

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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The prayers that we have just recited encompass both the Mahayana refuge and bodhicitta, which suffices for the altruistic Mahayana motivation. With this motivation intact we can now engage in our meditation practice.

In accordance with the sequence of the practice, we first take refuge and then generate bodhicitta. When taking refuge is combined with the bodhicitta motivation, such as 'I go for refuge for the sake of all mother sentient beings in order to liberate them from all suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness', or 'I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and engage in practices so that I obtain Buddhahood', then this is called generating *exceptional refuge*.

Now we can begin our meditation practice. *[meditation]*

It is good to generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings, in order to liberate them from all suffering, and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teachings, and put them into practise well.

2.2.1.2.1. The power of belief

2.2.1.2.1.3. The cause for belief

2.2.1.2.1.3.2. Explaining the cause of belief (cont.)

2.2.1.2.1.3.2.3. Contemplating black karmic cause and effect

This is presented in the following verse:

45. *Extremely tormented as one is fully skinned by the minions of Yama
Copper molten by extreme heat is poured onto one's body,
Pierced by flaming swords and daggers the flesh is carved up in hundreds of pieces,
Fallen on the blazing iron ground, comes about due to the many non-virtuous karmas.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Due to the karma of killing and so forth, one will be extremely tormented by suffering as all one's skin is being pulled off by the minions of the lord of death. The characteristic of engagement, which is that copper, molten by extreme heat is poured over one's body, is difficult to bear. Not only this, but one will be pierced by flaming swords and daggers and one's flesh will be carved up into many hundreds of pieces.

The experience of being tormented by the characteristic of place, which means that one falls onto the blazing iron grounds, comes about through the many non-virtuous karmas such as the karmas of immediate retribution, the karma of abandoning Dharma and the like.

We have already covered some of the types of sufferings that are explained here. The main point is that these sufferings are experienced in the realms into which one is reborn, and

that they are the result of the negative karma that one has previously created. As presented here, we need to pay attention to the karmas of immediate retribution, also known as heinous crimes, the karma of abandoning the Dharma and so forth. It is really worthwhile to pay attention to abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions, for one will then naturally avoid engaging in many misdeeds. For example, three of the five karmas of immediate retribution i.e. killing one's mother, killing one's father and killing an arhat, are all included in the misdeed of killing. So when one makes the commitment to refrain from killing, one is naturally protected from creating these extremely heavy negative karmas.

Indeed, contemplating abandoning the ten non-virtuous karmas is a high level of practice. In order to abandon the ten non-virtuous karmas you need to practise the ten white karmas, or the ten virtuous actions. Just as there are negative consequences from committing the non-virtuous karmas, as has just been explained, one will experience positive effects from observing the ten virtuous karmas. This is explained in great detail in the teachings.

When we make the commitment to avoid the ten non-virtuous karmas then that forms the basis for practicing morality. It is explained in the teachings that when one makes an active commitment to avoid the ten non-virtuous actions, then that serves as the basis for one to take the self-liberation, bodhisattva and tantric vows. It also serves as the basis for keeping the commitments of these vows. So practising the ten non-virtuous actions is the basis for observing all of the commitments that one may have.

As explained earlier, if one doesn't observe the karmic law of cause and effect, and abide in its practice, then one is not able to please the buddhas. This emphasises the essentiality of abandoning the ten non-virtues, and adopting the ten virtues.

2.2.1.2.1.4. Concluding summary

*46ab. Therefore one should practise belief in virtue
And meditate on it with great respect.*

The commentary reads:

Therefore, having contemplated the way of karmic cause and effect, one should practise belief in virtue and meditate on it with great respect by way of having conviction.

Having extensively identified the virtues and the non-virtues, and the effects of their white karma and negative karma respectively, one then puts that understanding into practice. By meditating on and familiarising oneself with virtue one understands that the positive effect of virtue is something that one wishes for, and so one engages in virtue. Likewise, by realising that one does not wish to experience the effects of negative karma, or non-virtue, one takes the initiative and makes a strong determination to avoid non-virtue.

We find that whenever we put some effort and energy into accumulating virtues we develop a strong sense of joy. So we rejoice in having accumulated virtue, and compliment ourselves: 'It is incredibly fortunate that I have had opportunity to engage in this virtue today'. Rejoicing in the virtue that one has accumulated actually increases the positive effects of that virtue. Thus, rejoicing in virtue is the optimum means to increase the positive effects of one's virtue.

Of course, we may try our best to avoid creating negative karma. However, due to strong habituation with the

delusions in our mind we might find that we still engage in some non-virtuous actions. But by contemplating and acknowledging the consequences of those negative deeds, we can develop regret, thinking, 'It has been unfortunate that I have engaged in such negativities'.

It is essential to acknowledge the effects of positive karma and negative karma. When one experiences pleasant situations and good things happening in one's life, then one can immediately rejoice and think, 'These are the positive effects of my previous karma'. When one experiences difficulties and unwanted suffering in life, one can immediately reflect, 'These are none other than the effects of my own doing, the negative karma that I have created in the past'. One understands that whatever one experiences, whether it is positive or negative, is the result of one's own karma. There is no other cause of suffering and misery than one's own negative karma. In this way, one takes the initiative to immediately relate whatever one experiences as effects of karma that one had created in the past.

That then generates the initiative to avoid creating more negativity, and to develop strong regret (which is said to be the most powerful of the four opponent powers) and engage in purification practices for negativity that one has already created. With this awareness in mind, one will then be able to lead a life abiding in karma. When one takes the initiative to develop this keen awareness of karma, one will take every opportunity to accumulate virtue, and to avoid engaging in negativity. If, and when, one finds oneself engaging in negativity, one will immediately be able to develop regret and purify it.

When one puts this into practice on a daily basis, then at the end of each day, as one reflects on the actions created during the day, when one finds that one has accumulated more virtue, that then becomes a great source of joy and one rejoices in one's good deeds. If one finds that one has created more negativity, then one develops strong regret, engages in some form of purification practice, and finally makes a commitment to avoid engaging in that negativity again.

When we take the initiative to integrate the Dharma into our mind, then eventually that becomes a positive habit, and we become inclined to engage in virtue. We will find that our mind spontaneously and joyfully wishes to engage in virtue. When that takes place, then that is the positive outcome of contemplating karma. While it is important for us to know the categories and divisions of karma, that in itself will not benefit one. We will only benefit from that understanding and knowledge when we actually put it into practice.

When we engage in a daily practice like this, contemplating the karmic cause and effect in detail, engaging in virtue, and avoiding or purifying negative karmas, then we become more and more acquainted with engaging in virtuous deeds, and less and less inclined to engage in negativity. When that transformation takes place, one naturally and spontaneously wants to engage in virtuous deeds, and naturally wants to avoid negative deeds. That is the hallmark that our practice of karma has taken effect. You might already have a belief in karma, but it is only by abiding in karma, which means putting it into practice, that we reap positive results from that belief.

When the commentary states *one should practise belief in faith and virtue, and meditate on it with great respect by way of having conviction* it is explaining that when one has developed a conviction in karma based on a profound understanding of it, then one will be able to engage in developing familiarity with virtue. By developing a strong conviction in the

importance of virtue, one will naturally be inclined to adopt virtue as one's practice, while at the same time abandoning negativities.

That will enable us to confidently face the next life. When we reach the time when we have to discard this body and go on to the next life, there will be no hesitation. That is because we will have the conviction that having engaged in virtue, we have created the causes to obtain all the good conditions necessary to continue to practise Dharma in the next life. In fact, when one reaches a significant age, or if one's body is really weakened due to some disease, then one will be quite glad to leave this old and weak body behind, and get a fresh new body, with all the good conditions intact. With that conviction there will be no hesitation about the prospect of death and going onto the next life, instead there will be joy. These are the practical and positive effects of having belief in, and abiding in karma.

If there is strong regret at the time of death, then the mind will be quite disturbed and it won't be a very pleasant death. Apparently, all the negativities and non-virtuous actions that one has committed in one's life come vividly to mind, bringing real remorse and regret at that time. That brings a mind of fear, sadness and anxiety at the prospect of facing death. In contrast, if one has a virtuous mind, and thus a joyful state of mind, then the death will be a positive experience which will then establish the immediate conditions for a good existence in the future life. This, in fact, seems to be one practical benefit of practising the Dharma. It is this immediately practical, personal goal that gives us the impetus to practise Dharma.

As the Lam Rim teachings explain, the state of mind at the time of death will be the one with which one is most familiar. If one has strong familiarity with virtue, then it will be a virtuous state of mind that will naturally arise. If one has a strong familiarity with non-virtue, then the state of mind at the time of death will most likely be a non-virtuous mind. As the Lam Rim further explains, if one has virtue and non-virtue in equal strength, then whatever one is engaged in first will arise as the prominent state of mind. So Lama Tsong Khapa is presenting us with some very significant and crucial points as a means to encourage us to actually engage in the practice of Dharma by abiding in the law of karma and so forth.

2.2.1.2.2. The power of stability

This has two subdivisions:

2.2.1.2.2.1. Striving steadfastly

2.2.1.2.2.2. Abiding steadfastly after having started

2.2.1.2.2.1. Striving steadfastly

This has two further subdivisions:

2.2.1.2.2.1.1. Starting upon having investigated well

2.2.1.2.2.1.2. The fault of giving up after having started

Here we can see how the outlines themselves present the material of the text in a very systematic, logical way. Not only that, but they are also, in themselves, instructions on how to engage properly in the practices and so forth. As presented here, one needs to have a strong commitment to do what one wants to do, and then develop a strong commitment to complete what one has started.

Starting upon having investigated well is a really crucial instruction. Before one engages in an activity one needs to first investigate what the benefits are and so forth. Then, having completed that thorough investigation, one will not create *the fault of giving up after having started*.

2.2.1.2.2.1.1. Starting upon having investigated well

The first two lines of verse related to this heading read:

*46cd. Having started through the ritual of
Vajradhvaja
One should meditate on pride.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

The sixth dedication of the *Arya Vajradhvaja Sutra* says:

Lha'ibu, just as the rising sun, without being stopped by blindness or uneven mountains, illuminates the objects that are suitable, bodhisattvas who arise for the purpose of others, ripen and liberate those suitable to be subdued, without being stopped by the various faults of sentient beings.

The citation from this ritual explains that having started a virtuous action, one should meditate on the pride of bringing it to completion.

First there is the citation from the sixth chapter of the *Arya Vajradhvaja Sutra*, which is the dedication: *Lha'ibu*, (son of the gods) *just as the rising sun, without being stopped by blindness or uneven mountains, illuminates the objects that are suitable...*

The analogy presented here is that when the sun rises there is nothing that stops the sun's rays from illuminating earth—it illuminates the whole surface. Uneven mountains and so forth are not obstacles for the sun's rays to reach earth, likewise blindness doesn't prevent the light of the sun from illuminating the ground.

Similarly, *bodhisattvas who arise for the purpose of others, ripen and liberate those suitable to be subdued, without being stopped by the various faults of sentient beings.* As explained here, when bodhisattvas resolve to help sentient beings, those who are suitable to be subdued will naturally be subdued, and the faults and negativities of other sentient beings will not be an obstacle for bodhisattvas to continuously benefit them.

We can relate this to ourselves. We might be helping someone for a while but then start complaining, 'Oh, they get upset very easily', or 'They don't really appreciate what I do for them', and in this manner we find many reasons not to continue helping them. So the faults of the person we are helping become an obstacle for us to actually benefit them. The main point being explained with this citation is that once a bodhisattva resolves to benefit sentient beings, they will not give up that commitment, even the faults and negativities of sentient beings are not an obstacle to their commitment to benefit sentient beings.

Having cited the sutra, the commentary goes on to explain, *The citation from this ritual explains that having started a virtuous action, one should meditate on the pride of bringing it to completion.* If one starts a virtuous action, one continues with that action until it comes to completion, and does not give up part way through.

Both the root verse and the commentary state that *one should meditate on pride.* In this context pride should be understood as a mind of great strength, courage and self-confidence. This form of pride is not deluded pride.

The next verse under this heading is:

*47. One should first investigate the action
And then start or not start.
To not start is supreme
But having started one should not stop.*

The commentary on this verse explains:

Before engaging in an action one needs to analyse with one's mind whether or not one has the capacity for this action. If one is able, then one starts the action; if one is not able, then one does not. To not start the action is supreme, but once one has started then one should not stop until it is completed.

As the commentary clearly explains, *Before engaging in an action one needs to analyse with one's mind whether or not one has the capacity for this action.* Here, *capacity* can refer to internal capacity as well as external capacity. Internal capacity means investigating whether one has the inner strength or commitment to be able to see the action through and so forth, and as well as seeing the benefits of that action. External capacity relates to external means and conditions.

Although this advice is explicitly related to virtuous actions and engaging in bodhisattva's deeds, it is, as I regularly emphasise, also crucial advice for everyday life. Whatever the situation, whether it be study or work, and whatever the activity, we need to first investigate to see whether we have the ability to complete that task.

Sometimes we might understate our abilities, and sometimes we might be over-zealous, so we need to really look into our own situation. This is really profound advice. We need to use our wisdom and intelligence lest we fall victim to being wrongly influenced or manipulated by others. If we are too gullible, we can be deceived or misled by others, even if they have the best intentions. If someone says, 'You should do it like this' and we don't really think much about it and say, 'OK, I will do as you say', then we might find later that we have taken on much more than we can manage.

Also, before making a promise to others we should really check and make sure that it is something we are able to do. Once we find that it is within our capacity, then we can safely make the commitment. These are really safety measures that we need to put in place before we engage in any activity.

As further mentioned in the commentary, *if one is able then one starts the action, but if one is not able then one does not.* Again, this is very practical advice. Having done a thorough analysis as to whether one has the capacity to complete an activity, one can then make proper assessment as to whether to engage in it or not.

The next part of the explanation, *to not start the action is supreme*, relates to investigating an action and realising that one doesn't have the full capacity to complete it, or that the necessary conditions are not intact. If one finds that the conditions are not intact, then it is best not to start that action.

But *once one has started* an action or activity then *one should not stop until it is completed.* If one has found that there is some benefit in completing the action and has already started the action, then one needs to complete it. The conditions may not be quite right, but because one has understood the benefit, one should complete the action. People often say things like, 'Oh, I'll give it a try, and if I can't manage then I can just leave it'. However as explained here, this can be a fault.

2.2.1.2.2.1.2. The fault of giving up after having started

The next part of the text explains the faults of giving up after having started an action. Many consider these few verses as very sound advice, and it is often cited.

The commentary begins with a query:

Query: What is the fault of stopping something one has started?

48. *One will be habituated to it in other lives
And negativity and suffering will increase.
One is diminished at other times and at
The time of the result; one will not achieve.*

Then Gyaltsab Je explains the meaning of the verse:

Answer: Through the concordant cause of having acted like this before one will in other lives also be habituated to giving up. The action similar to the cause of a person that breaks a promise is that their negativity increases, and the ripening result is that their suffering increases.

Further, one will be diminished later at different times, when starting other actions or at the time of the result of this action, which has become greatly prolonged. The other actions one will also not achieve as well.

The commentary states very clearly, *through the concordant cause of having acted like this before, one will in other lives also be habituated to giving up*. Here we can see that even in contemporary activities there are certain individuals who are quite keen about starting something, but after a while they put it aside. Then they start something else, and after a while they put that aside too. That becomes a pattern, where they keep starting something new, but never really see it through to completion.

If one is habituated to doing that now, then that is a concordant result of having previously engaged in actions and not seeing them through to completion. As explained here, the consequence of not completing an action that one has started will be a concordant cause for acting in the same way in future lives, where one will be habituated to giving up easily. We have all seen people who never really see anything through, and that is due to habituation.

The concordant cause and effect is also understood in relation to non-virtuous actions such as killing. The concordant effect of the cause of killing in a past life would be very readily and gladly taking the life of others, animals and the like, in this life. Similarly with positive actions: if one engages in positive actions in this life, then the concordant effect will be that one will be naturally inclined to engage in positive actions and virtuous deeds in the next life.

As the commentary further explains, *the action similar to the cause of a person that breaks a promise is that their negativity increases*. The negativity of breaking a promise increases, and the ripening result is that the suffering increases. This particularly relates to the pledges and vows that are part of a bodhisattva's practice. If one breaks those virtuous promises, then naturally the negativities increase, and thus future suffering increases.

Further, one will be diminished later at different times, when starting other actions or at the time of the result of this action, means that a further negative consequence of starting an action, and not seeing it through to completion is that due to that earlier habituation, when one starts a similar action again one will again not see that through. In this way it becomes *greatly prolonged*, meaning that whatever action one does will take a long time to reach any kind of completion, because one keeps having to restart that action again and again.

The other actions one will also not achieve as well, means that the result will not be achieved.

2.2.1.2.2.2. Abiding steadfastly after having started

This is a presentation of the ways and means of abiding steadfastly, or abiding by the commitments one makes.

There are two subdivisions:

2.2.1.2.2.2.1. Explaining it condensed

2.2.1.2.2.2.2. Explaining it individually

2.2.1.2.2.2.1. *Explaining it condensed*

The relevant lines of the root text are:

*49ab. Action, affliction and ability,
Practise pride regarding those three.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

Practise pride in the three, which counteracts discouragement and increases strength: pride in action after having commenced the action, pride in afflictions being an object of abandonment, and pride in the ability to engage and abandon.

As explained here in the commentary, one *practises pride in the three, which counteracts discouragement and strength*. As mentioned previously, in this context pride refers to a mind of great strength, courage and self-confidence. There are three types of this form of pride: *pride in action after having commenced an action, pride in afflictions being an object of abandonment, and pride in the ability to engage and abandon*.

2.2.1.2.2.2.2. *Explaining it individually*

Here there are three subdivisions:

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1. Pride in taking action

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1.2. Pride in ability

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.3. Pride against the afflictions, or applying the antidote to the afflictions

Here again, we need to understand that the term pride in this context implies a mind of courage, strength, and self-confidence. As the Lam Rim teaching also mentions, pride is a term that can be used to describe a positive state of mind.

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1. *Pride in taking action*

Pride of action is subdivided into three:

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1.1. Identifying the pride of taking action

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1.2. The reason for doing this

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1.3. Practising pride that also carries the burden of the inferior actions of others

2.2.1.2.2.2.2.1.1. *Identifying the pride of taking action*

Again, the pride of action is not the normal deluded pride. It is explained in these two lines of verse:

*49cd. Saying 'I will do the action alone',
Is the very pride of action.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary reads:

If one sees that others could do the action as well, one thinks, 'I shall do this alone'. The strength of mind generated here is the pride in action.

If one sees the benefit of an action, one takes the initiative to take on a responsibility, even when there are others capable of doing it. As the Lam Rim teaching explains clearly, one resolves, 'I will do that action. I will not rely upon others to do it, but I will personally take responsibility for that action'. Therefore it is a personal resolution. This is particularly the case with activities that fulfil the purposes of oneself and others, as one cannot rely upon others to fulfil purposes that benefit oneself and others. One has to do it oneself. This is the point of resolving 'I will do this alone'.

When identifying pride of action, the Lam Rim teachings explain clearly that having identified the positive results of fulfilling the purpose of oneself others, one then resolves, 'I,

myself, will take on responsibility for achieving that'. That is pride in action.

The Lam Rim then quotes from Nagarjuna's *Letter to the King*, where the Buddha says, 'I have shown you the path to liberation, now obtaining liberation is entirely in your own hands'. It also quotes from another text along similar lines. Once one has been shown the way and the methods to achieve liberation, then it is up to oneself to engage in acquiring the causes and conditions to actually obtain liberation. As mentioned previously, the Dharma is the actual refuge, which is the same point being made here. Achieving the results that are explained in the teachings has to be initiated and implemented by none other than oneself.

As explained in the teachings, the Dharma is the actual refuge. That would have to be the case because if the actual refuge or protector were to be the Buddha jewel or the Sangha jewel, then we would have already been liberated by now. They wouldn't be idly sitting around, they would have already liberated us! So the fact that the Buddha Jewel and the Sangha Jewel are not the actual refuge, and that the Dharma Jewel is the actual refuge is clear indication that we are not yet liberated because we have not fully relied on actualizing the Dharma refuge. These are the main points.

As I have mentioned previously, the explanations of the six perfections in the Lam Rim teachings are very clear. I have read the text myself again, but I don't know if any one of you have taken heed of that suggestion and actually checked the Lam Rim for yourselves. The actual presentation of the six perfections is found just prior to the presentation of special insight. These points are the very core of the Mahayana practice. If we don't have a good understanding of that, and if we don't try to apply it to our practice, then claiming to be a Mahayana practitioner would be just words, as we won't actually have the necessary qualification.

Reading the Lam Rim text is paramount for establishing a good basis for one's practice. Moreover, without the basis of a good understanding of the Lam Rim, there is really no way that one can adequately practice tantra. As we know, the sadhana practices begin with OM SVABHAVA SHUDDAH SARVA DHARMA SVABHAVA SHUDDHO HANG meaning *all existence transforms into emptiness*. It is presented on the assumption that we know what emptiness means. There are no details about renunciation, bodhicitta and so forth. The manner of presentation clearly indicates that it is a practice given to those whose minds are already ripened with the understanding of the earlier practices of renunciation and bodhicitta and so forth.

The teachings explain that in terms of the view there is no difference between the view of emptiness presented in the *prajnaparamita* teachings, and the view that is presented in the tantric teachings. Of course, in terms of profundity, the highest yoga tantra is more profound, but in terms of actual view there is no difference. In the *prajnaparamita* teachings, the foundations of renunciation, bodhicitta and so forth are explained in great detail as a way of developing a strong familiarity with them so that they serve as a good foundation. Then, when the tantric teachings are presented, one's mind is already ripened, and ready to receive those teachings.

I mentioned earlier that the tantric teachings are presented to trainees whose mind is already ripened with a sound understanding of the teachings on sutra. If you were to initially go straight into tantric sadhanas and so forth, then when you hear *everything becomes empty* you might have this vague notion that everything is just empty like space and

that there is nothing around us. In fact, there are some who claim, 'Oh, it is very nice to meditate on emptiness, because there is nothing there'.

Lama Tsong Khapa states in his *Foundation of All Good Qualities*, which you would all be familiar with, that 'having developed a profound understanding on the common path may I be able to engage in the practice of the uncommon path'¹. What he is saying is that without a good understanding of the common path, which includes renunciation, bodhicitta and an understanding of emptiness - i.e. the three principles of the path - there is no way that one can obtain liberation. Likewise, without understanding and practising bodhicitta, there is no way that one can obtain full enlightenment. According to the common path, one cannot overcome the delusions without the understanding of emptiness. When it comes to the practice of tantra, the very basis on which one generates oneself as a deity and develops that divine pride is the understanding of emptiness. Without a good understanding of emptiness, it is not even possible to establish the divine pride of the deity. These are crucial points that one needs to understand.

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

Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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¹ Having become a pure vessel by training in the general path
Please bless me to enter
The holy gateway of the fortunate ones
The supreme vajra vehicle.