

# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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While maintaining the motivation that we generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our meditation practice. *[meditation]*

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

In order to fully benefit all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the Mahayana teachings and put them into practise well, so that they become the means to subdue my own mind.

This is an essential motivation.

The *tong-len* meditation that we did earlier is an optimum method for developing bodhicitta. In particular, it serves as the method for developing the superior intention that is part of the equalising and exchanging self with other technique of developing bodhicitta. Superior intention is not specifically listed as a separate cause with this technique, as it is integrated in the giving and taking practice.

When we do this practice wholeheartedly and sincerely, it involves the intention of taking on the responsibility for freeing all beings from suffering, and thus taking upon oneself all the sufferings of other beings. It also involves taking responsibility for establishing all sentient beings in happiness by giving them one's own happiness. In the taking part of the practice we imagine taking upon ourselves every type of suffering experienced by sentient beings, and in the giving part, we give all joy and happiness to all sentient beings. When we do this meditation sincerely it becomes a very powerful practice.

As indicated in the teachings, this is a core Mahayana practice because it involves generating the highest altruistic intention. By training our mind in taking upon the sufferings of others, and giving them all happiness, we are actually engaging in a Mahayana practice.

Doing this practice sincerely means bringing to mind the actual meaning of the words as we recite them. As explained in the teachings, we familiarise ourselves with any practice first by reciting the words, then we reflect and meditate on the meaning. If we just recite the words and don't really think about their meaning, then of course it remains at the level of being just words. Acquainting one's mind with the words means not just reciting the words, but actually bringing their meaning to mind. With the *tong-len* practice, as we recite the words from the verses we also envision that the giving and taking is actually taking place.

## 2.1.2.3. ABANDONING THE LAZINESS OF DISCOURAGEMENT

2.1.2.3.3. *One can attain enlightenment if one strives, by stopping laziness (cont.)*

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**

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

These explanations relate to actual states of mind that occur during a practice. When bodhisattvas practise developing great love and compassion, they reach the point of taking upon themselves the responsibility for helping all other sentient beings. One reaches the point of feeling determined that one definitely has to obtain enlightenment in order to fully benefit sentient beings. There's no other way to fully utilise one's potential to benefit sentient beings other than actually attaining enlightenment.

Having developed that intention, one considers the practices that one needs to engage in if one is to achieve enlightenment. These include the practice of generosity. Here one may be daunted by the thought of practising generosity of giving away one's legs, arms and limbs and so forth. Doubt about one's capacity to actually engage in the practices that are required to achieve enlightenment may then arise. This is not just a theoretical thought; these are states of mind that actually do occur.

These two verses present the point:

20. *If: 'Well, because one has to give up  
Legs and arms I am afraid.'  
Not discerning between heavy and light  
One becomes afraid due to ignorance.*
21. *For innumerable tens of millions of eons  
One has been cut many times,  
Stabbed, burned and slashed,  
But one has not attained enlightenment.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary begins by expressing the doubt:

If one were to say, 'Well, though one can achieve it through enthusiasm, I am afraid, because one needs to practise the generosity of giving away one's legs, arms, head, and so forth, and I am not able to engage in these difficult practices'.

The response to this is:

Answer: Though one needs to practise generosity with these, without having distinguished well between heavy and light suffering, one is ignorant with regard to what has to be abandoned, and what has to be adopted, and one is afraid, although it is unnecessary to be afraid.

That is because, while circling in cyclic existence since beginningless time one has experienced the sufferings of one's body being cut, stabbed, burned by fire and slashed by weapons not only once, but many times for innumerable tens of millions of eons in the hells. But, however much one has experienced this, it has only exhausted purposelessly the vitality of one's body, and one has not achieved highest enlightenment.

As presented here, when a bodhisattva initially considers the possibility of achieving enlightenment, they see that when the appropriate causes are accumulated, then the

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result of enlightenment is definitely possible, and that if one applies enthusiasm then one can definitely achieve enlightenment.

When further considering the types of causes that have to be accumulated, one thinks about, for example, the practice of generosity, where one might have to give away one's legs, arms and so forth. That may cause a sense of fear such as, 'Oh, I might not be able to engage in these practices to that extent'.

One definitely needs to practise generosity in such ways, and fear of practising like that would arise when one is not able to distinguish *between heavy and light sufferings*. As explained here, heavy sufferings are the sufferings experienced in the hell realms, where one involuntarily experiences great extremes of suffering. If one neglects to recall that, one fails to see that the relatively minor sufferings, such as giving away one's limbs and so forth, which brings about great purpose, lead to great achievement. Feeling daunted and fearful of engaging in some practices will arise if one does not recall this.

When one is able to distinguish clearly between heavy and light suffering, one will understand that practising generosity by giving away limbs and so forth is really quite a minor suffering when compared to the great sufferings to be experienced in the hell realms. Furthermore, it has a great purpose, as it is a cause for actually achieving enlightenment. Thinking like this one develops a courageous mind of willingly taking these sufferings upon oneself, and is then able to endure them.

On a contemporary level, we can see in our normal day-to-day activities that those who wish to achieve some significant result in their work or studies definitely need to put up with some hardships and difficulties for one, two or three years. If one believes that one could achieve something quickly, and is daunted by small hardships, then one would never be able to achieve any significant result, in either study or work. So even in mundane activities we can see that in order to achieve a significant result, one also needs to endure some hardships and difficulties.

The text refers to being *ignorant with regard to what has to be abandoned and what has to be adopted*. Even though not explicitly mentioned here, one can derive from this explanation the understanding that it is reasonable to develop the fear of having to experience the sufferings of the lower realms, which will prevent one from creating the causes of those sufferings, which is negativity. Whereas being fearful of austere practices will prevent one from engaging in virtue and accumulating merit from practising generosity and so forth, which is the cause for achieving enlightenment. The first type of fear is a reasonable fear that we actually need to cultivate, as it will prevent us from creating the numerous types of negativities that are all causes for the sufferings of the lower realms. The unreasonable fear that we do need to abandon is the fear of engaging in austere practices of generosity and so forth, when in fact they are supreme causes for accumulating virtues and merits, and thus the cause for enlightenment. When we think about it in these practical ways, we can see that Shantideva is giving us very personal and profound advice.

The qualm that was raised earlier is *well, though one can achieve it through enthusiasm, I am afraid*. Now while this may be explicitly related to practicing bodhisattvas, it is also a significant personal instruction. The reason why one should not be afraid of such austerities is that *while circling in cyclic existence since beginningless time one has experienced the sufferings of one's body being cut, stabbed, burned by fire and slashed by weapons not only once, but many times for innumerable tens of millions of eons in the hells*.

What is being presented here is that it is not as if one is afraid of something that one has not previously experienced. In fact, one has already experienced the sufferings of being cut and so forth, many times over. In other words, we might feel fearful about being generous with our limbs, arms and legs and so forth, but, in fact, we've already experienced the sufferings of having our legs and limbs cut off numerous times in the past.

Despite having experienced all these sufferings in the past, it has not until now become a cause for our enlightenment. However this time around it is actually worthwhile to engage in the practice, as it will become a cause for enlightenment. That is the point being made here.

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

While one may experience some kind of suffering from these practices, it is nowhere near the extent of sufferings that one would otherwise have to experience in the hell realms. At this point it is good to bring to mind the importance of the practice of patience, as a way of enduring the sufferings one may experience from practising generosity and so forth.

We can recall here that Lama Tsong Khapa's advice that we need to really acquaint our mind particularly with the patience of definitely thinking about the Dharma, and the patience of willingly accepting sufferings. There are many more opportunities to experience the natural sufferings that fall upon us than there are occasions when we need to practise patience when others harm us. Being intentionally harmed is much rarer than the suffering that one perpetually experiences at any given time.

We have all experienced the different types of suffering that occur continuously—it is one problem after another. We always seem to be faced with some sort of problem, either from our immediate surroundings or mentally, and they never seem to end. Therefore the patience of willingly accepting suffering is an extremely important practice, as a way of not becoming overwhelmed and daunted by these problems. As explained in the teachings, the best way to be able to deal with a problem is to willingly accept that problem. Then, whatever the problem may be, one will have the capacity to actually deal with it, and solve the problem. If we don't engage in the practice of willingly accepting suffering, then we become overwhelmed and anxious about not being able to cope, and this creates even more suffering for us. That is why this essential advice is so relevant.

If we fail to engage in the practice of willingly accepting suffering, especially psychological or mental suffering, then we can become completely overwhelmed, and reach

a point where we are seemingly not able to cope. Whereas when we are able to practise patience by accepting mental suffering and problems, then when we experience some physical suffering we will not be daunted it, due to the strength derived from willingly accepting that suffering. That is because when the mind is in a strong position it will be able to handle the physical suffering, and cope much better with it. Conversely, if one is not able to deal with mental suffering, then even the slightest physical suffering can also cause great distress.

If we can maintain the practice of patience where our mind does not become overwhelmed and daunted, then we will be able to maintain our mental strength and tranquillity. Regardless of the difficulties and problems that may be occurring, they will not disturb the mind. Otherwise the mind becomes disturbed and chaotic, and really distressed, and everything appears to be very grim. Then one may lose hope and so forth. Whereas when one has mastered that practice to the level of withstanding those difficulties and problems, then even when there are difficulties they will not disturb the mind, which will be able to maintain its integrity and practise continuously.

Patience is particularly important when dealing with the hardships and sufferings that occur during our practice. We can all relate to this. If we were not to have the mind of endurance and patience, then we might feel that a practice is too difficult and just give up even with the slightest of difficulties. If we had the choice, would we willingly accept some hardships and engage in practice, or not engage in practice so that we don't have to experience any hardship? If we choose the second then there's a great danger that we might choose not to practise at all, and as presented earlier in the text, just enjoy ourselves during the day and sleep through the night. So we need to have a really courageous mind to choose wisely.

We need to relate any given points in the text to earlier explanations, which in this instance is to also apply the practice of patience.

The verse relating to this heading reads:

22. *There is a measure to  
One's sufferings in attaining enlightenment,  
Similar to the sufferings of a bodily procedure  
To clear the harm of tormenting diseases.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

If one considers the sufferings of the lower migrations, then the sufferings of the austerities of attaining enlightenment are of small measure and last a short time by comparison. They are also easy to bear, similar to being able to bear the sufferings of a bodily procedure to clear the harm of a tormenting disease.

As the commentary explains, *if one considers the sufferings of the lower migrations, then the sufferings of the austerities of attaining enlightenment are of small measure and last a short time by comparison.* According to the Mahayana Perfection Vehicle, we have to practise for three countless eons to achieve enlightenment, but one can spend many more countless eons in the lower realms. While that is the general presentation in the Mahayana Perfection Vehicle, it is explained in more advanced teachings that one can

actually achieve enlightenment even in just one lifetime. Lama Tsong Khapa is said to have obtained enlightenment in one lifetime, and there are many other examples of great masters who also obtained enlightenment in one lifetime. So one actually can achieve the state of enlightenment in a very short time if one engages in, and applies the practices. In comparison to the sufferings that have to be experienced in the lower realms, it's really of very short duration.

The example that is presented here is that *they are also easy to bear, similar to being able to bear the sufferings of a bodily procedure to clear the harm of tormenting diseases.* A tormenting disease is a disease that can cause great suffering if it is not cured. The cure might also cause some suffering, especially if the body is cut open as part of that cure, yet that is willingly accepted. It is considered to be a small suffering to be endured for the sake of removing the cause of a much greater suffering caused by a disease.

2.1.2.3.3.2.3 *The example of how it is suitable to bear small sufferings to destroy a great sickness*

The verse relating to this outline reads:

23. *All physicians make unpleasant sickness  
Go away with cures.  
Hence, one is able to bear small unpleasantness  
To destroy many sufferings.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains that:

All physicians will employ slightly unpleasant cures to make an unpleasant sickness go away. Likewise, since the austerities to achieve enlightenment are very small sufferings, one should bear the small suffering of the austerity to destroy the many sufferings of cyclic existence. In this way one pacifies boundless sufferings of self and other.

As clearly explained here, *all physicians will employ similar methods of applying unpleasant cures to make an unpleasant sickness go away. The sufferings of the austerities needed to achieve enlightenment are, in comparison, very small.* One needs to be able to bear these sufferings, as they are a cause to remove the many sufferings of cyclic existence. This pacifies the suffering of oneself and others.

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

This is subdivided into three:

2.1.2.3.3.3.1. The Buddha shows methods to cure great diseases without having to experience the slightest suffering

2.1.2.3.3.3.2. It is forbidden to give one's body for as long as one has difficulty

2.1.2.3.3.3.3. It is not difficult since the time taught for giving one's body is when one is habituated to give it like a vegetable

These three outlines systematically remove all of the doubts that may occur relating to engaging in the practices.

2.1.2.3.3.3.1. *The Buddha shows methods to cure great diseases without having to experience the slightest suffering*

The relevant verse reads:

24. *The supreme physician does not act  
In accordance with common cures;*

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*He cures boundless great diseases  
With extremely gentle methods.*

Here, Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

While one is working to achieve enlightenment, the supreme of physicians, the Able One, does not employ austerities like the common cures to cure sicknesses. He heals the boundless heavy sickness of having to wander in cyclic existence due to the afflictions with the method of an easy path leading to a happy result, without the extremes of being disheartened and exhausted or sensual decadence. Therefore, how is it suitable to be afraid of the austerities?

As the commentary explains, *while one is working to achieve enlightenment, the supreme of physicians, which refers to the Able One, or the Buddha, does not employ austerities like the common cures to cure sicknesses.* The methods that normal physicians use to treat disease can involve harsh and invasive treatments like cutting or even burning flesh, piercing it with needles and so forth. Even the tools they use are quite frightening—I recall seeing a young child crying when he saw the needle, before the treatment had even begun. This is how normal diseases are treated. The Buddha, who is likened to a supreme physician, does not use the harsh methods employed by normal physicians. In fact his methods are not invasive, are all very gentle, and do not harm in any way.

The method that the supreme physician, the Buddha, employs is that he *heals the boundless heavy sickness of having to wander in cyclic existence due to the afflictions with the method of an easy path leading to a happy result.* The easy, or suitable path refers to the practices leading to enlightenment, such as the six perfections. Practising generosity is a relatively easy practice, while practising moral ethics is a very gentle practice of refraining from harming others. When it comes to concentration, very suitable methods are presented. One develops concentration by sitting in the seven-point posture of the Buddha Vairochana, and developing a clear mind. These precise and gentle methods, which gradually lead to the development of higher realisations, are very meticulously presented.

Following this easy and suitable path leads to the happy result of enlightenment. Thus, the path itself is a happy and gentle path, which leads to the ultimate happy result of achieving enlightenment. Such a path is free from the *extremes of sensual decadence, and being disheartened and exhausted. Therefore, how is it suitable to be afraid of the austerities?* This implies that one should not be afraid of austere practices, when, in fact, they are gentle and suitable to practise, and moreover lead to the great result of enlightenment. That is definitely something that one should not be afraid of. Indeed one should willingly engage in them.

*2.1.2.3.3.2. It is forbidden to give one's body for as long as one has the thought that holds it difficult*

This relates to the earlier point of being daunted by the thought of giving one's body parts. As presented here, one should not be engaging in such practices for as long as one has the thought that considers it difficult to give one's body.

The verse relating to this outline is:

*25. The guide induces one to initially train  
Even in the generosity of vegetables and such.  
Having become habituated, then subsequently  
One gradually also offers one's flesh.*

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

Initially, when one is not even acquainted with offering vegetables and the like, the guide, the Buddha, induces one to train in the generosity of food, drink, vegetables and so forth. When one has become acquainted with this without difficulty, then subsequently one also gradually offers one's flesh.

It is not being suggested that one should start the training in generosity by giving away one's body parts or flesh, blood and so forth. As explained in the commentary, the Buddha presented the methods for practising generosity in a very skilful way. He advised familiarising oneself with the practice of generosity with things that are plentiful, such as food and drink, *vegetables and so forth*, which one can offer without much difficulty. As one becomes acquainted with that, one can further develop one's practice of generosity by giving more valuable things.

*When one has become habituated to, or acquainted with this without difficulty,* refers to having become acquainted with being generous with the material possessions such as food, drink, clothing and so forth. Through that acquaintance one reaches the point where one has no hesitation in giving away more valuable possessions. Through acquaintance and familiarity with that level of generosity, *then subsequently one also gradually offers one's flesh.* Through familiarity with easier acts of generosity one can reach the point where there is no hesitation in offering one's flesh, limbs and so forth when necessary.

*2.1.2.3.3.3. It is not difficult since the time taught for giving one's body is when one is habituated to give it like a vegetable*

Following on from the previous point, this section covers when it is suitable to offer one's body, flesh and so forth.

The verse relating to this reads:

*26. Once one has generated the awareness  
Of one's body as a vegetable or the like,  
Then one offers one's flesh and the like.  
Where lies the difficulty in that?*

As the commentary explains:

Once one has, through familiarity, generated the awareness of the generosity of one's body as the generosity of a vegetable or the like, then one can offer one's flesh and such.

Where lies the difficulty in that? Since there is not the slightest difficulty, it is unsuitable to be afraid.

As explained in the commentary, through familiarity with being generous with material possessions, one increases the mind of generosity to the point where there is no hesitation in offering these material possessions. Through that familiarity one reaches the point where offering one's body parts is no different to being generous with material possessions. In other words, it is suitable to offer one's body parts, as giving a vegetable and giving one's body parts amount to the same thing.

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

This section is to remove any doubt about whether bodhisattvas suffer. When bodhisattvas reach the higher paths and grounds, then engaging in practices of generosity is a cause for great joy and happiness, rather than unhappiness and suffering. Therefore it is suitable for them to practise austerities.

This section is subdivided into four:

2.1.2.3.3.4.1. Though a person who is unskilled in the sequence of training in the path has physical and mental unhappiness, those who are skilled do not have the suffering of austerities

2.1.2.3.3.4.2. There is no cause then for a great bodhisattva to be disheartened with cyclic existence

2.1.2.3.3.4.3. For these reasons they are said to be more skilled in achieving the path than a Hinayana

2.1.2.3.3.4.4. Hence, it is unsuitable to be discouraged from the actions of a bodhisattva

*2.1.2.3.3.4.1. Though a person who is unskilled in the sequence of training in the path has physical and mental unhappiness, those who are skilled do not have the suffering of austerities*

The verse relating to this is:

*27. No suffering because of having abandoned negativity,  
No dislike because of being skilful.  
Therefore, wrong conceptions  
And negativities harm mind and body.*

The commentary reads:

Bodhisattvas with the pure thought of compassion do not have physical suffering when they offer their body, because they have abandoned all the negativities of the three doors, and they also do not experience mental dislike because they are skilful regarding the time for offering the body.

Therefore, the wrong conceptions of grasping at the self of person and grasping at mine, and the negativities of killing and so forth, harm mind and body, and the great bodhisattvas have abandoned these causes for harm.

As the commentary explains, *bodhisattvas with the pure thought of compassion, do not have physical suffering when they offer their body, because they have abandoned all the negativities of the three doors, and they also do not experience mental dislike because they are skilful or have the knowledge regarding the time for offering the body.* As presented here, great bodhisattvas, who have attained high levels on the paths and grounds have no physical suffering, because they have abandoned all the negativities of the three doors.

This indicates that any mental or physical suffering that we experience on any of the three levels, is due to the negativities we create because we still have the negativities of the three doors. When negativities have been abandoned, then any suffering in relation to the three doors ceases.

Furthermore, *they also do not experience mental dislike because they are skilful regarding the time for offering the body.* Thus, because they have the skill of knowing the suitable time to give their body they do not hesitate to give their body parts whenever necessary.

*Wrong conceptions of grasping at the self of person and grasping at mine, and the negativities of killing and so forth, harm mind and body, yet the great bodhisattvas have abandoned these causes for harm.* More specifically, abandoning the wrong conceptions of grasping at a self of persons, and grasping at 'mine' refers to bodhisattvas who have gained a direct realisation of emptiness.

Bodhisattvas at the lower levels don't have any wrong conceptions of grasping at the self of person, and grasping at 'mine', but they don't yet have the direct realisation of emptiness.

Because the bodhisattvas who have obtained the direct realisation of emptiness have removed all the negativities of killing and so forth, they've removed the causes of harm to the mind and the body.

What is specifically explained here is that the negativity that one accumulates from engaging in the ten non-virtues such as killing and so forth, is a cause for physical and mental pain and suffering. Since *the great bodhisattvas have abandoned such causes*, they do not experience any physical and mental pain or suffering. What this implicitly points out is that if we wish to avoid suffering, then we need to avoid its causes, which are the ten non-virtues.

*2.1.2.3.3.4.2. There is no cause then for a great bodhisattva to be disheartened with cyclic existence*

The doubt which may arise is whether bodhisattvas who, with their commitment to benefitting sentient beings, remain in cyclic existence for a long time, will be daunted by having to remain in cyclic existence?

The presentation under this heading explains that bodhisattvas will not be disheartened about remaining in cyclic existence.

We can conclude here, and finish this in our next session.

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

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