
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. For this we use the motivation that we generated in the refuge and bodhicitta prayer.

[meditation]

Today, we meet again to begin our study program for the year.

All of you will probably be aware of the discipline that is an integral part of the study group program, so I don't need to go into detail about that. It would, however, be good for the senior students to explain the commitments to any new students.

For the senior students it's good to remember these commitments. Just listing them is not sufficient—we have to actually put them into practice. For example, last year when we did our recitation of Shantideva's text, there were many who did not attend on the day, so I have to assume that you did that recitation at home.

One can be aware that these commitments are virtuous in nature, but if one fails to engage in that commitment then one should be able to recognise that as being a personal fault, and that something is missing. Not meeting that commitment indicates that one is not practising what one knows intellectually. This also applies in daily life.

This also brings to light the situation where people can relate to others by grandly talking about practice, and the points of Buddhism, but when it comes to themselves they fail to put it into practice. Personally, I find that discrepancy a bit strange. This discrepancy between relating the teaching to others, but not putting it into practice oneself, really comes down to not paying much attention to cultivating a true sense of love and compassion within one's heart. The giving and taking meditation practice that we did earlier is a practice that instils and further establishes this love and compassion within oneself.

If one actually lacks a true sense of love and compassion, or even just a keen wish to develop love and compassion, then all sorts of faults begin to affect the rest of our practice, and it will not be very effective at all. This is something we really need to pay attention to; ultimately the very basis of our practice is love and compassion, so that should be our primary focus.

If we are preoccupied with self interest, and always thinking about our own needs or agendas or interests, then that is where we fall short of putting the Dharma into practice. If we really think about it, is there any benefit in always focussing on oneself and one's own interest? Does it actually benefit one? Does it really help? Personally I don't find it helpful at all. I find that rather than benefitting oneself it is actually harmful to one's development.

Thinking only of one's own interests makes it very difficult to associate with others, because it becomes very hard to really relate to them. Whereas when one's mind is imbued with genuinely thinking about others and their welfare, it is

much easier to relate to others. That is something which I'm sure you would have experienced for yourselves.

The main point that I'm emphasising here is the importance of really taking to heart the practice of cultivating love and compassion. We attempt to meditate on love and compassion at the beginning of each session, and the purpose of that is to help to really transform our minds. When we look back, has our practice of meditating on love and compassion over the past year brought about a significant change in us or not?

If we find there has been no change in our attitude and state of mind, then we need to acknowledge that the fault lies within ourselves and is not a fault of the practice. That is because we have not actually implemented that practice into our lives. If we see that there has been an improvement, then that is a good sign. Whatever we have practised in the last year should develop a little bit further this year; that is how we make progress in our practice.

That's also true for any normal mundane activity. Whatever we do in daily life should follow exactly the same procedure of using the experience one has gained in the previous year as a base on which to improve that activity in the new year.

With our progress in the practice of Dharma, if we have found that our mind has not improved over the previous year and that there is no improvement taking place this year, then we need recognise that as our fault, and not the fault of the Dharma. This is how we need to gauge our progress, by looking into where the fault really lies. The Buddha gave us the very clear analogy of how the doctor prescribes a treatment such as medication and so forth, but if the patient doesn't take the medication, they cannot hope to be cured. Blaming the doctor is completely baseless. It's not the fault of the doctor, it's not the fault of the medication or the treatment either; if the patient has not taken the medication, then the fault lies there. This illustration shows us how to engage in the practice of Dharma.

Rather than finding fault and always blaming others, our preoccupation needs to be with our own state of mind. I don't approve of those who always talk about the mistakes of others and pick on their faults, but never seem to take much initiative in improving themselves. When I encounter people who constantly complain and talk about the faults of others, that indicates to me that there is a lack of love and compassion in their heart.

We have all seen that there are some people, who, as soon as there is some sort of social engagement or meeting, quite readily talk about others' faults and so forth. I don't approve of that. Rather, one should be checking one's own state of mind, looking at one's own faults, and trying to improve on that. It's a matter of trying to work on one's own mind, rather than finding fault with others.

This is the real purpose of meditating on love and compassion. The *tong-len* practice that we do at the beginning of every session is said to be one of the best practices to develop love and compassion, and for a bodhisattva it is one of the greatest practices. We may not have actually cultivated genuine bodhicitta yet, and our practice of *tong-len*, or giving and taking, may not yet be a fully-formed practice. Nevertheless, even that contrived bodhicitta attitude, that similitude of the bodhicitta motivation that we base on the refuge prayer, is the basis of a sense of real purpose and deeper meaning. At our level that is what we base our practice on, and then we gradually

improve on that. We really need to keep the essentials of the practice in our mind.

It is because of our acquaintance over many years, and with a sense of genuine care and love and compassion for you, that I say all of this to you. From the very beginning my commitment to remain and teach here has always been with the intention that sharing the Dharma with you will actually benefit your mind. Essentially the whole purpose of the Dharma is ultimately to help to transform one's mind.

As the great masters have repeatedly emphasised, we can gauge the effectiveness of our meditation practice when we see a decrease in the delusions in our minds. When one notices that there is a decrease in these delusions, then that is a true mark of the meditation practice and the Dharma practice having had a positive effect. This instruction indicates to us that we can gauge our progress in our practice for ourselves. We practise Dharma meditation so that the delusions decrease, so we can check for ourselves whether that is happening or not.

In fact, when we repeatedly look into the real cause of problems in our life we find that it is the unsubdued mind that is the cause of all our mental turmoil. We need to see that the ultimate purpose of our practice is to ensure that it actually hits the mark of reducing the real troublemaker in our mind, which is the delusions. That is the ultimate purpose.

You are not just interested in the Dharma, but you are also keen in practising the Dharma, therefore I consider you to be practitioners. I want to reassure you that the purpose of the practice of Dharma is to weaken the delusions in the mind. I want to remind you that when you see delusions such as attachment and anger and pride reducing, or when you see less competitiveness arising out of jealousy, then you will understand that it has been your practice that has been the means to serve that purpose. This is how we need to see the value of the Dharma.

We all wish to achieve and strive to have a positive, kind and happy mind. Conversely, none of us wishes to experience an unhappy state of mind. What I'm reminding you of here is the causes that will bring about a more positive, kinder and happier state of mind, and what will reduce unhappiness. When we really look into why we experience unhappy states of mind then we will find that the causes don't lie outside, and that the ultimate cause of an unhappy mind lies within.

Specifically, it is the delusions that cause unhappy states of mind. We need to be able to recognise that the more we apply the antidotes for overcoming negative states of mind (such as anger, jealousy, pride and so forth), the more our mind becomes genuinely happier. Applying the antidotes for overcoming jealousy, pride and so forth makes our mind more relaxed, calm and genuinely happier. We need to understand the antidotes, and actually apply them, so that they help to reduce negative states of mind.

The essential practice comes down to developing love and compassion. The more we do that, the more it actually helps the mind. In a practical sense a lot of the mental agony we experience is caused by our biased attitudes towards others. The practice of cultivating immeasurable equanimity, which precedes developing love and compassion is in fact a practice that really helps to develop an unbiased attitude towards others, not discriminating between friends, enemies and strangers. Attitudes like having a strong sense of clinging to those who are close, and being distant to others,

can, at the very least, be reduced, and even overcome when one embraces the practice of, for example, developing immeasurable equanimity. Immeasurable love and immeasurable compassion, not to mention a lack of discrimination, actually leads to seeing everyone as being close. The way to cultivate that state of mind is to familiarise ourselves with these attitudes again and again, and really try to develop them within ourselves.

I spend a lot of time contemplating these points. I cannot claim in any way that I've developed love and compassion, but to the extent that I've devoted some time and energy towards developing that, what I can say is that it definitely helps my mind to become much more genuinely relaxed, and much more settled. As I often relate to you, my best companion is the positive state of mind of love and compassion, and the happy mind that follows from that. It definitely helps me in my life, and it seems to have a positive effect upon others too. I can definitely vouch for this from my experience.

I cannot emphasise enough that the essence of the Dharma is really love and compassion, specifically the love and compassion that is not stained by the self-cherishing mind. That is what pure love and compassion is—it is a love and compassion not stained by the self-cherishing mind. As mentioned earlier, developing that pure love and compassion needs to be based on developing our mind so that it does not discriminate between friends, enemies and strangers.

The practice of immeasurable equanimity involves overcoming the strong feelings of attachment when one focuses on friends, and overcoming anger when focussing on enemies, and overcoming a sense of indifference when focussing on strangers. It is these two different aspects of holding some close and others distant that cause a biased state of mind.

When one actually develops the mind of immeasurable equanimity, one will no longer have any sense of liking or dislike. Rather, one will embrace all equally. This is a point made by the Seventh Dalai Lama, Gyalwa Kelsang Gyatso. I'm not randomly making these points up. They are, in fact, all related to the sayings and writings of the great masters of the past, in which they explained the teachings from the perspective of their own practice and their own experiences. The important points that I share with you are based on those sources.

So it is important that we attempt to develop a love that is not sullied by a self-cherishing mind, and a compassion that is not sullied by the self-cherishing mind. Then we can really work on developing an unconditional love and compassion towards all beings.

Now while what I have said so far might not have been in an orderly, sequential manner, I have nevertheless been attempting to present to you the essential points of practice and so forth. So it is worthwhile that you really keep this in mind.

The great master Atisha gave us some very profound advice: 'The best instruction is to check one's state of mind'. Furthermore, he says 'Hide one's qualities and proclaim one's own faults, while hiding the faults of others and proclaiming their qualities'. That is an essential practice, and a very profound piece of advice that we need to really try to embrace at all times.

In his recent teachings in India, His Holiness the Dalai Lama mentioned something to the same effect. As those of you

who were at the teachings might recall, he was reprimanding the abbots and saying it is not sufficient to hold a high position, while piously thinking "Oh I've done quite well, and things are quite OK", when things are actually falling apart, such as the discipline of the monks becoming lax, and other faults in the monastery. Pretending that there are no problems and that everything is fine is not a good practice. His Holiness was pointing out that it is very important to really look out for faults, and if things are not going so well, acknowledge that, and try to fix the problem right from the start.

These are some of the profound points made by the great Kadampa masters of the past. This essential advice is what we need to keep in mind at all times: always be ready to talk about your own faults, rather than proclaiming your qualities, and be ready to talk about the qualities of others, rather than bringing out their faults and criticising them.

As mentioned previously, the essence of the Buddha's teachings is love and compassion, and so every attempt we make to develop love and compassion is moving in the right direction. Fully developing love and compassion is our ultimate task. And a teaching that profoundly and unmistakably presents the methods for developing love and compassion, followed by developing the altruistic awakening mind of bodhicitta, is this very text that we are studying, Shantideva's *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*.

This is a text which has been praised by all the great masters. His Holiness the Dalai Lama praises it again and again, saying that the depth and breadth of the instructions of how to develop love and compassion that are found in Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavata* are unequalled. When it is hard for us to consistently practise love and compassion, we need to, on a regular basis, read this text as much as possible and contemplate its meaning. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, just remembering and acknowledging the value of such teachings can, in itself, be a great practice; reminding us again of the importance of love and compassion.

We, of course, have received many teachings on this text, and sometimes we may fail to see its real value. Yet other people who do not even consider themselves as Buddhists really seem to see its great value. Just last Friday I was invited out for lunch by a Chinese lady called Cynthia, and we went to a Chinese restaurant in New Street, a little bit up from Bay Street. We parked quite close to a very nice building and I jokingly commented that it must be worth millions of dollars.

When we returned to the car after lunch we noticed someone was watering the garden while someone else was feeding the dog. Then the man feeding the dog saw me, said "Hello", and came over to greet me. He said that he was not the owner, but was overseeing its renovation. He said, "I can show you inside". So he took us inside and showed us all of the features of the ground floor. He said that the house was over a hundred years old, and that a lot of those features were genuinely unique. Then he pointed out one element, and said that the only other building in Melbourne with the same sort of patterns and designs was Parliament House.

He was very courteous and very, very nice. As we came out of the building he asked me, "Where are you from?", and I replied "I'm actually a Tibetan Buddhist monk". Then he said "Oh, like the Dalai Lama. Are you following the same sort of tradition?" Then he went onto comment that the wisdom and knowledge that the Dalai Lama imparts is not just good, but indeed perfect.

Our conversation continued when he asked where I lived, and I replied that the building where I lived in might be even older than this house. He seemed quite surprised, and took down the details of the address of Tara Institute.

Then he asked me "How do you find Australia", and I said that I find Melbourne really nice. He said that although he was born here, his parents are of Italian descent. They had travelled around the world, and gone to many different countries, and then having come to Australia, had found that Australia was really the best place for them to live.

At this point he introduced his son, who was the person watering the garden, and went on to offer to show us the entire building when it's completely finished. It really is a very grand place, and must have been really expensive to buy and renovate. Then the other workers all came up and shook my hand, and were really happy to see me.

This is just one small example of how, even though I haven't, as I mentioned earlier, developed any kind of significant realisation, my attempts to embrace love and compassion, seeing them as being of paramount importance, has definitely been of benefit. Even without any sort of formal understanding or knowledge, people just seem to relate to me and are happy to greet me and so forth. That's my own experience. Relating this story to you is yet another attempt to point out that when one makes a genuine attempt to familiarise oneself with the attitudes of love and compassion, making it a core practice, it definitely helps to reduce a lot of negative mindsets. These negative attitudes are naturally overcome by the positive attitudes of love and compassion.

We can all relate to the types of delusions that lead to negative minds. All of us have had the experience that as soon as a delusion takes hold of one's mind it really weighs one down, leaving one feeling unsettled, with a very heavy, dark sort of mind. These dark feelings all arise due to the predominance of negative states of mind, which quite readily manifest themselves in our minds. The more we attempt to develop, cultivate and recognise the love and compassion which is within ourselves, the less the opportunity for the negative sort of minds to arise. Thus, as the delusions become less prominent, our mind becomes happier, lighter and more joyful. We can see that the state of our mind, whether it is happy or unhappy, is not related to external things. Rather, it's dependent on our own state of mind. In other words, our overall state of mind depends on the most predominant attitudes in our mind.

I am openly sharing all of this with you as friends, using my own experiences and the attempts that I have made which have definitely helped my mind. I can confidently predict that if you make the same attempt it will definitely help you in your life as well.

This is what I bring back from India to share with you. I don't have any material things such as presents and the like to give you. In fact, whatever money I had was used to make offerings there, so there was not much left to buy presents for you. However I consider the advice that I have just given as my present to you.

To summarise this pith instruction, the more we familiarise ourselves with generating a positive state of mind, the more the negative states of mind will be naturally reduced. We need to really reflect upon that again and again.

What part of the outline are we up to now? What verse are we on?

[A student replies that we have completed the heading, Anger Is Unsuitable when the Direct or Indirect Causes Are Analysed, which was covered in verse 41. Geshe-la complimented her saying "You seem to be right on the ball, and that's good. Others are still looking for it!"]

This outline was the second part of an earlier outline and it particularly relates to not retaliating when others harm oneself. Now we move to the third subdivision of that outline.

STOPPING ANGER AT WRONGDOINGS DIRECTED AT ONESELF

1. TOLERATING THE GENERATION OF SUFFERING

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

1.3.3. Considering it one's fault if something undesirable is received¹

Putting patience into practice relates to the significant point of not retaliating when others harm us. Our normal, immediate reaction when we receive any harm is to retaliate out of anger. When we contemplate these points and change that attitude, then we are practising patience.

The point of this outline is that we need to realise that it is our own fault if we have some undesirable experience. This is again referring to the point about not retaliating when others harm us. At this point in the training, one trains one's mind to understand that if one is experiencing harm, then that is due one's own faults, rather than any fault of the other.

This is actually a very profound point. In fact it's actually presenting the profundity of karma. Therefore it is really an essential point to consider when thinking about the importance of practising patience. If one wishes to benefit others one cannot do that without the practice of patience. If, out of a sense of love and compassion, one attempts to benefit others, they may either show a lack of appreciation or even harm us. If we don't practise patience then that is the point where it will be very easy for us to actually give up any sense of wishing to benefit the other.

The most essential tool for benefitting others is developing and practising patience. Geshe Chengawa said that the essence of the Dharma is contained in these two lines:

Refrain from harming others,
While benefitting others

He said that when these two lines are practised effectively, they encapsulate all of the Dharma. The teachings of the Buddha in the form of the three baskets, as well as the practices of the three vehicles, are actually subsumed into these two lines. Being able to refrain from harming others when others harm oneself requires the practice of patience. It also helps us to not become disheartened when we try to benefit others. So we need to realise how essential it is to develop patience.

This outline, Considering It One's Fault If Something Undesirable Is Received, is divided into two parts:

1.3.3.1. The actual meaning

1.3.3.2. Refuting objections

When Shantideva was preparing his instructions and advice he would have thought, "When one experiences harm from

others, which stance would be most reasonable and beneficial? To think that it is their fault or one's own fault?" Of these two options Shantideva would have found that the greatest benefit comes from thinking that it is one's own fault. There is no actual loss but only gain in thinking in that way. Thinking that it is the other's fault will only serve to justify becoming angry and then retaliating.

So the practice of patience cannot be based on thinking that it's the other's fault. If one starts to understand that it's one's own fault that one is receiving the harm then that can be a sound basis to prevent anger from arising and for practising patience. So there is only gain in thinking in this way.

1.3.3.1. THE ACTUAL MEANING

This is subdivided into five:

1.3.3.1.1. Considering that it is one's own fault if one is harmed by others

1.3.3.1.2. It is the fault of holding onto the body which is a cause for suffering

1.3.3.1.3. It is the fault of having craved the cause of suffering in previous lives

1.3.3.1.4. The unsuitability of being angry at others by relating one's karma to the cause of their suffering

1.3.3.1.5 Anger is simply wrong and unsuitable

Having now listed the five subdivisions under this outline we can cover the verses relating to each of them in the following sessions.

We need to really contemplate this meticulously logical and systematic presentation. There is so much to contemplate here, and we really need to become familiar with it, and embrace it as the means for our practice.

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

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Edited Version

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¹ The other two outlines are:

1.3.1. Bringing to Mind the Method of Compassion

1.3.2. Anger Is Unsuitable when the Direct or Indirect Causes Are Analysed