

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

8 September 2015

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

Now we can generate the positive motivation for receiving the teaching along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment in order to liberate them from all suffering and lead them to ultimate happiness.

That is my goal, and in order to achieve that, I need to achieve enlightenment myself. Therefore I will engage in listening to the Mahayana teaching and put it into practise well.

Put simply, imagine someone asking, "What is your goal?" With the bodhicitta motivation the response needs to be, "My goal is to liberate all beings from suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness. In order to do that, I need to first achieve that goal, which is buddhahood, myself. So my purpose is to achieve that goal".

It is good to periodically assess oneself by asking questions such as: What is it that I really want to do? What is my main purpose in life? What is it that I wish to achieve? If one can competently respond that one's purpose is to accumulate virtue and merit, then asking those questions will be a check on whether one is actually engaging in the ways and means to accumulate that virtue. If one is doing so, then one rejoices and further strengthens that activity. If one is inclined to engage in negativities, then asking these questions acts as a reminder to be cautious. Then one can think "OK, I need to stop or reduce this activity so as to minimise the accumulation of negativity". This is how we make progress, and then a transformation can slowly start to take place.

We customarily ask others what they are doing, and then we wait for their response. Here, we need to be asking ourselves, "What am I doing?", which puts the focus on our own activities and manners. When one's partner or companion does something that is a bit inappropriate, we immediately jump on them and say, "What are you doing?" , accusing them of being ridiculous or stupid. But if we apply that approach to ourselves, "How about me, what am I doing?", then that initiative of looking into our own conduct will help us to behave more appropriately.

To re-emphasise the point: we quite readily notice someone else's mistakes and are quick to pounce on them. Periodically taking the initiative to look at our own thoughts and activities, and asking this question of ourselves, is a way of assessing our own thoughts, manners and so forth. Then we can reprimand or encourage ourselves as need be.

The instruction being presented in the following verses is to prevent the accumulation of negativities by applying mindfulness and awareness the moment one is about to engage in some negative action.

2.2.1.2.2.2.3. Pride against the afflictions (cont.)
2.2.1.2.2.2.3.2. One should not fall under their control at all

This is in reference to the afflictions.

The relevant verse reads:

61. *Just as one protects one's eyes
When great danger occurs,
One should take care not to be controlled by the
afflictions
When danger occurs.*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the meaning as follows:

When great danger. i.e. the danger of afflictions, occurs, then, just as humans protect their eyes with great concern, similarly, when there is the danger of falling under the control of the afflictions, one should take care not to be controlled by the afflictions.

As clearly explained in the commentary, *humans naturally protect their eyes with great concern*, which is especially true when there is a great danger. Their most precious organ is their eyes, and in the event of some great danger they instinctively protect their eyes, in spite of losing their limbs. That is quite obvious, as losing one's eyesight is one of the greatest concerns of any human being. Just as humans have this natural inclination to value their eyes as being most precious and thus protect them, *similarly, when there is the danger of falling under the control of the afflictions, one should take care not to be controlled by the afflictions.*

As I have indicated in the past, when there is a danger that one is going to be influenced by strong afflictions, then that is the time to apply mindfulness and awareness so as to not be completely overpowered and controlled by those afflictions. This instruction is exactly what is being explained here. Protecting one's mind from the afflictions is even more important than protecting one's eyes, or any other body part. The real destruction occurs in one's life when one is completely overpowered and influenced by the afflictions. There are those who are ultimately destroyed when they are completely controlled by attachment. Their wealth starts to decline, and their friends and companions and so forth will all fade away. It's the same with anger. So the more one contemplates the ill-effects of the afflictions and the damage that they do, the more one will be aware of that, and the more one will be primed to be really cautious about being controlled by the afflictions. As mentioned here in the commentary, whenever there is the danger that one's mind is controlled by the afflictions, then that is the time one should apply the means not to be controlled by them.

Simply put, one should not allow one's mind to be controlled by the delusions. The real culprit that destroys our happiness, and causes us so much distress, comes down to the afflictions. When the mind is controlled by the afflictions, then it is we who ultimately suffer. We are the ones who need to be in control of our own mind, so we should apply every measure not to give in to the afflictions, and not to allow them to control our mind. If we are feeling unhappy and we really look into the main cause, we will see that it comes down to the afflictions. In particular, the main affliction that causes the most distress and unhappiness is that our desires are not being fulfilled. We are not deprived of adequate wealth, food, clothing or shelter and companions, but we seem to be obsessed with unfulfilled desires, and so we constantly feel unhappy. It is this attachment to unfulfilled desires that causes inner turmoil,

stress and unhappiness. This is the point that we really need to understand.

When we are in mental turmoil, or even just unhappy, we are not capable of fulfilling our own purpose, let alone trying to fulfil the purpose of others. If we are not capable of fulfilling our own needs and purpose, then how can we even consider fulfilling the needs of others, and striving for their purpose? If one falls victim to the afflictions, then one will be defeated by them, and one's own purpose will not be fulfilled, let alone fulfilling the purposes of others. Therefore, we really need to focus on the disadvantages and faults of the afflictions, scrutinise them, and understand that what is really harming us is the afflictions that are in our own mind. We are quick to accuse others of harming us, but in comparison to the harm rendered by our own afflictions, that harm is actually quite minor. While physical wounds caused by others throwing a stone, for example, can heal after some time, the harm caused by the afflictions is continuous.

We need to recognise the afflictions for what they are. If one can recognise them when they arise, they will subside and we will not be completely overcome by them. At our level it is a significant achievement to even recognise the afflictions as they arise. As I regularly remind you, don't always try to find fault outside, and blame external situations for your problems. Rather, look within, and recognise that the real problem lies there.

If we do this on a regular basis, we will slowly begin to notice that the real cause of the problem is our negative attitude, or state of mind. When we start to notice this, and begin to manage our own attitudes and ways of thinking, the afflictions will start to subside. Then, regardless of external situations, we will feel a little bit more at ease, a little more comfortable, and we will notice an inner transformation taking place. Settling one's mind in this way is a very significant achievement.

When there is a dispute over wealth and someone gets killed, then others will remark, "What destroyed him was desire for the wealth that was the cause of the dispute". Delusions mislead us, just like others can mislead us. If, for example a non-drinker goes out with friends, and becomes more and more influenced by them, and then begins drinking a bit with those friends, they can end up becoming quite a drinker themselves. Then others make comments like, "Oh, he used to be a good person when he didn't drink. He was misled and destroyed through the negative influence of his friends".

When liberation is presented we are inspired to achieve liberation—we don't have much hesitation in wanting that! But then when the faults of the afflictions are presented, we might be hesitant in chasing them down, and applying their antidotes.

The point here is to recognise afflictions such as anger and attachment for what they are. When we recognise their ill-effects and disadvantages, then it becomes easier to understand others. When others, influenced by afflictions such as strong attachment or anger, are unhappy, showing inappropriate gestures and so forth, then instead of becoming upset and angry with them, by remembering one's own state of mind when one was affected by strong delusions, one can empathise with them. That becomes a means to develop compassion for others, rather than feeling angry and upset.

First, we need to recognise and acknowledge the ill-effects of the afflictions within ourselves, then we can relate that knowledge to others. Rather than seeing the other person as being at fault, one realises that it's the fault of the afflictions which are causing them to say inappropriate things and so forth. Of course, I have mentioned this many, many times in the past because it is such a significant point. There are many who have commented on how beneficial they have found this approach; they find they can really relate to it and find it very helpful.

When one can understand and acknowledge the real trouble maker and destroyer of happiness as being the afflictions, then they become the target. When we begin to combat the afflictions, we start to take the upper hand because we have more control over our minds. Then we will naturally become happier and more settled.

When one is not affected by the afflictions, then one feels a genuine sense of relaxation and ease. It is a break from the turmoil that can be created by manifest afflictions. The arhats, or foe destroyers, are in a perpetual state of peace, with a calm and peaceful state of mind, because they have uprooted the afflictions. We may not have reached that state yet, but nevertheless we benefit when we are temporarily free from manifest afflictions. Then we can actually experience a state of feeling calm and quiet and be at peace. From that we can gain a sense of how wonderful it would be if the afflictions were completely uprooted from our mind. Meanwhile, making an attempt to temporarily not be affected by the afflictions is a significant achievement for oneself at this stage.

2.2.1.2.2.2.3.3. One should generate the special thought to generate a stable antidote

The advice here is for bodhisattvas to obtain a stable antidote to overcome the afflictions.

The lines relating to this are:

*62. It is easy for one to die by being burnt
And even to be beheaded,
But one should not at all bow to
The enemy of the afflictions.
Likewise, at all occasions,
One should only act appropriately.*

Then the commentary presents the meaning as follows:

The measure of having a stable antidote: It is easy for one to die through being burnt by fire or having one's head chopped off, but one should not at all bow to the enemy of the afflictions.

Likewise, one should on all occasions destroy the objects of abandonment and make the antidote stable. Thus one should not act in any way other than appropriately.

Here *measure* means the mark or the gauge of having a stable antidote. *It is easy to die through being burnt by fire or having one's head chopped off, but one should not at all bow to the enemy of the afflictions*, means that, in comparison to the harm caused by the enemy of the afflictions, it is easier, or in other words, more suitable, to be burnt by fire or have one's head chopped off, because at worst it only destroys this life. Whereas if one were to *bow to the enemy*, meaning to be under the control and the influence of the afflictions, and not apply the antidotes to overcome them, then there will be perpetual harm throughout future lives. The harm that one endures over a long period of time will have come from the afflictions within ourselves.

As the harm one receives from the afflictions is so much greater and more destructive than the harm that one may receive in this life, one needs to apply the appropriate antidote. As the commentary states, *likewise, one should on all occasions destroy the objects of abandonment and make the antidote stable*. Making the antidote stable, refers ultimately to the antidote that serves as the means to overcome self-grasping. When that antidote is stabilised, then one can act appropriately on all occasions. Therefore the main focus is to stabilise that antidote.

Thus one should not act in any way other than appropriately. Having thoroughly reflected on the shortcomings of the afflictions, and their deeply rooted destructive nature, one needs to resolve to apply the antidote. Even in this life we can see the ill-effects of the afflictions, not to mention the ill-effects over many lifetimes. So we need to resolve to apply the antidote and make it stable.

2.2.1.2.3. The power of joy¹

This is subdivided into three:

2.2.1.2.3.1. One should strive in virtue regardless of the ripening result

2.2.1.2.3.2. Accomplishing virtue by keeping the result in mind

2.2.1.2.3.3. The way of relating it to the power of joy

2.2.1.2.3.1. One should strive in virtue regardless of the ripening result

This heading indicates that one should strive in virtue, without any concern for the ripening positive result that one will experience.

The instruction here is that bodhisattvas should engage in virtuous activities with the sole intention of benefitting other beings. They should not think, "If I engage in this virtue, I will personally benefit from the good result". If one engages in virtue with that intention, then that action would be done out of self interest. While there might be some virtue in that, it will be a limited virtue, as the intention to engage in the virtue will be tainted by self interest.

Whereas if one engages in virtue with the sole intention that it will be a cause to benefit others, then, regardless of any thoughts about the ripening result for oneself, one will actually experience the positive result anyway. In other words, there is no need to focus on benefit for oneself, as one will benefit as a natural by-product of the original intention. There is the famous quote in Lama Tsong Khapa's lam rim which says that by benefitting others, one's own benefit will be naturally accomplished on the side. His Holiness the Dalai Lama also emphasises the same point.

In our ordinary mind we might feel, "If I dedicate everything to others, what is there left for me? How will that benefit me?" Here we are being told that one need not worry about benefits for oneself, because personal benefit is a natural by-product of working solely to benefit others. When you dedicate yourself fully to the benefit of other sentient beings, then you will naturally be benefited as well.

In contrast to that, if one focuses only on one's own interests, then one will not even fulfil one's own purpose fully, let alone being able to fulfil the purpose of others. This is the point that was made earlier: one's own purpose and the purpose of others will be basically destroyed by self interest.

The verse relating to this heading reads:

*63. Just like desiring the resultant happiness of play,
Whatever the engaged activity is,
Hold onto these actions,
Like them without satisfaction.*

Then as the commentary explains:

Just as some children desire the resultant happiness of play so should bodhisattvas have joy and grasp at their actions for the purpose of others, such as listening, contemplating and meditating on bodhicitta. One should be so joyful that one desires the actions continually without being satisfied by them.

Just as some children desire the resultant happiness of play uses the example of children who want to keep on playing. When the parents try to call them back, or tell them to stop, they don't want to stop, because there is such joy in playing. They do not see it as a task, because they enjoy it so much. The advice here is that *bodhisattvas* should also *have joy and grasp at their actions*, meaning that they should hold onto their actions for the purpose of others with joy.

As presented here, engaging in deeds or actions of benefitting others, includes actions such as *listening* to the teachings and *contemplating* their meaning, and meditating, specifically *meditating on bodhicitta*. Of course, further practices of bodhisattvas include engaging in the three trainings of morality, concentration and wisdom, along with the practice of the six perfections of morality, generosity, patience, joyous effort, meditation and wisdom. Bodhisattvas engage in these activities with a sense of joy, and are never satisfied with engaging in them intermittently. Rather, they continuously engage in these actions for the purpose of others with joy.

One should be so joyful that one desires the actions continuously, without being satisfied by them, means not feeling satisfied in thinking "That's enough, I've done enough". Rather, one should continuously engage in these actions.

The main theme of the outline is that when bodhisattvas engage in these actions for the sole purpose of others, they have no ulterior motive of wanting to receive the benefit of the ripening results. There is no stain of self interest in their actions. Rather they feel joy in continuously engaging in actions for the sole purpose of benefitting others. Of course this advice is for bodhisattvas. However, we can take this explanation as a personal instruction to do as much as possible to develop an attitude of engaging in virtues in a continuous way, with a sense of joy. We should not be satisfied with engaging in one virtuous act now, thinking 'Oh, I've done my good deed for the day, so that's done!' Rather we should develop a mind of continuously engaging in virtuous actions, along with a sense of joy in doing so. With such a sense of joy, one will naturally be inspired to engage in these practices continuously. That is how we need to take this explicit advice to bodhisattvas as a personal instruction for ourselves.

2.2.1.2.3.2. Accomplishing virtue by keeping the result in mind

Lest one doubts that good results follow from virtuous actions, the advice here is that one needs to be mindful of the infallibility of karma;— one will definitely experience a positive result from positive actions, and when one engages in negative actions, a negative result will definitely occur.

¹ This heading was introduced on 14 July 2015.

Therefore one needs to accomplish virtue by keeping in mind the infallibility of karma.

The first verse under this heading reads:

64. *Although working for the purpose of happiness
It is uncertain whether it will become happiness
or not.
The very action that becomes happiness
How can one be happy not doing it?*

The commentary explaining this verse reads:

Though worldly beings engage in actions such as fieldwork in order to attain mental and physical happiness, it is uncertain whether the result will be happiness or not. Only the actions of bodhisattvas are certain to bring about temporary and ultimate happiness, and if one does not engage in these actions then how could one attain the resultant happiness?

As explained here in the commentary, *though worldly beings engage in actions such as fieldwork in order to attain mental and physical happiness, it is uncertain whether the result will be happiness or not.* This refers to uncertainty about immediate results. A farmer may toil in the fields but it is uncertain whether he will reap a good harvest. Even if he were to have a good harvest, then the next uncertainty is whether that success will bring about the desired result of physical and mental happiness. Likewise with those who trade with the intention of making a profit from their business ventures; it is uncertain whether they will actually make a profit, or if their business will prosper. But even if they were to make a profit, it is uncertain whether or not they would obtain the ultimate result of physical and mental happiness. That is the point being presented here.

As explained further in the commentary, *only the actions of bodhisattvas are certain to bring about temporary and ultimate happiness.* The actions of bodhisattvas, such as practising the perfection of morality, practising the perfection of generosity and so forth with the sole purpose of benefitting others, bring the certainty of physical and mental happiness.

Therefore, *if one does not engage in these actions then how could one attain the resultant happiness?* This indicates that if one does not engage in these causes, then of course one cannot experience the resultant mental and physical happiness. The main point emphasised here is that the action of benefitting others is what brings joy to a bodhisattva's mind. They find no joy in worldly activities; only actions that benefit others bring them great joy.

The next verse in this section is:

65. *If one is not satisfied by sense pleasures,
Which are like honey on a razor's edge,
Then how can one be satisfied by the merit
Of the ripening result of peaceful happiness?*

Then the commentary explains:

Sensory happiness of forms, sounds and so forth are like honey on a razor's edge: when tasted with one's tongue then, although experiencing some taste, one experiences the suffering of being cut on the tongue. If one is not satisfied by cyclic existence, no matter how much one is engaging in it, then how can one be satisfied by the merit of generosity and so forth, which is the cause to attain the temporary happiness of higher rebirth of gods and humans and the ultimate happiness where all suffering has been pacified. One should meditate on them insatiably.

The analogy used here could not be more graphic! It presents a very vivid image of what samsaric pleasures are

like: the *sensory happiness of forms, sounds and so forth are like honey on a razor's edge.* Although the Tibetan word used here refers to a very sharp knife, the English translation uses *razor*. If you smear honey on a very sharp blade, and lick it off the blade then, although you experience some temporary pleasure from the sweet taste of the honey, you will immediately feel the suffering of having cut your tongue. Shantideva, being a great master, always finds the most vivid examples in his explanations.

When the commentary refers to the *sensory happiness of forms, sounds and so forth*, the words *so forth* includes the rest of the sense pleasures—taste, smell, tactile feelings and mental pleasures. There is no other way to experience sensory pleasures other than by contact between the sensory objects and our senses. When the commentary states *if one is not satisfied by these pleasures in cyclic existence then no matter how much one engages in it* the implication is that in this life we have experienced many sensory pleasures, not to mention the pleasures we have experienced in previous lives as well.

Yet the very moment after one experiences coming into contact with an object that brings pleasure to the senses, a sense of dissatisfaction because one is not satiated arises. There has been a fleeting experience of pleasure but in the next moment, it has turned into dissatisfaction. That in itself indicates that we are not experiencing true happiness—we have not been satisfied by any of the sensory pleasures that we have experienced so far.

For as long as we are controlled by the afflictions, and experience these sensory pleasures, there will be no satisfaction while we remain in cyclic existence. That being the case, *then how can one be satisfied by the merit of generosity and so forth*, indicates that if one is inclined to be dissatisfied even with momentary pleasures, then why would one be satisfied with engaging in causes for both the temporary as well as the ultimate results?

As mentioned previously, engaging in the practices of generosity, morality, patience and so forth is the cause to obtain the temporary happiness of a higher rebirth of gods and humans. Not only that, but they are also the cause to obtain ultimate happiness, where all suffering has been pacified i.e. liberation and ultimately, enlightenment. Understanding and recognising that, one should, as the commentary concludes, *resolve to meditate on them insatiably*, and thus not be satisfied with practising the six perfections once or twice. Rather one should engage in them continuously.

Understanding this section of the text is not difficult. However we need to read it, and contemplate the meaning, then we will experience the benefit of more stability in our minds.

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 Adair Bunnnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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