
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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

Once again we have this wonderful opportunity of being able to gather together and meet each other.

Over the break I travelled to India with some of you. I had a very fortunate time in India — it was a time like no other. An enormous crowd (I estimated it to be thirty-five thousand people) attended the teachings, and the arrangements were amazing. A free lunch was provided for all, along with free tea and bread in the morning teaching session and tea in the afternoon, and all of it was of good quality. Bottled water was available all the time; in various corners bottles of water were piled up like small hills, so you could take a bottle whenever you needed. Some were only half empty when they were discarded, which shows how plentiful the supply was. Those were just the good external conditions that were in place for the teaching sessions.

Of course the teaching was presented by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a most extraordinary and unequalled teacher. And the topic of the teaching was the actual words of the Buddha himself. As His Holiness mentioned during the teachings, 'It is incredibly fortunate that we are together for these teachings. Because we are all followers of the Buddha, we definitely have a unique connection with him, and for that reason the Buddha is constantly looking down upon us with particular attention. With this understanding you should have no fears, and feel confident and relaxed'.

This is significant advice from His Holiness, and it is something that we need to always keep in mind throughout our lives. Then, if we can remember, 'As I have been a follower of the Buddha, he is definitely looking upon me with loving care and compassion' in the last moments of our life, just before death, this will provide the best conditions for a peaceful death. That, in essence, is what I can relay to you from the teachings in India that I attended.

In relation to my own conditions, I was definitely very comfortable while I was there. I felt very relaxed and didn't have any major complications or health problems, so I felt very good. It was only when I got back here that I realised how tired I was. For nearly five weeks I woke early, at around three o'clock, and sometimes two o'clock, to do my prayers. During teachings I usually don't eat much during the day, because I fear that it will cause drowsiness. But even though I was waking up very early and going to the teaching sessions two times a day, I noticed that my mind always remained fresh and clear. However all of that seems to have taken a physical toll, because when I got home I started to feel the impact of

the previous weeks. But now I'm refreshed and doing well again.

I'm relaying this account of my trip to India as many of you might have been wondering about my time there, and how things went. I can definitely state that the time I spent in India and the positive effects of all the teachings that I received from His Holiness has had a very, very profound impact on my mind. As recently as last night there was a clear indication of this, when I had a very vivid dream of the Dalai Lama presenting a yellow robe to me. This was a very clear sign of the very auspicious time I spent in India.

The real significance of me relaying all of this to you is to remind you of the main purpose of why we are gathering here. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the main point is to gain the means for cultivating a good kind heart. Both you and the teacher (myself in this case) have to always remember that this is really the main purpose. In fact, when one attempts to generate that kind good heart at every opportunity it becomes the most meaningful action that one can engage in.

I have personally received a lot of profound instructions about methods for generating a kind and good heart from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The significance of acquiring the means for generating a genuinely kind and compassionate heart is not all that obscure. When one thinks about it, it is quite clear that a kind heart is what ultimately contributes to one's wellbeing—it is one's real protector and guide. In every respect, the kind and compassionate heart is the most valuable asset that one can ever possess: it is the ultimate means for gaining personal happiness; it helps one to acquire all the good conditions for personal happiness; as well as removing the conditions for misery and suffering.

Furthermore, by engaging in study and learning how to develop a kind compassionate heart, we are acquiring the means to establish a real protector for ourselves. When that unflinching and trustworthy protector and saviour, that genuine, kind and compassionate heart, is established within us, we will be really genuinely relaxed and settled, and a happy person.

On the other hand, when one lacks these inner conditions for a true sense of happiness and wellbeing, then one constantly looks for an external companion to give that sense of happiness. That is why we are never really fulfilled. We are constantly searching for a trustworthy unflinching good companion or friend, and we are constantly unsettled because of our lack of success in this search.

That is where we take the wrong turn. If we actually believe that a trustworthy and unflinching protector and saviour and companion is somewhere out there, and that all we have to do is keep searching for them, then we are missing the point. Inevitably we won't find what we seek, and end up feeling lonely, and falling into despair. All of that will be eliminated once we establish a inner true friend and trustworthy companion.

For as long as we spend all our time and energy looking for external companions or external good conditions in the belief that this is where happiness lies, we will keep falling short of actually achieving a true sense of well-

being and happiness, and experience one problem after another, and one difficulty after another. If we just change our approach and start spending quality time looking within, searching for, and developing the true unfailing inner friend and companion, then we will begin to notice that our life takes a turn for the better. A true transformation will start to come about and we will begin to become more and more relaxed, more settled, more self-reliant and confident, and genuinely content and happy in life.

When we endeavour to establish these good inner conditions or causes, it is certain that we will achieve positive results from our efforts. Here the positive causes are the development of love and compassion for others, taking their interests into account, which naturally brings about the positive result of experiencing personal wellbeing. As a way of nurturing and maintaining our sense of love and compassion for others, the practice of patience is indispensable. So we need to definitely practise patience as well. When we develop these qualities we will definitely experience the result that we seek.

I regularly emphasise this point again and again, and you should not take it lightly. I feel that I'm presenting something which will be most useful and valuable and meaningful for your own life. If you implement this advice, then it will definitely be incredibly beneficial for your life. If we take the initiative to look within ourselves, and evaluate what is essential for our wellbeing, then we will realise that we must never be separated from love and compassion at any cost. When we begin to acknowledge that love and compassion are indispensable, and that we need to nurture and always maintain it, then we will be keen to apply the methods to protect these qualities.

As mentioned regularly, meditation is a supreme technique that actually helps protect positive qualities from degeneration. Protecting a sense of happiness, a happy mind, a clear mind, and a positive attitude is essential for personal wellbeing. Those meditation practices are none other than the unmistakable methods for protecting one's mind. When we are able to protect our happy and clear state of mind, we will undoubtedly experience mental wellbeing.

At times, of course, we may experience some physical ailments. That is a given fact, and experiencing physical ailments is quite natural. But when we have secured positive inner conditions then, despite physical illnesses or any difficulties we may experience on a physical level, we can maintain a positive outlook and a happy state of mind.

There are, of course, times where we may feel a bit weighed down, and anxious and so forth. These feelings do of course come about, but what we need to recognise is that they are mostly related to unrealistic thoughts, which are called discursive or superstitious thoughts. When unnecessary doubts and fears take over our mind, and we give in to these discursive thoughts, then that is when our mind gets weighed down, and we end up being caught up in this cycle of unease.

However, when we take a strong stance in recognising that the main cause for our mental turmoil is none other than our own disturbing thoughts, then we can start to instil a state of mind where we don't allow disturbing thoughts, particularly irrational fears and doubts, to completely overwhelm us.

Thinking in this way helps to keep us focussed on the right track in life. The Buddha said that we should use this internal investigation as a mirror to see our own mind. The Buddha is quoted as saying that the Dharma serves as a mirror. We use an external mirror to see if our face has dirt on it that needs to be removed, because we cannot otherwise see our own face. Likewise the Dharma is said to be like a mirror that reflects the stains and dirt of our mind. Through seeing that clearly we can then attempt to remove those stains, which are the disturbing thoughts and delusions in our mind. This is paramount for any transformation that we wish to develop.

As I mention regularly, this internal investigation is done by none other than our own intelligence and wisdom. Ultimately it is our own wisdom that serves as the unfailing and consistent guide that helps us to follow the right path in our lives. We should always rely upon our own clear, discriminating wisdom.

I share all of this with you again, as a means of reminding you to reflect upon whatever practice you may be engaging in—whether it's meditation or engaging in the teachings, or studying the Dharma—and be mindful that all of these practices give us the means to clearly recognise and distinguish between what is useful and what is harmful. Then we can adopt what is useful, namely the qualities, and discard what is harmful, which is the delusions that lie within. If we can clearly distinguish between conducive conditions and conditions that are harmful, then it is most likely that we will be able to achieve what we are seeking to achieve.

Some lamas give the very practical advice of first asking the question, 'Why do I need to practise the Dharma?' The simple answer to that is, 'Because I wish for happiness and do not wish to experience any suffering'. This, in fact, encapsulates the real purpose of whatever virtues we engage in—it is because we wish to experience genuine happiness, and do not wish to experience any suffering.

The next question is 'Do I have the ability to practise the Dharma?' The answer is, as presented in the Lam Rim, that one definitely has that ability, because of having all of the necessary **inner conditions**. These are the **physical conditions** of a precious human rebirth with its eight freedoms and ten endowments. We also have the mental ability, which is a clear and discriminating wisdom. Therefore we have the necessary **mental conditions**.

With respect to **external conditions** we have the unmistakable teachers who present the teachings in a precise and clear manner. Of course these teachers need to have the qualifications of a perfect teacher, which is a full understanding and knowledge of the teachings. When we are able to recognise the Mahayana teacher and have faith in him, then that combination provides the

intact external conditions to engage in the study and practice of the Dharma.

Thus one has the necessary internal conditions which encompass one's physical and mental conditions, as well as the external condition of having met with a perfect Mahayana teacher.

By reflecting on these points in the form of the questions and answers that are presented in the teachings, it is said that one will come to the conclusion that, because of having a precious human rebirth, we definitely have the ability to practise the Dharma. However it is not sufficient just to have all the right conditions. One needs to apply the teachings and actually engage in practising them right now. That conclusion comes from reflecting on the precious human rebirth as being extremely difficult to obtain, and very easy to lose.

Contemplating in this way, by raising hypothetical qualms and coming to conclusions based on presentations like that in the Lam Rim, for example, we develop very sound and logical reasons for not only recognising that we have the potential and the ability to practise the Dharma, but that we need to actually act upon it right now. The Buddha very meticulously emphasised death and impermanence as a means to exhort one to actually engage in the practice of Dharma.

One of the main reasons for reflecting like this is to counter laziness. One might recognise that one has good conditions, but laziness will prevent one from actually seizing the opportunity and acting upon it. The laziness that creeps into our life, of thinking that we could do it next month, or next year and so forth, arises from not contemplating death and impermanence.

Going back to the essential point of the need to develop the kind heart, the most purest and most altruistic kind heart that one can develop is bodhicitta. There is no more supreme altruistic mind than bodhicitta. This is what we need to focus on, and attempt to develop.

The most meticulous and thorough presentation of how to develop this precious awakening mind is none other than the text that we're studying now—*The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* by Shantideva. I can safely say that there is no more superior text explaining bodhicitta than what we are studying now. Keeping that in mind we can generate strong enthusiasm and joy about having the privilege of actually engaging in the study of this text, and trying to incorporate it into our lives. Indeed even just holding this text in our hands is said to be extremely fortunate.

This supreme altruistic mind of bodhicitta, the awakening mind, is based upon the genuine wish to benefit others. This genuine wish to benefit others stems from an unbiased love and compassion for others. When one cultivates a genuine unbiased love and compassion focussing on other sentient beings, then that actually becomes the basis on which to develop superior intention. This is the immediate preceding state of mind just before one actually develops the awakening mind itself, bodhicitta.

Superior intention is the state of mind where, based on love and compassion, one takes upon oneself the full responsibility of doing whatever is necessary to actually benefit all sentient beings. The reason why we do the *tong*

len practice (giving and taking meditation), before each session is to further establish that potential within ourselves.

When one develops that superior intention of taking full responsibility for benefitting all sentient beings, to liberate them from all suffering, and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness, one reflects upon whether one has the ability to do that right now. Then one clearly sees that only an enlightened being, a buddha, has this ability. When one resolves to achieve enlightenment oneself in order to benefit all sentient beings, then one is utilising the full conditions to develop the awakening mind.

We need to be reminded again and again that the whole purpose of studying this text is so that it establishes the conditions to actually develop the awakening mind, based on all the good conditions that were listed earlier.

As I've mentioned previously, in the technique of developing the awakening mind through the giving and taking practice, superior intention is not specifically mentioned. It is, however, encompassed within the actual practice of giving and taking. When one equalises oneself with others, and gives one's happiness to them, and takes their suffering upon oneself, then that is actually cultivating superior intention. Just because it's not explicitly presented as part of this technique, it doesn't mean that one doesn't need to develop superior intention. Indeed it is of paramount importance, because without developing superior intention, one cannot possibly develop bodhicitta.

Before we conclude the session for the evening let us recite the dedication chapter of *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* for the late David Brooks who passed away last week. He was a long time friend of many of us. We can dedicate our merit for him to have a peaceful passage onto the next existence.

We can also include in our dedications whoever may be needing help and assistance at this time, those who are directly connected to us, Tara Institute, its members and students, and one's family and relatives. As we recite this text we will see that it includes all beings who are suffering in different ways. That is something we can keep in mind.

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

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Edited Version

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