

# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

༄༅། །བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

14 July 2015

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

Now we can generate a positive motivation for receiving the teaching 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 practice well.

The more we familiarise ourselves with a positive motivation like this (as we do in our meditation sessions and in listening to teachings etc.) the more we can readily generate it, and apply it to whatever practice we engage in. This is very meaningful. In meditation it is questionable which renders a better chance of accumulating merit: generating a positive motivation, or the meditation practice itself. In spending even a few moments generating a very positive motivation, one definitely accumulates extensive merit.

Our motivation involves generating an intention to achieve enlightenment for the sake of limitless mother sentient beings, so to that extent, even for a few moments when we generate it, we definitely get a sky full of merit. If we cannot generate such a motivation before our practice, it is questionable whether it will arise spontaneously during the actual practice. The most essential attitude one needs to try and adopt at all times is a positive and kind attitude. If we ensure we have that, then whatever we do, whatever the situation we find ourselves in, we can make it most beneficial. If we lose that, it is a great loss. That is why I emphasise the importance of developing loving kindness again and again.

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

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

The outline here reflects the meaning of the verse and relates to bodhisattvas who have control over their rebirths. These bodhisattvas are not reborn in cyclic existence due to uncontrolled delusions and karma, but are actually born out of their aspiration to benefit sentient beings. For as long as they remain in samsara they do not become disheartened or daunted, because their purpose is solely to benefit sentient beings.

The verse reads:

28. *If the body is happy through merits  
And the mind is happy through skill,  
Though remaining in cyclic existence for the  
purpose of others  
Why should those with compassion be  
disheartened?*

The commentary reads:

Bodhisattvas have physical happiness through the merits of generosity and so forth, and they have

mental happiness, like the bodhisattva ever-crying, through being skilful regarding what has to be adopted and what has to be rejected, and the meaning of emptiness. So, since there is no cause for suffering, why should those with compassion become disheartened, even though they remain in cyclic existence for the purpose of others?

The commentary explains that the *bodhisattvas have physical happiness* which is gained *through the merits of generosity and so forth*—which includes the merits gained from observing morality, practising patience, joyous effort and concentration. What is being presented here is the aspects of merit and wisdom incorporated in the practice of the six perfections. The merits accumulated from such practices as generosity, contribute to having a physically sound body up to the point of not having any physical discomfort. Therefore a bodhisattva's body, which is the result of these practices, is one which experiences happiness rather than suffering. Furthermore, *they have mental happiness, like the bodhisattva ever-crying, by being skilful in what has to be adopted and what has to be rejected, and the meaning of emptiness.* Wisdom here also includes a precise understanding of karma, how to apply and abide by the law of cause and effect, as well as the realisation of emptiness. The accumulation of wisdom becomes a cause for mental happiness. Thus, through the combination of merit and wisdom, bodhisattvas obtain a body endowed with physical happiness, and a mind which experiences mental happiness. As explained further in the commentary, *since there is no cause for suffering, within their physical aggregates or the mental continuum, why should those with compassion become disheartened even though they may remain in cyclic existence, for the purpose of others?* This rhetorical question implies that since there is no physical or mental suffering and only happiness, a bodhisattva in fact does not become disheartened by remaining in samsara for the sake of benefiting other sentient beings.

A relevant point made in the earlier part of the chapter was that bodhisattvas reach a level where they are able to be generous with their body parts, and they regard giving them away as no different to giving away food or vegetables. At that point, when they have no hesitation at the prospect of giving away their bodies (when necessary) to others, it is a suitable time for them to actually give their body, because they don't become disheartened by that act of generosity. On our own level we can relate to the fact that when we have a strong physical illness, or mental distress, we are more vulnerable to becoming disheartened. It is very easy for one to lose enthusiasm and become disheartened and daunted by the tasks one has to perform, because of the physical and mental suffering entailed in them. Conversely, when we are feeling quite well physically and mentally, we are more capable of engaging in any activity we intend to accomplish. While the direct advice here is for bodhisattvas, we can definitely relate the importance of using our own physical and mental wellbeing as a way of continuing with virtuous activities in our own practice.

We need to understand that bodhisattvas not being disheartened with cyclic existence means they are not disheartened by the prospect of being in samsara for the sole purpose of benefiting other sentient beings. If, on our ordinary level, we don't utilise our wellbeing properly when we are feeling good physically and mentally, we can lose our disheartenment with samsara, and actually lose the purpose for practising Dharma. You probably find it true that when everything is going quite well, there is a danger of forgetting about the practice of Dharma. This means we are actually

enjoying samsaric pleasures at that time and don't feel disheartened with samsara. To develop renunciation at an ordinary level we first need to become disheartened with samsara as a way to be free from samsara itself. This doesn't imply that bodhisattvas don't have renunciation! Of course they do, but it is a renunciation based on having great compassion and love for other sentient beings whereby they don't become disheartened by the prospect of being in samsara. You need to understand this in its proper context.

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

The outline here indicates that because of being undaunted by the prospect of being in samsara for the benefit of mother sentient beings, bodhisattvas are much more skilled in achieving the path than those who follow the Hinayana path. The presentation here provides immaculately profound instructions on how to really engage in the practice. Even contemplating on the meaning of these verses and pausing for a few moments to think about their meaning can, in itself, become a powerful meditation practice that greatly benefits our mind.

The verse reads:

*29. They exhaust previous negativities  
Through the power of the mind of  
enlightenment,  
And they contain an ocean of merits.  
Therefore they are said to be superior than the  
hearers.*

The commentary reads as follows:

Since those with compassion exhaust previous negativities with the power of the mind of enlightenment and because they contain an ocean of accumulations of merits and wisdom they are said to be superior in progressing along the path than the hearers.

The commentary explains this quite clearly, but I'll just extract some of the main points. *Those with compassion* relates to the great bodhisattvas who are endowed with compassion who *exhaust previous negativities with the power of the mind of enlightenment*. At this point, recall how the benefits of bodhicitta were explained in the previous chapters. Generating bodhicitta for even a moment is a means to accumulate extensive merit and purify great amounts of negative karma. Hence, when someone is endowed with a perpetual state of bodhicitta in their mind, there is no question about the great extent of negativities that have been purified through the power of that mind, along with the accumulation of merit. Thus *because they contain an ocean of accumulations of merits and wisdom they are said to be superior*.

The accumulation of merit and wisdom are known as the two accumulations, so we need to understand what the accumulations refer to and what results they bring about. I have mentioned these numerous times in the past but it is good to reflect upon these points again. The whole doctrine is presented on the basis of the two truths, the path which consists of the two accumulations, and the result which consists of the two bodies of a buddha – the rupakaya and dharmakaya.

The accumulation of merit is the particular cause for obtaining the *rupakaya* which is a buddha's form body, and the accumulation of wisdom is a substantial cause to obtain the *dharmakaya* which is a buddha's wisdom truth body. Hence the two resultant enlightened bodies are the *rupakaya* and the *dharmakaya*.

The two accumulations include the practices of the six perfections, the first five of which are the particular means for accumulating merit, and the practising the perfection of wisdom is the means to accumulate wisdom. In particular, the wisdom realising emptiness forms the means to perfect the accumulation of wisdom. It is presented here that bodhisattvas *are said to be superior in progressing along the path than hearers*; this is particularly due to the fact that they have generated bodhicitta.

The main factor that differentiates bodhisattvas from hearers is the mind of bodhicitta. Hearer *aryas* (noble beings) have also gained the realisation of emptiness, so if it was just the realisation of emptiness that is required to obtain the ultimate goal of enlightenment, then when hearers on the paths of seeing and meditation obtain the hearer's path of no-more-learning, and become an *arhat* (foe-destroyer), they would have then obtained enlightenment. The factor which prevents them from obtaining enlightenment - that which obstructs them from achieving an omniscient mind - is that they have not yet developed bodhicitta. Furthermore, when a hearer or solitary realiser obtains the path of seeing, although they gain the realisation of emptiness, it is said that their body still remains a contaminated body.

However, when a bodhisattva obtains the path of seeing, their body transforms into an uncontaminated body. This has been clearly explained by Lama Tsong Khapa, and His Holiness also explained this point in his recent teachings. Therefore the key factor that makes bodhisattvas far superior to hearers is the mind generation of bodhicitta. This is the main factor to understand in order to derive the essential understanding of this verse. Obtaining the ultimate state where one has completely actualised, surpassed and perfected the two purposes comes only through following the Great Vehicle path, which focuses on the development of bodhicitta. This is why it is not sufficient to just rely on the hearers' path, as it lacks the sufficient causes for one to obtain the ultimate and perfected state of fulfilling the two purposes.

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

Following on from the earlier points, this part of the outline is saying *hence, it is unsuitable to be discouraged from the actions of a bodhisattva*.

The verse reads:

*30. Therefore, mounting the horse of bodhicitta  
That dispels all tiredness and weariness,  
Who, that knows the mind that goes  
From happiness to happiness, will be  
discouraged?*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains as follows:

Therefore, having mounted the powerful horse of the mind of enlightenment that dispels all mental tiredness and physical weariness, who of those proficient that know the mind that goes from the path of mental and physical happiness to the result of happiness, will be discouraged? It is unsuitable to be discouraged from practising the bodhisattva actions.

For the reasons presented previously, bodhisattvas have *mounted the powerful horse of the mind of enlightenment*. The mind of enlightenment or *bodhicitta* is analogous to a powerful horse, and when one has mounted that *mind of enlightenment that dispels all mental tiredness and physical weariness*, the powerful mind of bodhicitta enables one to dispel all mental tiredness and physical weariness. The

passage ...*who of those proficient that know the mind that goes from the path of mental and physical happiness to the result of happiness* relates to having a clear understanding of how following an easy path of mental and physical happiness will result in obtaining ultimate happiness. Knowing that, *who will be discouraged?* This implies that with this understanding, no-one would be discouraged. So it concludes that, having understood the great benefits, *it is unsuitable to be discouraged from practising the bodhisattva actions.*

## 2.1. Increasing the antidote, the power of enthusiasm

*The antidote* here relates to the antidote for overcoming laziness hence increasing the antidote to laziness is *the power of enthusiasm*. The particular type of laziness here relates to the laziness of despondency.

The power of enthusiasm is subdivided into three:

2.1.1. Increasing the powers that are the conducive conditions for enthusiasm

2.1.2. Being diligent about practising the actions with mindfulness and introspection

2.1.3. Empowering oneself to achieve the actions

### 2.1.1. Increasing the powers that are the conducive conditions for enthusiasm

This is subdivided into two:

2.1.1.1. A short presentation by way of identifying the four powers

2.1.1.2. An extensive explanation

#### 2.1.1.1. A SHORT PRESENTATION BY WAY OF IDENTIFYING THE FOUR POWERS

The first verse that relates to this reads:

31. *The armies for accomplishing the purpose of sentient beings  
Are belief, stability, joy and relinquishment.  
Belief is generated by reflecting on its benefits  
And the fears of suffering.*

The commentary explains the meaning:

Regarding the generation of the armies that destroy the opposing factors of enthusiasm so as to achieve the purpose of sentient beings: Similar to the king's four armies destroying his opponents, the four powers are the conducive conditions for enthusiasm.

The analogy here explains that the four powers are similar to the four types of a king's army. This relates to ancient warfare and refers to an army mounted on horses, an army mounted on elephants, an army that goes forth on chariots and an army that goes on foot (as explained in *Precious Garland*). Of the four powers analogous to the four types of army, the first is belief.

The commentary continues:

a) Belief that is aspiration regarding the practice of adopting and abandoning, generated through contemplating karmic cause and effect.

Belief here, and as also presented in the Lam Rim teachings, particularly relates to aspiration, particularly the aspiration regarding the practice of adopting and abandoning.

Next the power of stability is explained:

b) Stability that does not start something without investigation, and which finishes what was started.

Again, this is also explained in the Lam Rim teachings. The power of stability is continuously applied enthusiasm. Once one engages in a particular virtue, continuously applying

enthusiasm in engaging in that virtue, it is the power of stability.

Next the commentary explains the power of joy.

c) Joy that engages in effort without satisfaction, but with uninterrupted joy, like a child engaged in play.

Joy is explained here with the analogy of children playing naturally, and not wanting their joy and happiness in that play to be interrupted.

Next is the power of relinquishment, which relates to taking a rest. When engaging in an activity, putting in too much effort can often become an obstacle to accomplishing it, so there are times when one needs to take a rest and find the right balance. As will be explained later on, in meditation this means for one's focus not to be too tight or too loose, but to find the right measure. Thus, in whatever practice, when one is pushing too hard one needs to apply the power of "relinquishment" or rest.

d) Relinquishment that takes a break when body and mind are tired through the practice of enthusiastic effort, only to start straightaway again once refreshed.

If one doesn't take a break one may get stressed.

The commentary explains the four powers with belief as an example:

Explaining them by taking the power of belief as an example, they are generated by contemplating the fears of the suffering of cyclic existence and the benefits of the respective power, i.e., here belief.

The powers *are generated by contemplating the fears of the suffering of cyclic existence*, refers to generating the fear of the suffering, and then the benefits of the respective power. With 'belief', one contemplates on the benefits of the belief that will be generated.

The next verse reads:

32. *Giving up the opposite in this way  
Strive in increasing enthusiasm through  
Belief, pride, joy and relinquishment  
And the power of diligence and control.*

The powers are presented briefly in the verse, and the commentary further explains:

Giving up the opposing factors of not engaging in virtuous dharmas though seeing that one is able to, or the discouragement of thinking, 'I am not able to do this', one generates the conducive conditions of the four powers of belief, the pride of stability, joy and relinquishment.

Then, during the actual practice one diligently practises enthusiasm with mindfulness and introspection, and through the power of subsequently gaining control over body and mind one increases enthusiasm further and further. Strive in such a way.

*Giving up the opposing factors* such as *not engaging in virtuous dharmas though seeing that one is able to*, relates to the fact that one may see the benefits of the virtuous Dharma, but, despite that, one does not engage in the virtuous Dharma, which is caused by laziness. This type of laziness, where one thinks 'I'm not able to do this' is despondency, so at that point *one generates the conducive conditions*. *By giving up the opposing factors, one generates the conducive conditions of the four powers of belief, the pride of stability, joy and relinquishment*. Stability is referred to as a virtuous pride. The commentary further explains applying these conducive conditions of the four powers:

Then, during the actual practice, one diligently practises enthusiasm with mindfulness and introspection ...

It is not sufficient to apply the conducive conditions of the four powers initially. In *the actual practice, one needs to also diligently practise enthusiasm with mindfulness and introspection*. The point presented here is that mindfulness and introspection are an essential aid for maintaining enthusiasm during the actual practice.

... and through the power of subsequently gaining control over body and mind one increases enthusiasm further and further. Strive in such a way.

This is the way one actually adopts the practice of the four powers, and the two powers of diligence and control as well.

### 2.1.1.2. AN EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION

This is subdivided into four:

2.1.1.2.1. The power of belief

2.1.1.2.2. The power of stability

2.1.1.2.3. The power of joy

2.1.1.2.4. The power of relinquishment

#### 2.1.1.2.1. *The power of belief*

This is subdivided into four:

2.1.1.2.1.1. The object of belief

2.1.1.2.1.2. The result of belief

2.1.1.2.1.3. The cause for belief

2.1.1.2.1.4. Concluding summary

Each power is presented very meticulously by defining the object of belief, the result of belief, and the actual cause of belief etc.

#### 2.1.1.2.1.1. *The object of belief*

This is further subdivided into three:

2.1.1.2.1.1.1. Abandoning faults

2.1.1.2.1.1.2. Taking qualities

2.1.1.2.1.1.3. Analysing what one has done and what one has not

Again, in order to gain a clearer understanding of each power, the text sequentially and meticulously presents the ways to remove doubts in our minds. This will help the wisdom in our mind to really grow.

#### 2.1.1.2.1.1.1. *Abandoning faults*

The next two verses read:

33. *One should destroy the boundless  
Faults of self and others.  
Even if for each individual fault  
It will take an ocean of eons,*

34. *If it is not observable that one has  
Started to exhaust faults even partially,  
One becomes an abode for boundless suffering.  
Why does one's heart not burst?*

The commentary explains the meaning:

One should destroy the boundless faults of self and others, because one has made that promise at the time of generating the mind. When one destroys these faults one familiarises oneself with the antidote for an ocean of eons even for each individual fault. Since it will come like this, if one does not observe the beginning of having started to abandon faults even partially on oneself, then one will have to experience the sufferings of the lower realms, since one cannot bear to become familiar with the antidote even that much. Since one will become an abode for boundless

suffering, why does one's heart not explode? One's heart is completely made of stone, I say.

The commentary explains here that one definitely needs to strive to *destroy the boundless faults of self and others*. Why? Because one has already made a promise when generating the mind of enlightenment. One then reflects on that when destroying these faults and *familiarises oneself with the antidote for an ocean of eons even for each individual fault*. When applying the antidotes for overcoming these faults one needs to familiarise oneself with the antidotes for many eons. Even for one fault one has to repeatedly apply the antidote and familiarise oneself with it again and again. This is the way to completely overcome that particular fault.

Having realised this then *if one does not observe the beginning of having started to abandon faults even partially on oneself, one will have to experience the sufferings of the lower realms*. If one feels daunted that one cannot familiarise oneself with the antidote for that amount of time, one will see that by not doing so one will have to experience the sufferings of the lower realms. Then *since one will become an abode for boundless suffering, why does one's heart not explode?* This is a way of exhorting us to take heed; if one does not apply the antidote to overcome the faults then the consequence is to experience the boundless suffering of the lower realms. So if one contemplates that, one's heart should feel moved to expend real effort, and strive to overcome these faults.

The extensive Lam Rim explains these points by quoting Shantideva's verses. It gives detailed explanations of how one has to apply the antidotes to overcome the faults for many eons. So if, right now, one doesn't even consider applying an antidote for even one of the faults, even partially, then how can one possibly believe one will not have to experience the sufferings of the lower realms. This is explained in the Lam Rim more elaborately, and referring to a Lam Rim text on the point of enthusiasm will complement the explanation presented here.

Another point made in the Lam Rim text is that contemplating like this is a way not to become discouraged. Rather it encourages you to realise that you have spent a lot of time in meaningless thought and activity and not much time on applying the antidotes for overcoming the faults. Thus by reflecting upon how much time one has already wasted, to take heed and apply enthusiasm to overcome the faults. That is the main point.

These presentations are all very meaningful and we can definitely relate them to our personal practice.

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

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright  
Edit 1 by Jill Lancashire  
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe  
Edited Version  
© Tara Institute*