
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

བྱང་ལྷན་སེམས་དཔའི་སྣོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

2 December 2014

As usual let us spend some time in our meditation practice.

[Meditation]

We can now generate the 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 teaching, and put it into practice well.

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

1.2.2. Summary (cont.)

The second verse of the summary reads:

34. *In case they acted independently,
Since nobody desires suffering,
None of all the embodied beings,
Would receive any suffering.*

Some other commentaries place this verse under the next heading, *Meditating on the Patience That Does Not Think Anything of Harm*. This commentary relates it to the summary of the section, *Meditating on the Patience That Definitely Relies Upon the Dharma*.

Gyalsab Je's commentary on the verse explains:

If the result would be independently created out of their own wish, without the power of other conditions then, since not one sentient being desires suffering, none of all the embodied beings should have any suffering. Since we see that they receive suffering, and they do not have freedom, it is unsuitable to be angry at them. The mental afflictions are behind them.

What is being emphasised here is that results are not independently created. If suffering were to be created independently out of one's own wish or accord, then, since no beings would ever want to experience any suffering, they would not voluntarily or independently create that suffering for themselves.

If suffering were to be generated independently then, since no being would want to experience suffering, suffering would not be generated. However we all know that beings do experience suffering and that they do not have any control over that suffering. Thus *it is unsuitable to be angry with them* for their reaction to that suffering. *The mental afflictions are behind them* indicates that the cause of their suffering is the mental afflictions, and that is what has to be targeted, not the beings themselves.

1.3. Meditating on the patience that does not think anything of harm

This is subdivided into three:

1.3.1. Bringing to mind the method of compassion

1.3.2. Stopping the cause of anger

1.3.3. Considering it one's own fault if something undesired is received

1.3.1. Bringing to mind the method of compassion

This has three further sub-divisions:

1.3.1.1. Some harm themselves out of ignorance

1.3.1.2. If they commit suicide due to ignorance, it is no great surprise that they harm others

1.3.1.3. It is suitable to be compassionate with that person

1.3.1.1. SOME HARM THEMSELVES OUT OF IGNORANCE

Out of ignorance, some sentient beings actually harm themselves. Thinking about that should be a cause to generate compassion for them.

If we experience harm from others, then we need to remember that the harm is done out of ignorance. In fact, out of ignorance others cause harm to themselves. So if they are capable of harming themselves out of ignorance, then there is no question that they would harm others. Thinking about this factor gives reason not to react out of anger when others cause one harm.

The first verse under this heading is:

35. *The reckless harm themselves
With thorns and so forth.
In order to attain women and so forth.
They become obsessed and starve themselves
and so forth.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary reads:

These people that harm others through the power of the afflictions and a lack of conscientiousness also harm themselves. To attain liberation they roll on thorns, or jump from great heights. Some become obsessed with attaining wealth and women, and out of anger starve themselves and so forth.

As clearly explained in the commentary, *those who harm others through the power of the afflictions and a lack of conscientiousness, also harm themselves*. Thus, due to a lack of conscientiousness and the influence of the afflictions some people not only harm others, but they also harm themselves.

Furthermore, with their intention to be free from suffering, gain happiness and attain liberation, they are misled about the appropriate methods to reach liberation. They engage in actions such as walking on thorns, or jumping from a high cliff, and harm themselves, under the illusion that they are creating the cause of happiness, and freedom from suffering.

Others *become obsessed with attaining wealth and women and out of anger starve themselves and so forth*. We have all seen how some people become enraged, and even starve themselves to attain wealth, or for the sake of obtaining women and so forth. This is the extent of the harm that people are capable of inflicting upon themselves, due to the afflictions and a lack of conscientiousness.

What we can learn from this on a personal level is how incredibly fortunate we are in having obtained unmistakable methods for attaining liberation. There are so many who, in their quest for liberation, are presented with and follow incorrect or erroneous methods. This presentation of how some people harm themselves due to the afflictions, and an incorrect understanding, indirectly

shows us how extremely fortunate we are to have been presented with unmistakable methods. Thus we need to really cherish these unmistakable methods, acknowledge them and put them into practice.

The next verse under this heading is:

36. *Some are obstructed and jump from heights,
Eat poison and other unbecoming things;
With unmeritorious actions
They harm themselves.*

These unthinkable things actually do happen—we see so much harm arising from drastic actions done out of ignorance. So we really need to be cautious and wary of the afflictions.

As Gyaltsab Je states in his commentary:

Some are obstructed by the afflictions and jump from great heights, eat poison and other disagreeable things. Through non-meritorious negative actions that are the cause for the lower realms they harm themselves in this and in future lives. How can it be appropriate to be angry when one is harmed by others?

Here, *obstruction* indicates an obstruction to one's life. Due to being weighed down by great suffering, and a longing to be free from that suffering, there are those who, out of ignorance, take their own life by hanging themselves, or, as mentioned here, by jumping off a cliff or bridges. Others take poison and other harmful substances and they do this out of ignorance, with the intention of ending their suffering. They want to be free from their suffering but because they don't have the correct method they have no choice but to resort to such actions.

These, as mentioned earlier, are everyday occurrences. So we can see the relevance of Shantideva's presentation even in our modern times: we see so many ignorant people taking drastic measures, thinking that they can free themselves from suffering.

Many ignorant beings, which includes ourselves, regularly create *non-meritorious negative actions that are the cause for the lower realms*. With the intention to either gain some happiness or remove some suffering we regularly engage in non-virtuous actions, such as the ten non-virtuous actions of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and so forth. I have mentioned previously that there are some who feel uncomfortable when they don't have an opportunity to create negativity, and glad when they have an opportunity to create some negativity. So you can see I was not making this up—this is indeed exactly what Shantideva is presenting here. We willingly create so many negativities, which are actually the cause for rebirth in the lower realms.

So if there are those who create harm for themselves in this and future lives, then *how can it be appropriate to be angry when one is harmed by others?* This rhetorical question implies that it is inappropriate to be angry with those who are constantly engaged in harming themselves in this and future lives. Rather than anger, one should develop compassion for them.

So the main emphasis here is that those who act in this way are an object of our compassion rather than anger.

This, in essence, is the meaning of the heading, *Bringing to Mind the Method for Compassion*.

1.3.1.2. IF THEY COMMIT SUICIDE DUE TO IGNORANCE, IT IS NO GREAT SURPRISE THAT THEY HARM OTHERS

This heading emphasises the point that if, out of ignorance and other afflictions, people can take their own life—one's most cherished and prized possession—then it is no great surprise that they would harm others. The verse under this heading reads:

37. *When under the control of the afflictions
Suffering sentient beings even kill themselves.
How could it be that at such time
They do not harm the body of others?*

We need to see how the practices, such as patience, that are being presented in this text and others are the profound practices of the great noble beings, the bodhisattvas. First of all, we need to see how profound these presentations are. Secondly, we need to recognise that the methods and means to actually practice are really profound. Thirdly, we can also acknowledge the fact that those who actually engaged in these practices, the bodhisattvas, are indeed great noble beings. Then a deep sense of veneration and genuine respect and admiration for bodhisattvas will arise. This is how we need to relate to the advice being presented here.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

When one falls under the control of the afflictions one will suffer at heart, and be despondent and even kill oneself. At this time, how could it come that one does not harm the body of other sentient beings? By thinking that it is impossible not to be harmed it is unsuitable to get angry.

What is clearly explained in the commentary is that any being who *falls under the control of the afflictions* will experience much mental agony. Then they become *despondent*, feeling completely hopeless and worthless. Under such circumstances some people will not hesitate to take their own life, and thus destroy their most prized possession. So if, under the influence and dominance of the afflictions, an individual is capable of taking such drastic measures as taking their own life, then it is no wonder that they are capable of harming others.

In the commentary this is presented as a rhetorical question, *At this time, how could it come that one does not harm the body of other sentient beings?*, which indicates that harming others is more likely, as it is a much easier task. Therefore *by thinking that it is impossible not to be harmed, it is unsuitable to get angry*.

By contemplating this point one understands how beings who become angry and harm themselves are an object of compassion rather than scorn.

1.3.1.3. IT IS SUITABLE TO BE COMPASSIONATE WITH THAT PERSON

Because of the examples given earlier, it is suitable to be compassionate towards such beings. This is the point where the emphasis is placed on those who engage in harming themselves. These of course are very important points, and this is an unmistakable presentation of how to engage in these practices. When we reflect on what we hear and study, we need to try to implement it as much

as possible in our lives. If we just leave it to a mere act of listening out of curiosity, then while there might be some benefit in hearing these sacred words, our minds are not likely to change much. If we don't actually put it into practice, it won't have the benefit of transforming our mind.

We are, of course, under the influence of the afflictions, but if we take this advice to heart and try, at the very least, to aspire to these practices by emulating them, then it will definitely help to transform our minds. Even though anger still arises, we won't be completely dominated or influenced by it. The intensity of anger can definitely be reduced; this is how we begin to become a genuinely gentler and calmer person.

That transformation will definitely happen when we try to implement these points into our practice. On the next occasion when someone harms us, or wrongly accuses us, then instead of immediately reacting with anger and finding every reason to justify being angry with them, if we can just remember the points that Shantideva presents here, then it is most likely that we can protect our mind. Rather than becoming angry with this person, it is possible to develop some compassion for them.

The verse relating to this heading is:

38. *Even if one cannot generate compassion
For those that, due to generation of afflictions,
Commit suicide and so forth,
Why should anger have the last word?*

Gyalsab Je's commentary on this verse is not too obscure for us to understand.

It is suitable to practise compassion towards such a person that, upon having generated afflictions, harms others as explained above and even kills themselves. Even if compassion is not generated then how can anger be the final word? It is extremely unsuitable to get angry.

The main emphasis is that when one sees the condition of others, who *upon having generated afflictions harm others, and even kill themselves*, it is suitable to practise compassion for such individuals.

Even if one is not able to generate great compassion for them, then, at the very least *how can anger be the final word?* In response to this rhetorical question, the final point presented here is that *it is extremely unsuitable to become angry* with such individual beings who are driven by afflictions.

1.3.2. Stopping the Cause of Anger

This heading is sub-divided into three:

1.3.2.1. If childishness is their nature, then anger is unsuitable

1.3.2.2. Although the fault of harming is adventitious, anger is unsuitable

1.3.2.3. Anger is unsuitable when the direct causes are analysed

Of course the term *childishness* is not to be taken literally. It is a translation of a Tibetan word meaning 'like a child'. It refers to ordinary beings, as opposed to the supreme beings, the bodhisattvas.

In another text there is an indication of how, just as it is extremely difficult for a child to see a hair in the palm of

the hand, all pervasive suffering is extremely profound and hard to comprehend. This is an analogy illustrating the meaning of the term meaning 'like a child'.

1.3.2.1. IF CHILDISHNESS IS THEIR NATURE, THEN ANGER IS UNSUITABLE

The verse under this heading is:

39. *In case harming others
Is the nature of the childish,
It is as unsuitable to be angry at them
As it is to be resentful at the burning nature of
fire.*

Gyalsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

If harming others is in the nature of the childish, who do not know what has to be practised and what has to be abandoned, and, then it is unsuitable to be angry at them; just as it is unsuitable to be resentful and angry at fire for being in the nature of burning.

There are two aspects to *if harming others is the nature of the childish who do not know what has to be practised, and what has to be abandoned*. The first aspect is not knowing what has to be practised, and what has to be abandoned. The second is that one might know what has to be abandoned and what has to be adopted but, through being overwhelmed by the afflictions, one does not engage in this practice.

Not knowing what is to be practised and what is to be abandoned may be excusable if someone has not had that explained to them, and so they have no understanding. However, some people receive the teachings, and have a clear understanding of what has to be abandoned and what has to be practised, but they are still so strongly dominated by the afflictions that they are not able to actually engage in the practices. Most of us fit into that category!

These are the shortcomings of the childish, or ordinary beings. So it is unsuitable to become angry with them, because they either don't know what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded, or because they are so overwhelmed with strong afflictions they are not able to engage in the practices of adopting what is to be adopted, and abandoning what is to be abandoned. Thus, because they have no control over their own minds, it is unsuitable to be angry with them.

The analogy that is used here is that *it is unsuitable to be resentful and angry at fire for being in the nature of burning*. The very nature of fire is that it burns. So being resentful or angry with fire because it has the nature of burning, is pointless. Just as it is silly to be resentful and angry with fire because it has the nature of burning, likewise it is unsuitable to be angry with the childish, who either don't know, or are completely overwhelmed by the afflictions. It is because of their nature that they harm themselves and others, so it is unsuitable to retaliate, or be angry with them.

1.3.2.2. ALTHOUGH THE FAULT OF HARMING IS ADVENTITIOUS, ANGER IS UNSUITABLE

The verse under this heading reads:

40. *Then, even if this fault is temporary
And the nature of sentient beings is wholesome,
It is still not suitable to become angry,
Like being resentful that smoke rises in space.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Even if the fault of harming others arises adventitiously and the nature of the mind of sentient beings is wholesome and gentle, it is still unsuitable to become angry at the harmer, because that would be as unsuitable as being resentful at space for letting smoke to arise.

The nature of the mind of sentient beings is wholesome and gentle, and thus the act of harming others arises only adventitiously. This means that harming others occurs only occasionally, when the all the adverse conditions are intact. As mentioned here, it is *unsuitable to become angry with the harmer*, just as it is *unsuitable to be angry with space for letting smoke arise*. Other commentaries use the example of clouds developing. If we desire a sunny clear sky, it would be pointless being resentful about any temporary obstruction such as clouds or smoke. In fact being resentful about the sky allowing smoke or clouds to arise would be quite silly.

1.3.2.3. ANGER IS UNSUITABLE WHEN THE DIRECT CAUSES ARE ANALYSED

The verse presented under this heading is often quoted in the teachings. Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins with an argument:

Argument: It is suitable to get angry as the other person is harming me.

41. *Though I am contacted directly by the stick,
If I am getting angry at the wielder,
Since they are induced by hatred,
I should get angry at hatred instead.*

Then Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verse:

Answer: If I were to get angry at that which directly harms me then, since I am directly touched by the stick, weapon and so forth, and thus harmed by them, it would be suitable to get angry at them. Then, since they are not doing this independently, but are wielded by a person, if one were to get angry at the wielder, they are also without independence due to hatred. Instead of getting angry at these two I should get angry at hatred.

If we were to reason that we should be angry at what directly harms us, then we should be angry with the stick, or weapon, that actually makes contact with us. However common sense tells us that even though the stick caused us the direct pain, it would not be able to hurt us by itself, because it has to be wielded by someone. Therefore, even though it makes direct contact with us, it is not really the stick that causes the pain. Rather, the real cause is the wielder of the stick, so therefore one has reason to become upset and angry with that person.

In other words the stick is not hitting us independently, but is wielded by a person, so it is pointless being angry with the stick. The logic being presented here is that the wielder of the stick is also without independence, and is controlled by hatred.

If one is able to use logic and the common sense reasoning of not becoming upset at the stick because it is not independently hurting us, then that same line of logic also applies to the wielder of the stick, because they are, in turn, controlled by the afflictions. They are not acting independently as they are controlled by the afflictions.

So the conclusion is that *instead of becoming angry at these two—the stick and the person—one should instead become angry at hatred*, or the afflictions.

We can use this meticulous line of reasoning to further develop our own ability to use reasoning and logic to make the right decisions, followed by the correct means of engaging in whatever activity we do. We need to take, from the logic presented here, the proper way of conducting ourselves in all activities that we engage in. If one were to really contemplate these points, one can see that they give us a lot of room to use profound reasoning and logic in daily life. If one does not think much about them, then of course one will not really see their value.

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

*Transcribed by Judy Mayne
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*