
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual we will spend some time in meditation.

[meditation]

The *tong len* practice is a profound practice that can really assist us if we actually implement it. With respect to the *taking* part of the practice, we may not see the relevance of taking the suffering of others upon ourselves at first, and so the benefit of that part of the practice may not be immediately evident. However there is an obvious direct benefit in the *giving* part of the practice, as it is the immediate cause for the generation of love and compassion. Once love and compassion has been generated within one's heart then one will naturally and spontaneously act to benefit other sentient beings. So we can easily relate to the benefits of the *giving* part of the practice.

When one wishes for others to be endowed with happiness and to be free from suffering, and has the determination to bring about their happiness and free them from suffering, then that can definitely lead one to act in ways to bring about happiness for others, and help to remove their suffering.

The meditation and mental training that we do now will be transformed into actions that benefit others. Those who are deprived of happiness definitely wish for happiness, and those who experience suffering definitely want to be free from suffering. So if we help them to achieve this, we are benefitting others in a very practical way. So we can see that this practice is really the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

When we generate these two most precious states of mind—love and compassion—then we are naturally inclined to benefit other sentient beings. As the second Dalai Lama, Gedun Gyatso mentioned, when one generates the mind of compassion, then that instils the wish to benefit other sentient beings. Thus, a mind of love and compassion is a most valuable and supreme state of mind, which serves as a basis for benefiting sentient beings.

A mind of genuine, unconditional love and compassion that is devoid of self-cherishing and attachment, which is accompanied with the sole intention of benefiting others, is indeed a most supreme state of mind. The more we familiarise ourselves with generating love and compassion, the more we will develop that genuine feeling within ourselves, and the kinder and gentler our mind will become. This is the practical benefit of the *tong len* practice.

The practice of giving encompasses giving one's body, possessions and root of virtue. It involves initially training the mind in selflessly giving one's body, possessions and root virtues to others. As indicated in the

teachings, having trained our mind, we then need to actually practise giving to others, as way of directly benefiting sentient beings.

As the teachings explain, mind-training needs to be followed by actual practice. The way to measure our progress in this practice is to check whether our mind of giving has in fact increased. We do this practice in a form of meditation. However, reciting a prayer, and sitting for a few minutes with closed eyes is not sufficient, if it doesn't actually transform our mind into the mind of giving. When we can see that our mind of giving has actually increased and become more natural, then that is a true mark of progress, and a positive transformation.

The teachings indicate that we need to give away our body as well as our possessions and root virtues. Now, we may have not reached the point where we are readily able to give our body parts, which of course is the practice of the great bodhisattvas. However, by training our mind in giving our body in thought, we are familiarising ourselves with the practice, thus drawing closer to being able to actually give our bodies.

Practice needs to be manageable and practical, so that means engaging in practices that are in accordance with our ability. What we need to really contemplate is minimising the mind of wishing harm upon others. The true mark of progress is when the mind wishing harm upon others is reduced, and the mind of wishing to benefit others is increased.

As advised further, one needs to immediately regard any sentient being one happens to meet as being as kind as one's mother and remember that, 'They are the supreme field of my merit, because by relying on sentient beings I will be able to accomplish all the necessary conditions (such as accumulating merit and wisdom) for achieving enlightenment. Therefore this being is really precious to me. If I endeavour to please this sentient being then that will be the equivalent to pleasing all the buddhas and bodhisattvas'. That is how we need to relate to other sentient beings.

As Shantideva mentions

*When looking at sentient beings say,
"In dependence on this very sentient being
I will become a buddha",
And look at them honestly and lovingly.*

So we need to see any sentient being we encounter as being the cause for our enlightenment. In addition to reciting that verse and remembering its meaning, one also needs to put it into practice. We need to be able to look at any sentient being, and think, 'This sentient being is the cause for me to become enlightened', and hold that being with the mind of compassion.

Memorising a verse such as this and then reciting is a way to train the mind. As the teachings indicate, one needs to first train with words. So when we do the *tong len* practice we begin by reciting this verse from the *Guru Puja*:

And thus, O Venerable Compassionate Gurus, we
seek your blessings,
That all karmic debts, obstacles and sufferings of
Mother beings,
May without exception ripen upon us right now,

And that we may give our happiness and virtue to others

And thereby invest all beings in bliss.

That recitation helps to instil the actual meaning of the practice into one's mind. That is why the teachings advise us to first train in the words, which means memorising those words and then, whilst reciting them, bringing the meaning of the words to mind.

In summary, the essential advice is to practise to the extent that one is capable. This eliminates excuses about not engaging in practices because one doesn't know enough, and so forth. In fact, as some teachers have advised, we are not deprived of the knowledge of how to practice, but we are deprived of the actual effort to put in the practice. So, beginning with the basics, we need to actually apply whatever we have learnt.

Essentially, this means integrating the practices into your minds. If we think of practices as being exterior practices, and live our life in a manner that is not in accord with the teachings, then that is where we will fall short of any true transformation. We need to integrate our practises into our minds so that we always carry them with us, in whatever we do.

When they hear such advice, anyone who is keen to put the Dharma into practice will say to themselves, 'Yes, this is meant for me. This is what I need to be doing'. But when someone who is not too keen on practice hears such advice they will think, 'Oh yes, I have heard that before. I already know that' and thus fall short in implementing the advice. They have reached a dangerous point where they have this false assumption that they know all that they hear, and they don't relate it to themselves. There is a particular term in Tibetan, *cho drep*, sometimes translated as *immune to the Dharma*, which is derived from the fact that no matter how long you boil some vegetables, they never really cook well. This sort of analogy is used to describe someone who hears advice and instructions in the teachings, but keeps thinking, 'Oh yes, I have heard that before. It doesn't relate to me, because I already know it'. If that is their attitude then how could the advice in the Dharma ever help them to transform their own mind? The Dharma only transforms the mind if one takes it to heart, and practises what one hears.

Another example of how we might relate something in the teachings to some external factor is the teaching on impermanence, which is an essential teaching for helping to transform the mind. If, for example, a glass breaks and one has heard the teaching on impermanence and how things are transitory and change moment by moment, then one might think, 'Oh yes, of course. This is an example of impermanence'. However, that does not actually instil any sort of personal realisation of how one is also impermanent and changing from moment to moment. In particular, one's own life is also fragile and changing moment by moment. If one is able to relate the glass breaking to oneself in that way, then one has then taken the teaching on impermanence as a personal instruction, and used the external event as an impetus to practise the Dharma.

For those who are keen to practise, witnessing someone's death will also be a very strong impetus to remind

themselves of the fragility of their own life, and the need to practise before the moment of death arises. So we can see the difference it makes, when an instruction is applied on a personal level and put into practice.

Coming back to the main point, the practice of love and compassion is essential. We might not be able to generate the bodhicitta attitude right now, but we do have access to its base which is love and compassion. So it is just a matter of actually contemplating and putting effort into generating those states of mind. That is something we definitely can do, and generating the thought of love and compassion to the best of our ability, and meditating on that, is essential for our practice.

When we are able to generate the thought of love and compassion to a certain extent, then it becomes easier to actually move to the next step of developing the special intention in which one takes on the personal responsibility of benefiting sentient beings. One thinks, 'It is not sufficient to merely wish other beings to be free from suffering and endowed with happiness. I need to take responsibility for doing that myself. I need to take on the responsibility of freeing all beings from every type of suffering, and leading them to the state of ultimate happiness'. When we take personal responsibility in this way, then our minds become a much more fertile ground for the development of actual bodhicitta.

After having developed the special intention, we realise, 'Even though I wholeheartedly want to take on the responsibility of freeing all beings from suffering, and leading them to the ultimate state of happiness, the reality is that I don't have that ability right now'. So one contemplates, 'Who has that ability? How can I possibly achieve this ability myself?' That is when one contemplates reaching the state of enlightenment, and how it is a perfected state, where one is free from all adversity and has developed all qualities. At this point one thinks, 'When I have achieved that state of enlightenment, then I will have the capacity and ability to free all beings from suffering, and lead them to happiness'. It is at that point one has generated a very firm foundation for generating bodhicitta.

Over the past year we have been studying Shantideva's precious text together. Studying this text and making the effort together makes us real Dharma friends. From the teacher's side, I have tried my best in presenting it, and from your side, you have placed all of your attention on listening to the teachings, and trying to study them. We have made that joint effort to study this profound text by Shantideva, which presents the unmistakable methods of generating bodhicitta and then practising the six perfections. So we can all rejoice in our joint efforts.

As a result we have definitely accumulated a great amount of root virtue. So we need to secure and increase it so that it does not go to waste. Thus we rejoice in and dedicate that virtue, which is a supreme practice.

One of the greatest prayers of aspiration that is a means to dedicate one's virtues is the *King of Prayers*. As we did last year, we will recite it again, not only as a supreme means to rejoice and dedicate for our own virtues, but also as a means to dedicate that virtue to those who are connected to the Centre who are unwell, and those who

have passed away. Because of the connection we have with them, and the connection that they have with the Centre, our practice will definitely benefit them as well. So this is not just a personal practice

Of course, as you recite it in English, I will have to recite it in Tibetan. However I don't necessarily feel left out, as I'm happy and proud to be reciting the text in Tibetan! Tibetan is now being accepted as being one of the most supreme languages for the study of the Dharma. Leaving aside the contents of the texts such as Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, the language is incredibly rich with lots of deeper meanings in the words. It would be quite difficult to find any other language, even in other Buddhist countries, which presents the teachings so profoundly.

Only in Tibetan will you find all of the Buddha's doctrine intact. Many works were translated into Chinese, but a lot of them have been since destroyed. There are some Japanese translations, but I have heard that you need to know Chinese characters to be able to read them. So Tibetan is one of the rare languages that has kept all of the Buddha's doctrine intact. That is why I can claim Tibetan to be supreme. I value the language and don't wish to forget it.

Given that Buddha's teachings are preserved in the Tibetan language, it seems quite reasonable to think that being reborn as a Tibetan might be a reasonable aspiration.

There are now many Buddhist scholars in America and other countries who only became renowned after they learned Tibetan and studied the texts directly in the Tibetan language. Glen Mullin once told me that every big university in America has one student of late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye as a staff member, which has to imply that he was a great teacher. I have heard that Glen is a very learned man himself, with a very intelligent mind. I gather that he has translated many texts and also written the history of all the previous Dalai Lamas.

Glen presented me some of these translated works himself, and told me that the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargye had advised him that it will be good for him to engage in the Dharma activity of translation and so forth. But in order to do that, he advised that it would be good, not just to learn Tibetan, but to also have some understanding in the debate system. That is why Glen was advised to go to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, where he studied for a while.

Apparently Glen indulged in a care-free hippie lifestyle in his youth. However, he developed a connection with Gen Rinpoche, Geshe Ngawang Dhargye. He would visit Geshe-la in the evening, and Geshe-la would reprimand him about his ways. Then slowly, slowly he began to transform himself to the point where he really got into the Dharma, and became a good scholar.

Before reciting *The King of Prayers*, generate a bodhicitta motivation that is based on the intention:

For the sake of all sentient beings, and to lead them to the ultimate state of happiness and free them from all suffering, I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will recite this prayer, and dedicate it to that purpose.

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

Transcribed by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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