful, and that she got a lot out of teaching, but she confessed, "He talked a lot about suffering, and I am not too sure about all of that, but nevertheless, the teachings were very meaningful." She wasn't refuting the validity of those sufferings, but said "I am not too sure about that". Then, a couple of years later, when I met her again, she said, "Now I can definitely relate to the sufferings and I totally understand the significance of them. That is exactly true." Just as Geshe Ngawang Dhargey had related, she found it to be true for herself. This shows that when we have some experience or a deeper understanding, then we will gain a real conviction.

The significance of contemplating on the various types of sufferings, particularly thinking of death and impermanence, is that with a certain amount of familiarity it will become an integral part of one's practice. Furthermore, one will be able to maintain a constant impetus to be consistent with one's practice. In particular, meditating on the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of the time of death, one reaches the point where one recognises the truth in this. When one has a personal experience of it, rather than it just being a theory, it generates a conviction in one's mind and one will always be mindful of what one is doing—whether eating, walking or sitting. Whatever we may be engaged with, one will always try to incorporate that activity into one's practice, knowing that death can happen at any time, and that one should not waste time with meaningless activities. To that extent, the practice becomes authentic and one's purpose becomes that of a real practitioner. Without this sort of personal experience and conviction, it is very hard to claim to be a true practitioner. It is hard to regularly implement the practice in one's daily life, so we need to strive to generate some conviction in whatever practice it may be. Even if it is only a few points, to try to make an attempt to generate that conviction, whatever the practice may be.

Even though it might seem as though I am side-tracking from the actual topic, these are really important points for your practice, particularly in relation to recalling death and impermanence, which is really essential for one's practice to become more pure. Without familiarity with meditating on death and impermanence, cherishing this life and grasping at it will arise very easily. Then, whatever practice we do while clinging to this life will be mostly a worldly dharma.

Even if we meditated, the practice would only be a worldly concern rather than a real practice.

## **1.2. Meditating on the patience that definitely relies on the Dharma**

This is subdivided into two:

1.2.1. Extensive

1.2.2. Summary

Maybe we can cover this in our next session. So you can prepare yourselves by familiarising yourselves with the commentary, and also refer to the Lam Rim teachings.

Also it might be a little bit hard to read it all, and I don't know if you have access to it, but the *Compendium of Practices* by Shantideva himself is also a very good text to study. The chapter on patience also has a lot of information, and there are a lot of quotations from the sutras as a way to show the source of these teachings.

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

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