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# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Based on the motivation we have just generated during the recitation of our prayers, we can now engage in our meditation practice. *[meditation]*

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

## 2.1.2.1.2.1. Abandoning laziness by contemplating the disadvantages of this life

2.1.2.1.2.1.2. *Since one is under the control of death, acting leisurely is unsuitable (cont.)*

### 2.1.2.1.2.1.2.1. One should not be lazy as one is under the control of the lord of death

The verse relating to this heading reads:

6. *Having closed off all roads,  
The lord of death has cast his eye on us.  
How can you enjoy food?  
How can you enjoy sleep?*

Gyalsab Je's commentary on this verse reads:

The butcher that is the lord of death has closed off all roads leading to the deathless city and has already cast his eye on us. How can you be like a careless buffalo and enjoy eating food or crave for sleep. This carelessness is unsuitable.

Here, *deathless city* refers to the state of liberation. The presentation here is that the road to liberation is blocked by the lord of death. Just as the butcher's task is to slaughter animals, the task of the lord of death is to take one's life. Our life can be taken by the lord of death at any time. Gyalsab Je uses the analogy of a buffalo who continues to enjoy eating grass and drinking water, despite the fact that other buffalos are being slaughtered around it. Even though such careless buffalos are on the verge of being slaughtered themselves, they behave as if there is no immediate danger to their life.

The Tibetan word, *bak-mepa*, translated here as *careless*, carries the meaning of lacking conscientiousness. The buffalo lacks conscientiousness about the fact that it is about to be killed, and we will be like that buffalo if we also lack conscientiousness and fall into a state of enjoying food during the day and craving sleep at night. As we are in the constant grip of the lord of death, death is imminent, yet we act like the buffalo who continues to enjoy food and drink, even as it is about to be slaughtered.

Taking this as a personal instruction, we need to reflect upon the fact that we are very fortunate in that we have obtained a human life with the eight freedoms and ten endowments. Furthermore, we have come in contact with the Dharma. So it would be a great pity if we were to

focus only on the worldly affairs of this life, such as eating, drinking and sleeping, and not utilise this life to engage in some form of virtue to secure our wellbeing in our future life. Engaging in virtue and practising the Dharma becomes meaningful when the focus is at the very least for the betterment of our future life. This is really the point to consider here. The imminence of death exhorts one to engage in some practice of virtue. So, as the commentary explains, *this carelessness is unsuitable*.

To really take this instruction on board, we need to reflect upon how our remaining lifespan is constantly decreasing, and how the end of this life is definitely approaching. Now if our life were to completely cease to exist at the time of death, and if we didn't have to take rebirth again, then one might say that it is acceptable to devote ourselves entirely to worldly affairs, and enjoy ourselves as much as we like in this life, which, of course, involves accumulating non-virtues. If this approach were to actually bring some genuine sense of happiness, then we might again consider that approach as being worthwhile. But from our own experience we have found that when we are completely engaged in worldly affairs, our life isn't all that happy anyway. The main point here is that if we reflect on the fact that there is some continuity of life after death, and that we have to prepare for that future life, then we will understand why it is worthwhile to engage in virtue.

When we take a farsighted approach, and engage in activities that benefit our future life, then the natural by-product is benefit in this life as well. Whereas if one focuses only on the worldly affairs of this life, there will be no benefit in our future life, and only minimal benefit in this life. This is the significant point that we need to reflect upon.

There is a continuity of life that has no beginning, and at the end of this life we will not cease to exist. In fact this was the point of young Tenzin's question to His Holiness Dalai Lama in the recent teaching in Brisbane: if sentient beings need to rely upon the Buddhas to become enlightened then how did the first Buddha become enlightened? His Holiness definitely paid great attention to that question, and looked directly down at Tenzin as he answered it at length. I also have to say that many people have this same question.

His Holiness explained how there is a continuity of our mindstream, and that there is no beginning to samsaric existence, and that there are two interpretations about the end of samsaric existence. On a general level there cannot be an end to the cyclic existence of all sentient beings at once. In fact it is almost an irrelevant question, because some say 'yes', and others say 'no'. We could never be certain when that end has actually occurred.

However there will be an end to one's personal samsaric existence. Gyalsab Rinpoche elucidated the fact that because one can overcome all one's defilements, there is definitely an end to cyclic existence for an individual being. From the moment they gain the direct realisation of emptiness, cyclic existence ceases for that person, and they will not be involuntarily reborn into cyclic existence again. So there is definitely an end to an individual's cyclic existence.

The assertion that there is no beginning to cyclic existence relates to not being able to find a beginning to one's consciousness. When you trace back your consciousness you cannot find a particular point in time where you can say, 'This is when the consciousness first started'. So because there is no beginning to an individual's consciousness, it is asserted that there is no beginning to cyclic existence. Here of course the term *consciousness* particularly relates to the subtle awareness of an individual's mind.

Tenzin is to be congratulated for his very good question—he is a young person with a sharp mind! He also helped to clarify an earlier question asked by another person, to which His Holiness also gave a lengthy answer.

To summarise the point: an individual's cyclic existence ends at the moment the ignorance of grasping at a self is overcome by the realisation of emptiness. When the very cause of individual cyclic existence is severed, then the consequences of having to be reborn again in cyclic existence naturally ceases as well. When the cause of cyclic existence, the ignorance of grasping at an inherently existent self, is overcome, then the result, which is cyclic existence, ceases. This is the law of cause and effect—when there is no cause there cannot be an effect.

#### 2.1.2.1.2.1.2.2. *Strive in virtue since you will die soon*

Again, the outline by itself explains the meaning of the following verse. Gyaltsab Je uses the outline as an exhortation to engage in the practice of Dharma: because one will die soon, one must strive in virtue.

The lines of verse are preceded by this hypothetical statement:

Argument: I still have some time

Then two lines of verse are presented as an answer to that statement:

*7ab. Since one is certainly going to die soon  
One should build up the two accumulations  
until then*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary on these lines explains:

Answer: One is certainly going to die soon and hence one should build up the two accumulations as long as one is not captured by the lord of death

The meaning of the verse is quite clear. *One is certainly going to die soon, and hence one should build up two accumulations for as long as one is not captured by the lord of death.* We can relate this point to the Lam Rim teachings on the certainty of death, which explain that our lifespan is constantly decreasing, and that it is never extended. The reality of our life is that with each moment that passes, our lifespan is decreasing. It is not as if it decreases, and then stops for a while. Our lifespan is constantly decreasing, and there is no way to add more time on to it. So we need to seize the opportunity to engage in virtue right now.

*One should build up the two accumulations* refers to accumulating virtues and abandoning negativities or non-virtues. Death is inevitable, and we can't do anything about the fact that we will have to face it. However, what we do have in our hands is the capacity to ensure that we

will, at the very least, not experience any fear at the time of death, and that, by accumulating virtue, we can even take a better rebirth than our present one. That will then enable us to continuously engage in the practice of Dharma. That is something we can do now. We can't prevent death, but by accumulating the merit for a good rebirth next life we can definitely prevent fear at the time of death, as well as prevent an unfortunate rebirth.

We've all seen people who are completely obsessed with happiness in this life, and who end up being quite miserable. Things never seem to go well for them. They seem to be constantly facing difficulties and problems, because they are constantly trying to make things comfortable for this life. When things don't work out in that way, they experience despair and agony, and end up being quite miserable. Whereas those who focus on their future life engage in activities that will help them in the next life, while being more relaxed and contented, and thus happier in this life too. So you can see that there is a different outcome from these two different attitudes, one of which focuses only on this life, and the other which focuses on the future life.

What we can take as a personal instruction here is that it is really worthwhile to pay heed to preparing for our future life, by engaging, as much as we can, in accumulating merit with the intention that it will benefit us in the future. We are very fortunate that not only have we met and come into contact with the Buddhadharma, but we have come in contact with perfect teachers who explain the Buddhadharma, and we have the intelligence and means to understand it. It would be a great pity if we let all these good conditions go to waste, and pay no attention to accumulating virtue and merit for our future life. We have the ability to not only make this life happy, but also to prepare for our future life. So why not seize the opportunity to achieve both?

#### 2.1.2.1.2.1.2.3. *The time of death is the wrong time to abandon laziness*

At the time when one is about to die, one might think, 'Oh, I need to practise Dharma and abandon laziness now'. But it is already too late, as death will occur at any moment. As there is no time left, abandoning laziness at that point will not really enable one to accumulate virtue. The implicit meaning here is that right now is the best time to abandon laziness, and engage in accumulating virtue.

The next two lines of verse are:

*7cd. Though one abandons laziness then,  
What shall one do when it is the wrong time*

In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains that:

Though one may abandon laziness when one is held by death, what is striving at the wrong time supposed to accomplish? One will not achieve the slightest purpose.

We have just covered the meaning of this.

**2.1.2.1.2.1.2.4. One should not be lazy since one can die suddenly without finishing one's work**

The verse relating to this subdivision is:

8. *This started without completing it,  
This one left half done,  
With the lord of death coming all at once  
One thinks, 'oh no, I am doomed.'*

As Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Since one will die soon, at the time when this work is undone, just started, or half done, the lord of death comes suddenly. Then, regretfully, one thinks, 'Oh no, I am doomed.' When one is regretful from fear what shall one do? Strive in virtue, starting from right now onwards.

Here we can recall the story of the teacher who regularly used to tell his student, 'when we finish our work we will go on a picnic'. One day, the teacher saw a procession in the distance, and he asked the student what was happening, and what were they carrying? The student replied, 'Oh that is someone who has finished all their work, and who is going on a picnic'. In fact it was a corpse being carried in a funeral procession!

*Since one will die soon* indicates that death will not wait. At the time *this work is undone* means that a task has not yet been started, or a task may have *just started*, and *half-done* means that the task has yet to be completed. At any one of these stages the *lord of death* may come *suddenly*. Then one will *regretfully think*, 'Oh, no, I am doomed'. The implication is that if one has not engaged in accumulating virtues then one will feel regret and fear at the time of death. There is nothing that one can resort to if one has not accumulated virtue. The conclusion is that one should *strive in virtue starting from right now onwards*.

It is good to really contemplate these points and take them as a personal instruction, thinking that by engaging in virtues, there will, at the very least, be no regret at the time of death. That would be a good way to die. A peaceful death is one where one has no regrets, and with that lack of regret comes the consolation that one has done one's best to accumulate virtues and merit. When one has accumulated some virtue there definitely seems to be an ease at the time of death. This is a really significant point.

*2.1.2.1.2.1.3. If one does not strive in virtue, one shall be overwhelmed by suffering*

Here there are two subheadings.

*2.1.2.1.2.1.3.1. At the time of death one shall be overwhelmed with misery*

*2.1.2.1.2.1.3.2. If one does not strive in virtue starting right now, one will not achieve one's aims*

***2.1.2.1.2.1.3.1. At the time of death one shall be overwhelmed with misery***

The relevant verse reads:

9. *With swollen red eyes due to misery  
And tears running down their faces,  
Near and dear ones lose hope  
And I look into the faces of the lord of death's  
messengers.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary of this verse reads:

At the time of one's untimely death, near and dear ones, with swollen red eyes due to misery and tears

running down their faces, lose hope, and one, though being afraid, will have to look into the faces of the lord of death's messengers.

First of all, *untimely death* refers to the situation where someone might have a lifespan of, for example, one hundred years. However due to misadventure or accident, they can die prematurely. There used to be a student called Norman Henderson who asked questions, very respectfully, with his palms together. One of his questions I remember, concerned the meaning of untimely death. He wondered how, if there is a fixed time for everyone to die, one could die before that fixed time. He was quite baffled as to how someone could die when it was not their time.

It is quite clearly explained here in the commentary that it would be unfortunate if one were to be completely consumed by fear at the time of death. And if one has not prepared for one's death, then the prospect of death can definitely be a cause for fear and so forth. The exhortation here is to prepare for death by engaging in virtue and so forth. By accepting death and being prepared for it, there will be no place for fear.

As we contemplate these passages talking about death, we need to remind ourselves that the main point is that they are not intended to cause irrational fear about death. Rather, their purpose is to exhort one to engage in virtue, or in more simple terms, to lead a more meaningful life. So it is good to understand these passages in their proper context. Generating irrational fear or paranoia about death doesn't really serve much purpose.

***2..2.1.2.1.3.2. If one does not strive in virtue starting right now, one will not achieve one's aims***

Again, the meaning of the outline is be quite clear.

10. *When overwhelmed by the memory of one's negativities,  
And covering one's body with excrement  
As one becomes mad with fright because one  
Hears the sounds of the hells, what shall one do  
then?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

When being overwhelmed by the memory of the negativities that one created before, and one covers one's body with excrement as one becomes mad with fright, thinking 'I too have to go there', because one hears the sounds of the great sufferings of hell that one will definitely experience, such as being burned and so forth—at this time, when it is unsuitable to practise enthusiasm, what shall one do? One needs to strive in virtue straight away.

As explained quite clearly in the commentary, if, at the time of death one's mind is disturbed by *the memory of the negativities that one has created* in the past, it causes fear and so forth to arise. On a physical level one has no real control over one's bodily functions, and *one's body* can, uncontrollably, be covered by *one's own excrement*. It seems that at this time such people do have fearful visions and so forth in relation to the prospect of their future existence, which causes even more fear. But it is too late *to practise enthusiasm*, because the end of one's life is already in sight. The point here is that one needs to apply enthusiasm and engage in virtue, right now.

#### 2.1.2.1.2.2. Abandoning laziness by contemplating the sufferings of the next life

This is has four subdivisions:

2.1.2.1.2.2.1. Sufferings will definitely arise

2.1.2.1.2.2.2. They are difficult to bear

2.1.2.1.2.2.3. It is contradictory to wish for happiness and not to strive in virtue

2.1.2.1.2.2.4. Exhorting to strive in the method for becoming liberated from suffering

These four points are an exhortation to strive in the method for becoming liberated from suffering.

##### 2.1.2.1.2.2.1. Sufferings will definitely arise

The verse relating to this heading reads:

11. *Since one will have dangers in this life,  
Like a flapping live fish,  
What need is there to mention the unbearable  
sufferings  
Of hell, created by negativity.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

When you die you will have sufferings like a live fish flapping on hot sand. If one has such fears even in this life then what need is there to talk about what happens when you experience directly the unbearable sufferings of hell due to the results of the negativity you created?

This is an explanation of the suffering that can be experienced just before the moment of death, if one has spent one's life in negativities and not taken the initiative to accumulate virtue. Their suffering will be just *like a live fish flapping on hot sand*. If you put a fish on hot sand, its suffering will be unbearable as it flaps about in constant motion.

As the commentary further explains, *such fears* or sufferings, *even in this life* are just a prelude to the sufferings that will be experienced after death. So *what need is there to talk about what happens when you experience directly the unbearable sufferings of hell you will experience as a result of the negativity you created?* The main point here is that if the sufferings just prior to death are so unbearable, then one can just imagine the great unbearable suffering that will have to be experienced in the lower realms like the hell realms.

In order to prevent such suffering one needs to engage in virtue, as a mind that is imbued with virtue assists a peaceful death. Normally we consider that a good death is when the body is relaxed, and there is no experience of agony or pain. So we are being exhorted to prepare for our own comfortable death now, by engaging in virtue.

The point of the main heading, Abandoning Laziness by Contemplating the Sufferings of the Next Life is that we can prevent the prospect of suffering at the time of death, and most importantly the sufferings in the future lifetime. Thinking about that with a calm, logical and factual understanding will encourage one not to waste time now. Rather than engage in laziness, one needs to apply enthusiasm in order to accumulate virtues and avoid negativities. This is the main way to avoid these fears and sufferings.

We will conclude here and recite the tenth chapter of Shantideva's text as a dedication for Tenzin—Ingrid's oldest son—who passed away recently. I don't have to go

into a detailed explanation about the dedication, as the text itself is quite clear. When I received the message about his passing I did my best to do prayers from my side, with the hope that they will benefit him. The message could be passed on to Ingrid that this practice is the best thing we can do for him now. Feeling remorse and regret will not help him in any way, but doing this practice together will definitely benefit him.

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

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