
Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation generated whilst reciting the refuge prayer, we can engage in our usual 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 this purpose I will listen to the teachings well, and put them into practice.

I regularly emphasise the importance of cultivating a joyous and happy mind within oneself. Once cultivated this becomes our true, unfailing companion, able to assist us at all times. We don't regularly pay attention to this factor; rather we seem to become more obsessed with trying to look for external conditions for our happiness, like finding friends or objects. We think these are going to be our companion and make us happy, but when something fails with these external conditions, it brings us great distress. That is because we have not paid attention to developing our true inner friend, and thus we feel distraught and lonely.

Taking the initiative to develop our unfailing inner companion, which is a joyous and happy mind, is of course dependent on the practice of Dharma. This is actually what the practice of Dharma is meant to be for. Practising Dharma doesn't mean listening to the teachings just to acquire an intellectual understanding. It means actually putting whatever understanding we gain from the Dharma into practice, because that is how we develop our mind to become more positive and, consequently, happier.

The reason we need to take this initiative is the fact that there will never be an occasion where we will be separated from our mind, so developing it becomes essential. Wherever we go, whatever we do during the day in our everyday life and even during the night when we go to sleep, it is not as if we leave our mind somewhere else. It is with us all of the time, up until the last moment of this life, when we experience death and are separated from our physical and material conditions. Then, what goes on is the continuity of the mind and also the individual self. Up until the time of death the combination of our body, our mind and our individual self are together at all times. Therefore the wellbeing of our self as an individual is relative to the wellbeing on all three levels: the body, mind and individual self. They all contribute to the wellbeing of others. Recognising this is how we take the initiative to establish our own wellbeing.

Basically the state of our mind is what determines what kind of individual self or characteristics we have. To explain further, when the mind is harsh that makes the individual person harsh. When the mind is gentle, kind and positive it makes the person with that mind a kind

and gentle person. In other words, what determines whether a person is harsh and unruly or kind and gentle is the state of their mind. At any given time it is the state of mind that influences an individual to behave in a certain way. This, then, shows that the person is not innately good or bad right from the beginning. Bad characteristics are not in their nature, it is dependent on their state of mind (or attitude). As these can change from negative into a more positive state, we cannot say that an individual is an innately harsh and unruly person from the beginning.

Further on, at the point of the end of our life, when we separate from our physical body, the individual self and the mind continue on. From this we can begin to understand how our individual self and mind are a continuum that comes from past lifetimes. There is a very clear sign that the individual self and mind we possess now is actually a continuity from past lives. We can say that there are two levels to our individual self: a self which is related to our individual name associated with this life, and a deeper and more subtle level of self which is not associated with our name. We all have a very strong, deep sense of 'me', and when we hold onto this we are not particularly relating to the self that our name or personality represents in this lifetime. This sense of 'me' or self beyond the self related to our current individual personality or name is an indication that such a sense is coming from a previous lifetime. If we actually pay attention we might be able to detect the deeper sense of self within ourselves. This is how the consciousness can be proven to come from a previous existence.

The main point here is to understand why the teachings explain that along with the self comes an individual's consciousness or mind, which is inseparable from it. The actual reasoning presented in the teachings on past lives is that there is a continuity of our consciousness that comes from the past. This is established through reasoning, which then follows on to prove that the individual consciousness goes on to future lives. This is how one proves logically that there are past and future lives.

The point of analysing this is so we can say an individual is not something that is fixed. Thus if we term someone mean or bad we should understand the person is just influenced by a state of mind (at a given time) and when this state of mind changes, the person consequently becomes a more positive person. So a person who is considered mean at one time can become a gentle and positive person at a later time. This understanding can be very helpful in not being fixated on a particular characteristic that one may identify with now—there is a possibility of change for self and others. It can be very helpful to not identify with others solely on the basis of their immediate behaviours, gestures and habits. There is something beyond this; it is not their true nature, and this is helpful as way to have more acceptance of others.

In relation to oneself not taking things too personally and not being too negative and judgemental about others, it really helps to think about this, then any hostile feelings about them can immediately subside. We can definitely learn from others; when they do positive things we can be inspired and learn from that, but even when they do

negative things, we can take the initiative and learn from that too. We can learn that this is not their true nature and how change is possible. From that understanding we can develop a more positive mind and attitude towards them. That is something that will benefit oneself.

So it is by beginning to incorporate this understanding into one's practice that it is possible for some practitioners to state without hesitation that being with an angry person helps them to practise patience. Because of their positive attitude, others being unruly and angry only becomes a cause to find more reason to develop patience, rather than retaliate and create negativity for oneself.

2.1.2.3. ABANDONING THE LAZINESS OF DISCOURAGEMENT

This is divided into three subsections:

2.1.2.3.1. Advice to strive in the antidotes to discouragement

2.1.2.3.2. How it is taught in the scriptures to practice the antidote

2.1.2.3.3. One can attain enlightenment if one strives, by stopping laziness

2.1.2.3.1. Advice to strive in the antidotes to discouragement

The verse reads:

16. *Without discouragement, with armies,
Sincerity and self-empowerment,
Equalise self and others,
Exchange self and others.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins with:

Kings conquer their enemies with the four types of armies.

Under the heading Gyaltsab Je presents advice on how to apply antidotes for overcoming discouragement, or the laziness of despondency.

The commentary states that a king conquers the enemies with four types of armies, which is an analogy for a person applying the four types of enthusiasm to overcome discouragement. Earlier in the text 'overcoming' referred to the king overcoming external enemies like enemies of a country. Here overcoming relates to the inner enemies, the delusions within oneself. That is how the analogy is to be understood.

As the commentary further explains:

Similarly, bodhisattvas initially lift up their minds and generate the armour-like enthusiasm free from despondency that intends to train in the path.

The essential point here is *bodhisattvas initially lift up their minds*. To lift up one's mind means to have a strong, courageous mind right from the beginning, which is a significant way to overcome despondency. This is important for any kind of task one wishes to undertake, but here the advice relates to bodhisattvas engaging in practices to benefit other sentient beings in great ways. In relation to our own practices, whatever level we may be at or whatever task we might undertake, we too need to have a courageous mind initially. If we don't have this from the beginning, our mind would be wary and uncertain, and it would be very hard to take on the task at all. And even if one did, it would be easy to lose one's

enthusiasm. So having a courageous and uplifted mind right from the start is what is being recommended.

Bodhisattvas who initially uplift their minds generate armour-like enthusiasm (which was explained in earlier sessions). And having generated armour-like enthusiasm, which is being *free from despondency*, they intend to train in the path.

The commentary continues:

Then they generate the enthusiasm of application that builds up the army of the two accumulations as preparation.

At the time of the main part they sincerely practice introspection and mindfulness, and thus gain control over themselves as their body and mind become serviceable.

Having done that, one should equalise and exchange self and others as explained below.

Next, bodhisattvas *generate the enthusiasm of application* and that enthusiasm *builds up the army of the two accumulations as preparation*. Then, at the time of the main part of their practice, *they sincerely practise introspection and mindfulness and thus gain control over themselves*. I have emphasised regularly that mindfulness and introspection are the two most essential tools for securing one's practice, for it not to decline, and to ensure it has unceasing continuity. *Mindfulness* is a state of mind that constantly remembers the points of the practice, and *introspection* is the state of mind that helps detect whether one's mind is wavering away from the practice and brings it back again. Therefore mindfulness and introspection are the most essential tools for ensuring one has a steady practice.

When one has incorporated introspection and mindfulness into one's practice, then one gains control. The bodhisattvas practise this way *and thus gain control over themselves as their body and mind become serviceable*. Here we need to understand the meditation on calm abiding, the state of mental quiescence, in a very detailed way. When one uses the tools of mindfulness and introspection, and continuously focuses single-pointedly on the meditation object, through discipline and practice one reaches a state where one overcomes the defects of one's body and mind. The *physical defects* are the faults of the body that make the body feel very heavy and sluggish. When trying to meditate, aches and pains are all defects of our physical body. *Defects of the mind* make the mind feel weighed down, sluggish and heavy.

Gaining control over themselves relates to gaining complete control over their body, speech and mind and all the activities related to the body, speech and mind. In gaining this serviceability one then gains full capacity to apply them in virtue at all times.

The commentary continues that having gained complete control over one's body and mind *one should equalise and exchange self and others*. What the bodhisattvas do next is develop and further enhance bodhicitta by applying the method of exchanging self and others, right from the beginning, and it becomes a powerful method. This is the optimum method for generating bodhicitta, and is explained in detail in the eighth chapter. Here Gyaltsab Je strongly suggests that to generate bodhicitta one first

needs to achieve calm abiding, as it is difficult to generate bodhicitta without having steady concentration. He clearly states this in another text as well, although there are different interpretations as to whether this is the case or not.

2.1.2.3.2. *How it is taught in the scriptures to practice the antidotes*

The next section of the commentary explains how the antidotes are presented in the scriptures, the sutras themselves.

The commentary first presents this statement:

The Buddha alone, being of very sharp faculty, achieved his aim by practising for many countless great eons the extremely difficult trainings and accumulated infinite merits by making an effort in enthusiasm. Do not become discouraged and despondent, saying, 'Since I am not like this, how could I attain enlightenment?'

When one contemplates how the Buddha attained the state of omniscience by accumulating virtue and merit over countless great eons, it can bring about a sense of despondency, where one thinks 'How can I possibly achieve that myself?' Understand that this despondency is not a passing despondency, where one feels 'I cannot do that' but rather a specific type of despondency that arises after analysing and contemplating what it takes to become an enlightened being.

One accepts that to benefit other beings one has to achieve enlightenment. One then contemplates on what the Buddha must have done to develop his qualities. One then realises that no virtues or qualities can arise without depending on causes. In recognising the countless qualities and virtues in the Buddha's mind, one realises they are all dependent on numerous causes that had to be created in the past, and each of these involved overcoming each and every non-virtuous deed. Overcoming one non-virtuous deed yields one virtue, and in that way over countless eons the Buddha, as a bodhisattva, created all the causes required to obtain all those results. After contemplating this, a sense of despondency can arise. This is also clearly explained in the Lam Rim teachings.

The verse reads:

17. *Do not be despondent,
Saying 'How could I become enlightened?',
Since the Tathagata speaks the truth,
He taught also this truth thus.*

The commentary continues:

Question: In what manner did he teach?

Answer: From the *Sutra requested by Subahu*.

Further, bodhisattvas should practice correctly and with emphasis like this: They should think, 'If those that turned into lions, tigers, dogs and jackals, vultures, cranes, crows and owls, worms, bees, flies and mosquitoes become awakened in highest enlightenment, then now, while I am a human, I need to practice the enthusiasm that achieves enlightenment, even at the cost of my life.'

The same is also taught in the *Clouds of Jewels Sutra*.

As the commentary explains, one should not become discouraged or despondent by saying or thinking *Since I*

am not like this, how could I attain enlightenment?' This sentiment is expressed in one's present state of being, which is riddled with delusions and faults. Having a deluded state of mind in this life one may think one could never change, could never attempt to accumulate all those causes to achieve enlightenment. This is the laziness of discouragement or despondency.

In explaining the meaning of the second two lines the commentary says:

Since the Tathagata speaks the truth, he thus also taught this truth, which is suitable to accept since he has no cause to speak deceptively.

The main point here is that the Buddha abandoned all causes of deception, and that as there are no causes of deception there is no way the Buddha would speak deceptively. We can relate this to our ordinary lives, when we sometimes feel we can't trust somebody because they might be deceptive. So even though they might appear to be telling the truth, it can seem like they have cause for speaking deceptively, and we may be a bit unsure about what they say.

Contrast this with the Buddha's words. The Buddha has overcome all causes of deception, so there is no possibility for the Buddha to speak deceptively. Thus that which was taught by the Buddha can be taken as the truth as presented in the sutra below.

The commentary explains if asked: *In what manner did he teach?* Then the answer, which is presented here is *From the Sutra requested by Subahu*.

The Sutra presents:

Further, bodhisattvas should practice correctly and with emphasis like this: They should think, 'If those that turned into lions, tigers, dogs and jackals, vultures, cranes, crows and owls, worms, bees, flies and mosquitoes become awakened in highest enlightenment, then now, while I am a human, I need to practise the enthusiasm that achieves enlightenment, even at the cost of my life.'

Rebirth as one of the animals listed here would be considered as being inferior to a human rebirth. Yet what is being presented here is that even these animals and insects have a buddha-nature, and with it they have the possibility of becoming enlightened. The commentary emphasises that animals like *flies and mosquitoes become awakened in highest enlightenment, then now, while I am a human, I need to practise the enthusiasm that achieves enlightenment, even at the cost of my life* and exhorts us to embrace our human existence with all its conditions intact. The Buddha said that even beings in an inferior state, with less intellect, have the potential to become enlightened, so surely this means that as a human with all the reasons to create the causes for enlightenment, we should definitely not be despondent. In this way we are being exhorted to overcome the laziness of despondency and discouragement. The main point is that each and every living creature has the buddha-nature and the ability to achieve buddhahood. With our human rebirth we should make the most of this opportunity.

2.1.2.3.3. One can attain enlightenment if one strives, by stopping laziness

This has four subdivisions:

2.1.2.3.3.1. Considering that one can attain enlightenment if one generates the power of enthusiasm

2.1.2.3.3.2. The austerities that accomplish enlightenment are suitable to bear since they do not possess even partially the sufferings of the lower realms

2.1.2.3.3.3. They are suitable to bear since the king of physicians heals great diseases with gentle methods

2.1.2.3.3.4. It is suitable to like the austerities since they lack suffering and are strengthened by happiness

2.1.2.3.3.1. Considering that one can attain enlightenment if one generates the power of enthusiasm

This is a significant point relating to how the power of generating enthusiasm within oneself can assist one to attain enlightenment.

18. *Those that became flies, mosquitoes
Bees and likewise worms,
Even they, if they generated the force of
enthusiasm,
Attain the difficult to attain highest
enlightenment.*

19. *One like oneself, who has been born into the
human race,
And knows what is beneficial and what is
harmful,
If one does not give up the practice of
enlightenment,
Then why should one not attain enlightenment?*

The commentary explains the meaning:

As it was taught earlier, even those that became flies, mosquitoes, bees and likewise worms, will attain the difficult to attain highest enlightenment if they generate the force of enthusiasm and build up the accumulations.

Since it is taught like this, then someone like oneself, having been born into the special human race, knowing what is beneficial and has to be adapted, what harms and has to be abandoned to attain the aim of the wish for enlightenment, if one takes up the practices of enlightenment and does not give them up, then why should one not attain enlightenment? Determine that you can definitely attain it.

It is clearly explained here that the way to develop enthusiasm and overcome the laziness of despondency is to recognise that even the animals mentioned here can become enlightened. So compared to the animals' inferior physical condition, we should not be despondent as we have been born as a human with a supreme body.

Coupled with this state of mind, this discriminative wisdom of *knowing what is beneficial and has to be adapted, what harms and has to be abandoned to attain the aim of the wish for enlightenment* is the intelligence we possess as humans to attain enlightenment. Therefore, if the Buddha stated that even animals in their inferior state can generate the force of enthusiasm and build up accumulations able to attain enlightenment, then someone like oneself, who is born with all the conditions intact, with a sound physical body and sound mind, with the wisdom understanding the

causes of enlightenment, then why should one not attain enlightenment, if one were to formally take up the practices of enlightenment and not give up? One would definitely achieve it. As I often emphasise, in our condition right now, it is not as though we lack understanding. What we lack is putting it into practice. In terms of understanding the Dharma. We definitely have sufficient understanding, but if we don't put it into practice then this is when we fall short in accumulating the causes of merits etc. One should determine that one can definitely attain enlightenment, and ask oneself, 'Why shouldn't I attain enlightenment given that I have all the reasons and all the conditions necessary to attain it.'

2.1.2.3.3.2. The austerities that accomplish enlightenment are suitable to bear since they do not possess even partially the sufferings of the lower realms

This has three subdivisions:

2.1.2.3.3.2.1. Fear of the austerities of giving up legs, arms, and so forth is unsuitable

2.1.2.3.3.2.2. One does not need to experience the sufferings of the lower migrations even partially

2.1.2.3.3.2.3. The example of how it is suitable to bear small sufferings to destroy a big sickness

We will cover this next week.

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

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