
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

༄༅། །བྱུང་རྒྱུ་མེམས་དཔའི་སྤོང་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

15 March 2016

Based on the motivation that we generated during the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, we will now engage in our meditation practice.

[meditation]

Now we can set our motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teachings and put them into practice well.

The very text that we are studying introduces bodhicitta – the mind of enlightenment – showing us how to develop and further nurture it. It is important to periodically remind ourselves of this aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, and to familiarise ourselves with bodhicitta again and again on a regular basis.

Generating the bodhicitta attitude as a motivation should not be confused with actually generating the mind of enlightenment. However, such a motivation definitely plants a seed that will develop at some time in the future – familiarising our mind with bodhicitta now will definitely leave a very strong imprint.

As His Holiness mentions, while chapter eight explains how to develop concentration and thus calm abiding, it is presented in the context of instructions on how to develop the mind of enlightenment. So the presentation is not just about how to develop calm abiding, but more specifically on developing bodhicitta. For those of us who are already familiar with the bodhicitta attitude, the following verses in the text show the optimum way to develop this mind of bodhicitta.

As I have mentioned previously, the first two chapters in the text are specifically related to the benefits of the mind of enlightenment, while the middle three chapters present techniques to prevent the degeneration of the mind of enlightenment, and chapters seven to nine specifically explain how to further develop the strength of the mind of enlightenment. So we can see the really meticulous organisation of the text. His Holiness the Dalai Lama praises this text as being one of the most supreme presentations of how to generate bodhicitta, develop it and further increase it. It is indeed a supreme text.

2.2.2. Meditating on affinity for isolation

2.2.2.2. EXPLAINING

2.2.2.2.2. The quality of independence

This heading relates to the quality of the satisfaction that one gains from being in solitude. The verse relating to this heading reads:

88. *Acting independently and without attachment,
Having no relation to anybody,*

*Enjoying the happiness of contentment,
This is difficult to find even for the powerful.*

Gyaltsab Je gives this explanation of the meaning of the text:

The happiness of independently enjoying place, possessions and so forth as one wishes without attachment to them, of abiding in a place with no relation to anybody, with the happiness of being content with meagre food and clothing, is a happiness that is even difficult to find for gods and influential humans. Hence, those skilled should make an effort to rely on solitude.

What is clearly presented here is the need to develop contentment, and in explaining the benefits of contentment, it is also showing the faults of not practising contentment. All the positive qualities that are presented here are the consequence of practising contentment, which is one of the main prerequisites for developing calm abiding. *The happiness enjoying place, possessions and so forth* means that when one is in solitude one is able to enjoy the place and its conditions. *Independently* refers to not having to rely on or be dependent on others, i.e. one is able to enjoy that place of abode because one does not have to depend or rely upon others.

It is possible to enjoy the place and possessions and so forth because one is not attached to them. When one overcomes attachment to one's own body, the place one dwells in and one's possessions then one is able to fully utilise and enjoy them. In contrast, when we are still attached to our body, possessions and place, then although we may claim otherwise, we are, in fact, not able to really enjoy our possessions and so forth because of that strong attachment. It is attachment that prevents us from fully enjoying the attributes of our body, possessions and place. In addition to enjoying the place and so forth, there is also *the happiness of being content with meagre food and clothing*.

Having *no relation to anybody* refers to not being constricted by others. Having no need to please relatives or friends or people of high or low status, one can completely focus on one's practice. Indeed, it is our strong attachment to relationships that keeps us circling in samsara as we try to please those to whom we are attached, and overpower those who try to oppose us. It is these kinds of relationships that keep us circling in samsara over and over again.

The joy that is being explained here is the joy of contentment. When one practises having few desires and contentment then it brings great satisfaction. We really need to pay attention to the great advice that is being presented here.

It may sound presumptuous, but from my own experience I can say that I have found real satisfaction with my attempts at having less desire and practising contentment. In my early twenties I spent some significant time practising having less desire and contentment. I arrived in India with no possessions and no money – just the clothes I wore. Yet over the next couple of years, despite real hardship, I was not unhappy because I practised contentment with my situation. My mind was happy, and as a result of practising in this way, I had no worries. I am not sure if I was swayed by the

worldly dharmas, but I do recall feeling a great sense of satisfaction with this practice.

Although having less desire and practising contentment is a paramount practice for Dharma practitioners, anyone who practises contentment will definitely reap the benefit, and experience an inner sense of joy and satisfaction. Nagarjuna said that being contented is a true mark of wealth. As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary, finding the happiness of contentment *is difficult even for the gods and powerful, influential humans*. Nothing in samsara – wealth, pleasurable objects, sensual pleasures – will make them happy when they lack contentment in their heart.

In simple terms, practising contentment means being happy with what one has, and thinking, 'I am happy and contented with what I have, and I am happy and contented with the friends that I have, even they are few in number', regardless of whether we are in solitude or not. We can apply this practice to our everyday life, wherever we may be.

As the text indicates, when all the conditions come together for one to be able to go into solitude, then it should be utilised to further develop the mind of enlightenment. Indeed, there is no greater joy and satisfaction than in doing that.

Then the commentary concludes with this exhortation: *Hence, those skilled should make an effort to rely on solitude*.

One cannot underestimate the great value of contentment as that is what brings a true sense of satisfaction. When one is contented, any wealth one has will bring a sense of joy and happiness. Without contentment however, no matter how much wealth one has, there will be no satisfaction and no real happiness. Those who practice true contentment seem to be really happy wherever they may be. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has noticed that the focus of a certain order of Christian monks and nuns is contentment. They don't have any possessions or savings; they forsake everything and concentrate on a single-pointed focus on God. Even though they don't have anything, they seem to be really happy because they are contented. We can see from this example how the practice of contentment definitely brings a sense of joy to those who practise it.

When one is contented, one's living conditions and so forth will work out quite well. Whereas if one lacks contentment then that leads to dissatisfaction with one's surroundings and living conditions, and then conflicts and so forth arise. We really need to pay particular attention to this point.

However, the emphasis on practising contentment should not be misinterpreted as meaning that one has to get rid of all one's wealth and possessions. That is not the point. Rather, one needs to reduce attachment to wealth and possessions. If one does not explain this to others properly, and they misunderstand what you say, then they may get the impression of, "Oh, if you are a Buddhist then you have to completely divest yourself of all your wealth and possessions". Being contented is not suggesting that we have to live in very poor conditions. Far from that, it is actually saying that we should be contented and happy regardless of the situations we

encounter, and that reducing attachment to one's possessions and wealth brings satisfaction and contentment.

3. THE WAY OF MEDITATING ON CALM ABIDING¹

This is the third major section of the chapter, and it has two subdivisions:

- 3.1 The way of meditating on equalising self and others
- 3.2. The way of exchanging self and others

Here we can note that the method for developing calm abiding is presented within the context of meditating on equalising and then exchanging self with others. There is no separate explanation of the way to develop calm abiding.

What is calm abiding?

We also need to take note that calm abiding (*shi-ne* in Tibetan) and mental stabilisation (*sam-ten*) refer to the same thing. As I have explained many times, the definition of *calm abiding is the meditative equipoise that is able to single-pointedly focus on its object for as long as it wishes, which is combined with the bliss of physical and mental pliancy*. Calm abiding is a meditative state of mind that is able to focus single-pointedly on an object for as long as one wishes, and this is associated with the bliss that arises due to physical and mental pliancy. The methods for developing calm abiding will be presented in more detail later on, but it is good to have some understanding of the topic at this point.

The reason why the explanation of calm abiding is embedded in the subject of the text, rather than being explicitly introduced and explained, is perhaps because the teaching was presented to listeners of sharp intellect. Because of that intellect we're able to derive an understanding of this topic from other sources of the Buddha's teachings.

Coming back to the method for developing calm abiding, having chosen an appropriate object one needs to focus on that chosen object without wavering. Focussing single-pointedly means focussing on that object without distraction, free from the obstacles of laxity and excitement.

One continuously engages in this single-pointed focus, free from the faults of laxity and excitement, again and again, and thus familiarises one's mind with the object. Then, having engaged in that mental training, the mind becomes free from defects like wandering off, or resistance to focussing on the object. Thus the mind becomes serviceable, and it is at this point that one obtains mental pliancy.

Because one is able to focus on the object without mental effort, it helps the wind energy to flow freely through one's body. Any physical resistance to sitting for too long, to the distractions caused by aches and pains and so forth subsides, and so the physical body also becomes serviceable. At that point one obtains physical pliancy.

¹ This section of the text was introduced on 29 September 2015. The other two major sections under the heading Explaining the Text of the Chapter, are Advice to Meditate on Mental Stabilisation, and Abandoning the Opposing Factors to Calm Abiding

Due to that physical pliancy there is no resistance whatsoever at a physical level, and one is able to sit for as long as one wishes. That induces a blissful feeling throughout the body, which is called physical bliss. Experiencing that physical bliss then induces a mental bliss.

When a meditator experiences this combination of physical and mental bliss, and further familiarises themselves with the object of focus, then they are able to focus unwaveringly on that object, free from all faults, and for as long as they wish. At that point the meditator has obtained calm abiding. This, in short, is what reaching calm abiding entails, and it is a significant result of the practice of meditation.

Although further explanations are presented later on, it is good to have this summary of what calm abiding means. This understanding will resolve any doubts about the benefits of engaging in the practice of meditation, or its end result that you or others might have – it is that physical and mental bliss of remaining in single-pointed focus on an object.

The three higher trainings

Following the attainment of calm abiding, one then obtains special insight, which is the real force that overcomes our delusions. In order to obtain special insight one has to have first obtained calm abiding. In other words, special insight cannot be developed without having previously developed calm abiding.

The first condition for being able to develop calm abiding is practising **morality**, which serves as the basis for the other two higher trainings of concentration and wisdom. So morality is really the fundamental basis. As you know, one of the qualities of a Mahayana teacher is that they are endowed with morality; this indeed is one of the most important qualities of a Mahayana teacher. The definition of morality and so forth is explained in detail in *Liberation in the Palm of your Hand*, so you can refer to that for more information.

Morality serves as the root of all virtues. Just like a seed is the basis from which all plants grow, morality is the basis for the development of all virtue. Practising morality acts as a restraint to engaging in the gross levels of external distractions.

Inner distractions can be divided into gross and subtle distractions. The gross level of inner distraction is basically laxity and excitement. As a means to overcome these gross inner distractions of laxity and excitement one applies the training of **meditation**.

Subtle inner distraction refers to grasping at true existence or grasping at a self. To overcome this grasping one needs to apply the **wisdom** realising emptiness. The wisdom realising selflessness, or the realisation of emptiness is the means to overcome the most subtle levels of inner distraction, and thus eliminate all distractions.

It is good to have this overview of how gaining an understanding of the three baskets of the teachings of the Buddha can be subsumed into the three higher trainings of morality, meditation and wisdom, and how that serves as a means to overcome gross and subtle distractions and

obscurations. Having this overall view can be very helpful for understanding the structure of the Buddha's teachings.

Having given you an overview of what calm abiding entails, its benefits and so forth, we now return to the text.

3.1.1. Brief explanation

This section is explained in two verses.

*89. Having contemplated the qualities of solitude
In these and other aspects,
One should pacify disturbing thoughts
And meditate on the mind of enlightenment.*

The commentary on this verse explains:

Having contemplated in the aspects outlined before, and in other aspects, the qualities of remote places isolated from outer excitement and other distractions, one should then pacify the disturbing thoughts that are aspiring to sense and other objects, and meditate on the mind of enlightenment.

When the commentary states *Having contemplated in the aspects outlined before, and in other aspects, the qualities of remote places isolated from outer excitement and other distractions*, it is referring to places that are isolated from external distractions such as friends and relatives, and the hustle and bustle of daily life. So the abode needs to be an isolated place like a forest or a cave where you are free from external distractions.

The next type of isolation is isolation from inner distractions, which are *the disturbing thoughts*. As mentioned previously, it is not sufficient to exist in an isolated place free from external distractions if the mind is still distracted. No conducive external conditions can help if one is constantly affected by disturbing thoughts. Therefore, you need to be isolated from inner distractions, i.e. disturbing thoughts.

... and other aspects refers to being isolated from self-interest. The very purpose of going into isolation is to develop the mind of enlightenment. If you are affected by self-interest and a self-cherishing mind, there is no way that you can develop the mind of enlightenment, which is primarily the wish to benefit other sentient beings.

So one should *pacify the disturbing thoughts that are aspiring to sense and other objects*, and then use the external conditions to meditate on the mind of enlightenment. That is the real purpose of conducive conditions.

The second verse under this heading reads:

*90. At first, strive in meditating
On equalising self and others.
Since they are the same in happiness and
suffering
Look after others like yourself.*

The commentary is presented in the form of hypothetical questions and answers.

Query: With which method should one meditate?

Answer: At first, strive in meditating on equalising self and others.

Query: How?

Answer: Since others have the same acceptance and rejection of happiness and suffering as oneself, and try to establish their happiness and clear their suffering in the same way as one tries to establish

one's happiness and stop one's suffering, one should look after all sentient beings, cherishing them like oneself.

In response to the hypothetical query, *With what method should one meditate?* the commentary states, *At first strive in meditating on equalising self and others.* This is an essential point, because without first equalising oneself with others there is no possibility of being able to engage in the actual practice of exchanging self with others. So the practice of exchanging self with others has to be preceded by equalising oneself with others.

The hypothetical question following on from this is *How?*, and then the commentary goes on to explain that one needs to see all beings as being equal in wanting happiness, and not wanting any suffering.

All beings equally have this fundamental aspiration or wish to be happy and not to suffer. We might wonder how all beings can be equal, but when we think about it we see that regardless of whether they are rich or poor, whether they have high status or power like a king or minister, or if they are a simple person, all living beings, including animals such as cats or dogs are alike in wanting happiness, and not wanting to experience suffering. So as explained in the commentary, one needs to first strive in meditating on equalising self and others.

When the commentary explains that *others have the same acceptance and rejection of happiness and suffering as oneself* it is saying that as we too have this wish for happiness and want to avoid suffering, we are all alike. This is how we are equal. Since that is the case, we need to *try to establish their happiness and clear their suffering in the same way as one tries to establish one's happiness and stop one's suffering.* Without first generating the mind of equalising oneself with others, there is no possibility of developing love and compassion.

Thus, the commentary concludes, *one should look after all sentient beings, cherishing them like oneself.*

[Symbolically, there was a pause here as a lost frog that had made its way into the gompa was collected to be returned to an appropriate habitat. We recited the OM MANI PADME HUM mantra, followed by the Four Immeasurables.]

3.1.2. Extensive explanation

This has four subdivisions:

3.1.2.1. Explaining the meaning of equalising self and others

3.1.2.2. The way of meditating on equalising self and others

3.1.2.3. The benefits of meditating on it

3.1.2.4. If one meditates on equalising self and others, one can develop it

3.1.2.1. EXPLAINING THE MEANING OF EQUALISING SELF AND OTHERS

This hypothetical question precedes the verse.

Argument: As there are infinite different sentient beings, and it is not suitable to generate the mind thinking 'I' with regards to them, how can the acceptance of their happiness and the rejection of their suffering possibly be one's own?

The verses that we have covered are essential for our practice. Therefore, it is good to really familiarise ourselves with them, reading and rereading them and thinking about their meaning. Just reading them once or twice doesn't help to move the mind, and without that there will be no transformation. But by reading them again and again and thinking about their meaning we can derive real benefit from them – it can bring great solace.

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
Edited Version*

© Tara Institute