
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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

Let us now generate the bodhicitta 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 Mahayana teachings and put them into practice well.

2.1.2.3. THE FAULTS OF DISTRACTIONS

This is divided into two:

2.1.2.3.1. Since it is difficult to be associated with the childish, one should not be attached to their distractions

2.1.2.3.2. Stating supporting quotes

2.1.2.3.1. *Since it is difficult to be associated with the childish, one should not be attached to their distractions*

The verse reads:

22. *Sentient beings have many wishes,
That even the conquerors cannot satisfy.
What need is there to mention someone inferior
Like oneself?
Therefore, give up worldly thoughts.*

The commentary explains the meaning as follows:

One cannot fulfil the various wishes of sentient beings. If even the conquerors cannot fulfil their wishes with their diverse enlightened activities, then what need is there to mention someone inferior like oneself who does not know their thoughts? Therefore, give up the thought of associating with worldly people.

The commentary explains how worldly friends cannot be relied upon. They have childish wishes, and as their minds are unstable and change all the time, their wishes also change all the time. The point here is that, because their minds are not easily satisfied, they cannot actually fulfil their wishes.

The commentary explains, *one cannot fulfil the various wishes of sentient beings. If even the conquerors cannot fulfil their wishes with their diverse enlightened activities, then what need is there to mention someone inferior like oneself who does not know their thoughts?* As worldly beings only have worldly concerns, such as attachment to the body, possessions, wealth and friends etc., it becomes very difficult to associate with them, and to try to please them. Whilst it is very difficult to fulfil their wishes, they in turn obstruct one from engaging in virtuous activities. The commentary's resolution to this is, *therefore, give up the thought of associating with worldly people.*

When one resolves to go into isolation as a way of engaging in virtuous practice, one needs to do so with a deep sense of disenchantment with the worldly concerns of worldly beings. As just mentioned, the concerns of worldly beings revolve around trying to please one's relatives and friends, acquiring possessions, status, wealth, attachment to the body etc. These are their main concerns.

The emphasis here is to strongly recognise the pointlessness of relying on childish beings: one cannot benefit them by fulfilling their worldly wishes, and it can harm oneself. If this understanding can be deeply established, then when one actually resolves to go into isolation, then there is no danger of turning back. Conversely, if one does not have this deep sense of disenchantment with worldly concerns, then while one may like being in isolation, at times it becomes a bit difficult. Then one may consider coming out of isolation and associating with worldly beings again out of attachment.

Going into isolation and fully engaging in meditation practice is really the way of a pure Dharma practitioner. While it is not easy to leave everything behind and go into isolation to fully focus on practise, generating such a wish and aspiring to do so is very beneficial. Even people from ordinary walks of life have shared with me the fact that they are a bit weary of the everyday concerns of work etc. They have told me that they'd like to leave everything behind and go somewhere where there are no phones, no business agendas or appointments, and no one to hassle them, and that just going to an isolated quiet place would be really nice. Of course even though this isn't possible for them in their present situation, it is something they find very attractive. When one wishes to do this for the purpose of Dharma, and all the conducive conditions come together, then it becomes a very meaningful thing to do.

By reflecting on the great advantages of being able to practise wholeheartedly and virtuously in isolation, even if one does not have the capacity to do it right now, one should make strong aspirations and prayers that one may be able to do so in the future. That will leave a very good imprint on one's mind so that even if it is not possible in this life, it lays the foundations for one to acquire all the necessary conditions to practise in isolation in future lives. There will be a time when all the necessary conditions come together for one to actually go into isolation.

One needs to understand the great significance of making aspirational prayers. The teachings state that when aspirational prayers are made deeply from one's heart, the content of that prayer can definitely materialise in the future.

The next verse continues to explain why the childish are not reliable and why they are difficult to associate with.

The verse reads:

23. *They criticise those who do not have gain
And are unpleasant to those with gain.
How can one be made happy by them
Who are naturally difficult to associate with?*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

They criticise and put down those sentient beings that have not found gain, saying, "They have no merits." Those who have gain they criticise, saying, "They practise wrong livelihood". As they are difficult to associate with, how can one be made happy by the childish? As one cannot, one should not associate.

We would recognise what the commentary is presenting here! People who associate with others who are less fortunate or less successful than themselves, criticise them for having less wealth than is seemingly suitable. They say, 'Oh, how unlucky', or 'They are good-for-nothings' etc. However when others do have significant wealth they are again criticised, and people say for example, 'They must have cheated to get what they have' or 'They probably got that wealth through devious means'. These are the very worldly companions we associate with, and this is how they either look down upon others or scorn them.

The commentary points out, *they criticise and put down those sentient beings that have not found gain, saying, "They have no merits,"* and so forth. *Those who have gain they criticise, saying, "They practise wrong livelihood".* Therefore, *as they are difficult to associate with, how can one be made happy by the childish?* This implies that as one cannot be made happy by those who have childish and worldly concerns, *one should not associate with them.*

2.1.2.3.2. Stating supporting quotes

This next part is from the sutras.

The verse reads:

24. *As the childish are not happy
If their purpose is not fulfilled,
Those gone thus teach:
Do not be friends with any of them.*

The commentary explains:

Those gone thus teach that as the childish are unhappy if their purpose is not fulfilled, which is more important to them than anything else, one should not associate and befriend them.

The ones gone thus, meaning the buddhas, taught that *as the childish are unhappy if their purpose is not fulfilled, which for them is more important than anything else, one should thus not associate and befriend them.* That is what the Buddha had advised.

An example from the *Sutra of the Moonlight Lamp* is quoted:

Ordinary individuals do not have friends;
Even if one says words endowed with
Dharma;
They do not believe and show anger and hate;
These are the actions of the childish.

Further,

Although one relates well with the childish for
a long time,
One can say that later they will become
unfriendly and disagreeable,
Having understood the causes of the childish,
The skilled do not rely on the childish.

This is quite easy to understand so there is no need for further explanations.

2.1.2.4. THE BENEFITS OF RELYING ON ISOLATION

This is further subdivided into five:

- 2.1.2.4.1. Distinction of company
- 2.1.2.4.2. Distinction of place
- 2.1.2.4.3. Distinction of livelihood
- 2.1.2.4.4. Distinction of individual discernment
- 2.1.2.4.5. Distinction of non-distraction

2.1.2.4.1. Distinction of company

The commentary starts with the statement:

The skilled who have listened to much Dharma should stop associating with the childish and retire to the forest.

The verse reads:

25. *The animals, birds and trees in the forest
Do not say anything unpleasant.
When shall I abide together with
Those whose company is delightful?*

The commentary then continues:

The animals, birds and trees in the forest do not say anything unpleasant. Generate the wish thinking, "When will I abide together with those whose company is delightful?"

The great advantage of going into isolation with just the company of animals and birds is that there is no worry about them criticising oneself, or saying unpleasant things. Likewise one need have no concern about displeasing them. However with ordinary childish beings one always has to be careful not to offend them. There is always doubt about whether what one has said could be taken the wrong way, or if what one has done has pleased them or not. It seems that apart from some exceptional cases, where people know each other very well, and can communicate without causing any sort of dispute or conflict, most people always have to be careful with each other. Even couples that have been together for many years still seem to need to be careful not to say the wrong thing, which could displease the other.

In contrast, when one lives in isolation amongst the animals and birds, one has no doubts whether one would be pleasing them or not. One can remain comfortable without those kind of doubts or fears, and that in itself is a very delightful atmosphere and conducive environment for one's practice. Thus, one generates this thought as an aspirational prayer, "*When will I abide together with those whose company is delightful?*"

Soon after we settled in India, after the escape, there were many very good monks who resolved to go into isolation and practise. Unfortunately many did not survive for long because of health conditions etc. There was one quite young monk named Kelsang in Dalhousie, who was 25 years old at that time, and a student of the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey-la, from whom he received many teachings on the lam rim and so forth. He was so inspired to go into retreat that he would go up into the cold mountainous area; altogether he went up for about 12 years. In winter he would come down for some time because it gets extremely cold, but then he'd go up into isolation again in the summer months, then come down to receive more teachings before going back into the retreat area. In this way he spent a long time in retreat mode.

Every three years he would go up for a period of time and then come out for a while, and then go back again for three years. It was on the fourth time, after he'd come out that I met him in Dharamsala and we had some tea together at a tea stall. There he told me that he was out to receive some rare teachings from His Holiness on the *Six Yogas of Naropa*, and then he was planning to go back into retreat again. He was from Amdo in the eastern part of Tibet. The late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey-la told me in Varanasi that this monk was of good nature and had very good potential. In later years I didn't hear what happened to him, or know his whereabouts.

Some years ago I visited a serene and isolated place in Tasmania. The area is called Lorinna which is not far from Devonport. There were only two families there and I stayed in one of the cabins, and the family there looked after me. They had a small gumpa where I was staying. I remember there was a beautiful peacock and mountains in the distance, and further down some lakes. It was a very quiet and serene area. I remember the family looking after me had a son called Owen, who would bring me my meals. I stayed there for two weeks and did the White Manjushri retreat. I was a very happy to be alone in a quiet and serene atmosphere. The family would send me tea, hot water and other essentials. Apparently the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey had also visited that place, and I heard that a hundred people had come at that time. Anyhow, as described in the text, this is a serene and isolated place that I visited in Tasmania.

This verse describes specifically the distinction of company, so the next verse describes a suitable place.

2.1.2.4.2. *Distinction of place*

This refers to a suitable place.

The verses read:

26. *Abiding in a cave, empty temple
Or abiding at the foot of a tree,
When will I not look back
And be without attachment?*
27. *When shall I abide
Without attachment and act independently
In naturally spacious places
Not held as 'mine'?*

The commentary explains the meaning as follows:

Abide as you desire in a cave, empty temple or at the foot of a tree. Having abandoned the family home and not wishing to take it back, generate the wish thinking, "When shall I abide in solitude without attachment and not look back?"

Generate the wish, thinking, "When can I act independently in naturally wide open places not held by someone else as 'mine', and become unattached to body and enjoyments."

The commentary explains the place or abode is to be in a *cave, empty temple or at the foot of a tree*. The Vinaya has a description of an ideal place for retreat as being in an area where there are plenty of trees.

Resorting to such isolated places is further explained as most ideal where *having abandoned the family home and not wishing to take it back*; one goes into isolation with a sense of resolve and commitment that one will not turn back until one achieves one's goals. One generates the wish,

"when shall I abide in solitude without attachment and not look back?" Here an aspiration is presented: may I be able to abide in such places, along with the following wish, *"When can I act independently in naturally wide open places not held by someone else as 'mine', and become unattached to body and enjoyments."* This again refers to leaving aside all worldly pleasures—attachment to one's body, wealth, relatives and friends etc.—and going into isolation with only the intention to engage in practice. It's good for one to read these lines periodically and generate this aspiration in one's mind.

First, the text describes the suitable company to be found in isolation, followed by the suitable place for one's practice in isolation. The next verse explains the distinction of livelihood—which is the type of livelihood one must rely upon. We can see that all of these are the means to practise less desire and contentment.

2.1.2.4.3. *Distinction of livelihood*

The verse reads:

28. *When will I abide without fear,
Despite not hiding my body,
With as little as a begging bowl,
Wearing clothes unneeded by anyone else.*

The commentary explains the meaning as follows:

Generate the wish thinking, "When will I abide without fear of robbers though not hiding this body in an inaccessible abode where there's no cause to be robbed, having only an earthen bowl, a little incomplete food and wearing clothes discarded by others?" Meditate on this again and again and also put it into practise.

This advice would be for fully ordained monks as it refers to, *having only an earthen bowl*, which is the simplest form of begging bowl. Other belongings of a fully-ordained monk would be a walking staff and a sieve. Because of their simplicity one can abide in places with no *fear of robbers*, and one does not have to resort to hiding one's body *in an inaccessible abode*, because one's belongings are so meagre there is no fear of robbers in relation to either one's body or possessions, such as the clothing *discarded by others*.

As explained distinctively in the Vinaya, the clothing of a fully-ordained monk is of two types; either clothes discarded by others, already used and old, and thrown away; or robes which have already been used by others. In either case they are very simple, not new or fancy clothes. With these meagre belongings, which are not valuable, one can reside in isolation without any sense of fear that robbers could come and take things away from oneself. Naturally one would abide in a very relaxed atmosphere without such fears.

As the advice here is about livelihood, it might be directed to the livelihood of going into isolation as a fully-ordained monk. The personal instruction is to live a life with contentment and few desires. We can see the value of having contentment and how having less desire would be a very relaxed and conducive way of living.

After finding an ideal, conducive place in relation to one's company, the place itself, and livelihood, one needs to resolve to meditate on this again and again, and put it into practice.

This advice is quite suitable for someone with a male form because maybe there would be less fear about going out into the wilderness alone. As a woman one might be a bit more hesitant, and one needs to be more careful in how to go about it. In the past I remember an American nun called Thubten Pemo who wanted to go up into a cave, and live in isolation. But she said she needed someone not too far away to help her. Which monk could go and serve her? How could monks decide that anyway? So that was difficult for her.

In either case, male or female, one must resort to strong determination to go out in the wilderness. That definitely requires courage. Without courage I think it would be very difficult to resolve to do it.

2.1.2.4.4. *Distinction of individual discernment*

This is subdivided into two:

2.1.2.4.4.1. Individually discerning the antidote against attachment to the body

2.1.2.4.4.2. Individually discerning the antidote against attachment to friends and relatives

2.1.2.4.4.1. Individually discerning the antidote against attachment to the body

This is presented in two verses, the first reads:

29. *Having visited the cemetery,
When will I equalise
My body with the bones of others,
As being subject to disintegration?*

The commentary explains the meaning:

Bringing to mind the impermanence of the body: Having visited the cemetery make prayers thinking, "When will my body equal the corpse and bones of those others that are subject to disintegration?"

Generate the recognition of decay as explained in the *Mother of Conqueror Sutras*.

This verse presents one of the best methods to overcome attachment to one's body—to go into cemeteries and observe the corpses as a reminder of what one's own body will eventually become. The only difference between the corpse you see there and your own body is that you happen to be living now. When death comes one's body will be no different to the state of the corpse's body one sees in the cemetery. By relating to the corpses, *bringing to mind the impermanence of the body, having visited the cemetery*, one resolves to think, "*When will my body equal the corpse and bones of those others that are subject to disintegration?*" and contemplate in this way.

One will generate the recognition of decay as explained in the *Mother of Conqueror Sutras*, refers to eight different ways of meditating on the imperfections of the objects, such as body. Look up the eight different methods yourselves; I've presented them in earlier teachings. Amongst the eight there are those who are attached to the body's shape, then one meditates on the decomposition or disintegration of the body's shape. Then for those who are attracted to the colour of the body, meditating specifically on the change of the corpses' colour etc. In this way the eight specific types of meditations unfold.

The next verse reads:

30. *Also, this very body of mine
Will cause even the coyotes
To stay away from it with its stink.
It will come like this.*

The commentary explains the meaning as follows:

Regarding generating the recognition of the impure body, also this very body of mine will cause even the coyotes, which crave the impure, to want to stay away from it and its stink of decay. Equalise your body with the corpse in the cemetery, thinking, "It will come definitely like this, it is its nature."

Here the commentary emphasises the impurity of that body to which one is so attached. The way to reduce this strong attachment is to think, *this very body of mine will cause even the coyotes, which crave the impure, to want to stay away from it and its stink of decay*. So even wild animals like coyotes and animals that normally devour corpses would be repulsed and not approach the corpse due to the stench and decay of putrefaction. One's own body is in that same nature. The only thing keeping our body fresh and lustrous now is the fact that it has a consciousness in it. But once the consciousness leaves, it is only a matter of days before one's own body is the same as explained here. One should resolve that it will definitely occur like this; it is its nature. The personal instruction here is recognising the means to overcome attachment to our body because often we succumb to strong attachment to it.

2.1.2.4.4.2. Individually discerning the antidote against attachment to friends and relatives

This is subdivided into three:

2.1.2.4.4.2.1. It is unsuitable to be attached to friends and relatives

2.1.2.4.4.2.2. The reason for that

2.1.2.4.4.2.3. Thinking of oneself as a guest that stays each day in a different place

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

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