

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 generated during the refuge and bodhicitta prayer, we will now engage in our regular meditation practice. [meditation]

We can generate the bodhicitta 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 listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

Generating such a motivation, even for a few moments, will definitely establish very strong positive imprints in one's mind.

This part of the text explains very profound ways of engaging in the actual practice of exchanging self with others, which becomes very meaningful when we put it into practise.

The earlier verses explained how one needs to overcome strong attachment to desire objects. To overcome strong desire for sensual objects, one needs to rely on solitude. This pacifies one's physical and mental defects, making them serviceable for applying single-pointed meditation on developing bodhicitta.

3.1.2.1. EXPLAINING THE MEANING OF EQUALISING SELF AND OTHERS

Firstly, the commentary presents this hypothetical argument:

Argument: As there are infinite different sentient beings, 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?

What is being presented here, in the form of an argument or doubt, is that *there are infinite different sentient beings*, if one cannot possibly regard all sentient beings as oneself, then how could it be possible for one to accept their happiness and reject their sufferings?

The verse reads:

91. *Although there are many parts such as hands
and so forth,
They belong to the same body that is the object
of protection;
Likewise, the happy and suffering migrators
All equal oneself in desiring happiness.*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse, which serves as an answer to the earlier hypothetical argument:

Answer: Although the body has many parts such as the feet and hands, they are all the same in being parts of the one body that is regarded as 'mine' by the person. Likewise, although there are many different migrators, such as gods and humans, their happiness and sufferings are not different. Focusing on how they are the same, one beholds all others as oneself, holds them as self, and thinks, "I shall establish that happiness and I shall clear away this suffering." This is the meaning of meditating that all of them are equal to oneself.

The first part of the commentary presents the analogy, *although the body has many parts such as the feet and hands, they are all the same in being parts of the one body that is regarded as 'mine'*, which means that although there are many distinct parts to our body such as the arms, the legs, the head etc. the reason we cherish and protect all parts is because of clinging to them as 'mine'.

This is an analogy to illustrate that although there are an infinite number of distinct sentient beings, *such as gods and humans etc.*, they are all the same in wanting to experience happiness, and not wanting to experience any misery or suffering. As there is no difference between one's own likes and dislikes and their likes and dislikes, if one begins to cherish all beings it is possible to regard their suffering as one's own suffering, and their happiness as one's own happiness. One then takes the initiative to establish their happiness and eliminate the suffering of all sentient beings.

As will be presented further on, the key point is to develop the mind that cherishes other sentient beings. When one develops this mind then it is possible to establish their happiness and remove their suffering, just as one would for oneself.

3.1.2.2. THE WAY OF MEDITATING ON EQUALISING SELF AND OTHERS

This is subdivided into two:

3.1.2.2.1. Refuting that the acceptance and rejection of happiness and suffering is unsuitable to be the same

3.1.2.2.2. Explaining the reason why it is suitable to meditate on it as equal

3.1.2.2.1. Refuting that the acceptance and rejection of happiness and suffering is unsuitable to be the same

What is being established here is that it is suitable to regard the acceptance of happiness and the rejection of suffering in others as being the same as, or equal to, oneself. Without first accepting this, there is no possibility of being able actually engage in the practice of exchanging self with other.

The practice of exchanging self with other depends upon first accepting others' suffering and happiness as being equal to one's own. What is being explained here is that not accepting this is unsuitable.

The next two verses explain this point. The next hypothetical argument presented is:

Argument: Since other's sufferings do not harm one's body, and one's own sufferings do not harm the body of others, it is invalid that the clearing away of their suffering equals the clearing away of one's own suffering.

This hypothetical argument represents a doubt that arises in most of us, where we think, 'How can I be equal to others?'

The next two verses provide the answer:

92. *If, 'One's sufferings
Do not harm the body of others.'
Yet, they are one's sufferings,
Holding them as mine, they are unbearable.*
93. *Similarly, others' sufferings
Do not fall upon oneself.
Yet, they are one's sufferings,
Holding them as mine, they are difficult to bear.*

The commentary further explains:

Answer: There is no fault. Even though one's suffering does not harm the body of others, and the suffering of others does not harm oneself, their suffering is one's own suffering. By grasping at oneself as 'self' one

finds one's own suffering unbearable. Similarly, by meditating on holding other sentient beings as self, even though their sufferings do not fall upon oneself to experience, their sufferings become sufferings to be cleared by oneself, because by holding sentient beings as one's own self, if they experience sufferings, they become difficult to bear for oneself.

In relation to the earlier argument, what is being presented here as an answer is, *even though one's suffering does not harm the body of others, and the suffering of others does not harm oneself, their suffering is one's own suffering*, because one is affected by it. Of course others' physical suffering is obviously not one's own suffering. In other words, when someone else is suffering from a physical ailment, it is not as if we experience the actual pain of that ailment in our own body. While it is true that the suffering of someone else's body does not harm one's own body, nevertheless their suffering is akin to one's own suffering, because one is affected by it. Thus, one needs to overcome their suffering, which is the main point.

By grasping at oneself as 'self' one finds one's own suffering unbearable. This confirms that in relation to oneself, the suffering one experiences is due to a strong grasping at the self, and so one's suffering becomes unbearable.

Similarly, by meditating on holding other sentient beings as self, even though their sufferings do not fall upon oneself to experience, their sufferings become sufferings to be cleared by oneself. This acknowledges that while others' sufferings are not experienced by oneself, when others are experiencing suffering, if one holds them as self, then their suffering becomes one's own suffering.

In reality we do experience this. For example, when close and dear ones are experiencing pain and suffering, even though we do not actually experience their pain, it is unbearable to see them suffering, because of our strong bond with them. In contrast, if a stranger, or someone we feel indifferent towards, experiences pain and suffering, it doesn't affect us very strongly. That is something we can see through our own experience.

What is also apparent is that while we feel close to someone their suffering can be unbearable for us, however when they start to become distant their suffering becomes less unbearable to us. Once it was unbearable, but then it becomes less unbearable. We might even feel glad that they are suffering now.

The main point here is that just as one's own suffering is due to strong clinging to one's own self, clinging to others also produces suffering for oneself when they experience suffering. *Their sufferings become suffering to be cleared by oneself.* If this is the case, one cannot reject their suffering by saying, 'It's not my suffering. I don't experience this suffering so it doesn't concern me.' Rather one needs to resolve, 'Because this suffering affects me, it is a suffering that I need to overcome'. When one holds sentient beings as dear as oneself, then it becomes difficult for one to bear their suffering; this is the point. The logical reasons meticulously explained here, show that it is reasonable to clear away the sufferings of other sentient beings.

We have personal experience of this reasoning. When we are not able to bear the sufferings of others then we are more inclined to remove that suffering, and if their suffering is not unbearable, then we will not be inclined to do anything to clear away their suffering. We notice more readily that when those very close us are suffering, we take the needed action because it's unbearable for us to see them suffer. That's why

we take the initiative to do something to remove their suffering. So even though their suffering is not one's own suffering, their suffering does become a concern because it is unbearable for us to see.

When we apply this on a practical level, first we need to feel that their suffering is unbearable, then that becomes the initiative for one to actually act to clear away the suffering of other sentient beings.

We need to relate this first to a close friend or relative, then we can understand this on a larger scale, in relation to all sentient beings. We will be able to see that this is very true and reasonable. These sentiments are very meaningful and a practical way to put good attitudes into practice.

While we many not yet be anywhere near developing actual bodhicitta, if we can practice by really seeing how, just like oneself, other sentient beings do not wish to experience any suffering, and wish to only experience happiness, then we will be able to recognise others as being exactly the same as ourselves.

We need to contemplate how 'It is reasonable for me to have concern for other sentient beings and take initiative to do something to help them be free from suffering and endowed with happiness'.

On a more practical level, one would take into consideration the genuine concerns of those that we live with, and those who we deal with every day, if one had a strong feeling for their wellbeing. The point is thT when you see the other suffering and you cannot bear it, you will take initiative to help clear away their suffering. Similarly, when the other is deprived of happiness, doing something to establish them in happiness is an initiative one would take. This is indeed a very practical and meaningful strategy to foster better relationships with others.

To make one's mind familiar with these positive attitudes one needs to take initiative to actually contemplate and meditate on this points. I can definitively share with you that in my regular practice, after reciting the Prayer of the Four Immeasurables, I pause for a while to contemplate on the sentiment I need to devote myself to, in order to bring about happiness for other beings and remove their suffering.

Just thinking on that, making that resolve in my mind and spending a few moments meditating on this is, I feel, akin to generating superior intention. And on the basis of developing superior intention, one can easily develop the aspirational mind of enlightenment.

While I cannot claim of doing great practices, these are the points I really pay attention to and try to spend some time on. As I mention regularly, just making this strong resolve in the morning 'today I will not intentionally harm any living being, I will only engage in benefiting other sentient beings', and spending a few moments on it in the morning, is very meaningful, and in itself quite a powerful practice. To start the day with this intention is indeed very meaningful.

3.1.2.2.2. Explaining the reason why it is suitable to meditate on it as equal

That is again subdivided into three:

3.1.2.2.2.1. Extensive explanation

3.1.2.2.2.2. Short summary

3.1.2.2.2.2. Refuting objections

3.1.2.2.2.1. Extensive explanation

This is then subdivided again into three:

3.1.2.2.2.1.1. Stating the reason

3.1.2.2.1.2. Establishing the pervasion

3.1.2.2.1.3. Clearing away obstructing thoughts of 'It is unsuitable to meditate on equalising self and others'

3.1.2.2.1.1. Stating the reason

The verse reads:

94. *I shall clear the sufferings of others
Because they are suffering, like my own
suffering.
I shall benefit others
Because they are sentient beings, like my body.*

The commentary explains:

Take the subject 'the sufferings of other sentient beings': they are suitable to be eliminated by oneself—because they are suffering, e.g. like one's own suffering.

It is appropriate for one to establish the benefit and happiness of others—because the other person is a sentient being, e.g. like establishing the happiness of one's body.

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse in the form of a syllogism.

- *Take the subject 'the sufferings of other sentient beings' is the subject;*
- *they are suitable to eliminate by oneself is the predicate;*
- *because they are suffering is the reason;*
- *The example is, like one's own suffering.*

In the example, one understands that it is suitable to remove one's own suffering for no other reason than it is suffering and unbearable.

It is the same when one establishes that upon others, i.e. it is suitable to eliminate the suffering of others because, like one's own suffering, their suffering is also unbearable. That's the first part of the syllogism.

The next part is the predicate, *it is appropriate for one to establish the benefit and happiness of others*, for the reason *because the others are sentient beings*. Again using oneself as an example, just by virtue of the fact that one is a sentient being, one naturally wishes to establish benefit and happiness for oneself. Likewise because others are also sentient beings, with the same wishes as oneself, it is appropriate to establish benefit and happiness for them as well.

The example is that just as one wants to establish the happiness of one's own body, it is the same for others; they wish to experience happiness, and that is the reason to establish it.

These points are meticulously presented as topics to contemplate and meditate upon. When one can read these verses, quote this reasoning, and then really reflect upon them, they are not difficult to hold as an object to meditate on, they are quite easy to relate to. Just contemplating it can bring great release to a stressful state of mind and make it more relaxed.

3.1.2.2.1.2. Establishing the pervasion

That is subdivided into two:

3.1.2.2.1.2.1. The actual pervasion

3.1.2.2.1.2.2. Clearing away obstructions

3.1.2.2.1.2.1. The actual pervasion

This statement is presented first in the commentary:

It follows that it is appropriate to equally reject and accept upon having focused on the happiness and suffering of self and others—

The verse then reads:

95. *When both self and others
Are the same in desiring happiness,
What difference is there to me,
Why do I strive only for my own happiness?*

The commentary then explains:

That is because when both self and others are the same in desiring happiness—then what difference is there between others and myself? There is no difference whatsoever. For what reason do I strive only for my own happiness? It is unsuitable not to strive for the happiness of others.

As presented here, *when both self and others are the same in desiring happiness — then what difference is there between others and myself?* Being a hypothetical question, it explicitly implies, that *there is no difference whatsoever*.

So therefore, *for what reason do I strive only for my own happiness?* Again this implies that there is no real reason to strive selfishly only for one's own happiness. *It is unsuitable not to strive for the happiness of others*. The main factor that prevents one from not striving for the happiness of other sentient beings, and only working to alleviate one's own suffering, is not yet being able to replace self cherishing with the attitude of cherishing other sentient beings.

When one is able to reverse self-cherishing, then it becomes possible for one to completely embrace the need to strive for the wellbeing other sentient beings.

In practical terms, understand that one must change one's attitude in whatever one does, particularly when engaging in accumulating virtue. Without a clear motivation directed towards others it just becomes a means to focus on one's own benefit.

However if one's attitude is that 'I'm engaging in this virtue not just for myself, but to create a cause to benefit all beings', then due to the power of the motivation, the virtues and positive deeds one engages in actually become a means to benefit other sentient beings.

We need to think in these practical terms rather than thinking that one has to actually engage with others, and become really busy in order to benefit others. Without this practical approach one may not even see that it's possible to actually benefit other sentient beings. If, at our level, one can just focus on the motivation to be of benefit to other sentient beings, and make sincere dedications, then whatever positive deeds one engages in become a cause to actually benefit other sentient beings.

For your daily practice, take heed of Shantideva's advice and remind yourself: I'll generate positive motivation to engage in positive deeds for the benefit of other sentient beings; and at the end I'll make sincere dedications. In this way, when one dedicates whatever virtues one accumulates, to the aspiration to ultimately benefit sentient beings to achieve enlightenment, then that definitely secures all one's own virtues to become a cause towards that end. These are really important points to understand on a personal level for one's personal practice.

The next verse reads:

96. *When both self and others
Are the same in not desiring suffering
What difference is there to me?
Why do I protect myself but not others?*

The commentary then explains:

When both oneself and others are the same in not desiring suffering, what difference is there between others and myself? There is no difference. For what reason do I work for my own happiness, and protect my own happiness from degenerating, but do not protect the happiness of others? It is suitable to work for the happiness of others, as both are equally the same.

The commentary highlights, *when both oneself and others are the same in not desiring suffering, what difference is there between others and myself?* Insofar as not wishing to experience suffering, *there is no difference whatsoever.*

This being the case, then the logical argument is that, *for what reason do I work for my own happiness, and protect my own happiness from degenerating, but do not protect the happiness of others?* Following these reasons, it is unsuitable just to work for one's own happiness. The conclusion presented here is that *it is suitable to work for the happiness of others, as both are equally the same.*

3.1.2.2.1.2.2. Clearing away obstructions

The verse reads:

97. *If, 'I do not protect them
Because their suffering does not harm me.'
Since also the future sufferings
Do not harm, why protect from them?*

The commentary explains the meaning of this verse with another hypothetical argument:

Argument: If one were to say, I do not protect sentient beings when they experience suffering because their suffering does not harm me.

Then it presents the answer:

Answer: This is highly unsuitable. Otherwise, it would also be unsuitable to accumulate wealth when young out of fear of suffering in old age, or to engage in the morning or in the day in a method to avoid suffering in the afternoon or tomorrow, since the later future suffering does not harm the earlier person. Even if one fears there could be suffering, it would be inappropriate to protect oneself.

The commentary answers the hypothetical argument *I do not protect sentient beings when they experience suffering because their suffering does not harm me.* We often hold on to the very narrow and self-centred view 'If the suffering doesn't concern me, I don't have to do anything about it. Why should I care about other beings' sufferings?'

The commentary explains that this is a misconception and that the reasoning is flawed. If it were the case then, *it would also be unsuitable to accumulate wealth when young out of fear of suffering in old age.*

The reasoning here is a way to refute the earlier argument that it is a common practice in youth to accumulate wealth to secure your wellbeing in old age. However, with this line of reasoning, one would have to say 'Oh, since the old person being deprived of wealth doesn't affect me in my youth, why would I need to accumulate wealth to make that old person more comfortable? In effect it is saying that the old person is not the same being as the young person, and that

that they are completely different people. Although it is true that the old person's suffering doesn't affect the youth now, is it really unsuitable to accumulate wealth for the old person?

This is the same as the earlier argument: that one does not need to consider others' suffering because it doesn't harm oneself. This example overcomes that doubt.

We need to understand how the very meticulous reasoning presented here is a way to counteract that flawed reasoning, that we don't have to strive to work for other sentient beings to remove their suffering, because their suffering doesn't harm us. If that were so, then someone in their youth would not engage in accumulating wealth to relieve the suffering of their old age. Why? Because, according to the argument presented here, that older person's suffering doesn't affect the young person now.

Using this reasoning, you would not take measures in the morning to relieve the likely sufferings to be experienced in the evening. Why? Because the suffering you might experience later in the evening doesn't harm you now. Likewise you would not relieve sufferings for the next day because those sufferings don't harm you today.

Here we can see the meticulously logic showing that just because something doesn't affect one now, that no reason not to take measures to relieve one's sufferings in the future. Likewise, one should also strive to relieve the sufferings of all sentient beings even though they are separate from us, and don't affect us directly.

The commentary further explains, *since the later future suffering does not harm the earlier person, then even if one fears there could be suffering, it would be inappropriate to protect oneself.* So, the absurdity being pointed out here is, even if one were to fear one would suffer in the future, following that flawed reasoning it would be inappropriate to protect oneself. This points out the absurdity of that earlier hypothetical statement that one need not protect the other beings from suffering because it doesn't affect oneself.

Then this hypothetical argument is presented:

Argument: If one would not wonder in this life whether one could experience suffering in a later life, then one would have to experience sufferings in the later life. It is therefore appropriate to make an effort to prevent that situation.

Again, what is being presented is the absurdity that if one were to follow this flawed reasoning one would think that one does not need to work on relieving the sufferings of future lives because it doesn't affect one now. This follows from the previous hypothetical argument.

The verse reads:

98. *The conceptual thought thinking,
'I will experience this,' is wrong.
The dead person that takes rebirth
As another, is another.*

Basically, the meaning presented in the verse which serves as an answer is:

Answer: The conceptual thought thinking that the self of this life experiences sufferings in the later life is distorted. This would be like a dead person that takes rebirth as another person in a later life. This later person is not suitable to be the same as the earlier person.

This was a refutation of the unsuitability of one to eliminate the sufferings of another with the reasoning

of the similarity of the earlier and later different moments. The meaning of the text is not that it is a refutation based on the ultimate.

The commentary indicates that *the conceptual thought that the self of this life experiences sufferings in the later life is distorted*, because, of course, there is a different person. The individual person of this life and the individual person in the future life are separate and distinct. What is further explained is the absurdity that a dead person that takes rebirth as another person in a later life, is not suitable to be the same as the earlier person.

This is a refutation of *the unsuitability of one to eliminate the sufferings of another with the reasoning of the similarity of the earlier and later different moments. The meaning of the text is not that it is a refutation based on the ultimate.*

The reasoning is that the need to remove the suffering of the future is not because they are the same person. Rather, because of the continuity from moment to moment, one does actually affect the later person. From moment to moment one affects the next moment. So in this way we actually see how they are related.

The verse reads:

99. *When something is suffering
And one protects another,
The suffering of the foot is not that of the hand
Why should it protect it?*

The commentary explains:

Further, when one part of the body needs to eliminate the suffering of another body part and protect that body part, since the suffering of a foot pained by a thorn is not the suffering of the hand, why should the hand eliminate this suffering of the foot? It would follow that it is unsuitable.

What is being presented here is that if the flawed reasoning is that one does not take the initiative to remove the suffering of another just because it is separate, then it is also true that if, *the suffering of a foot pained by a thorn is not the suffering of the hand, why should the hand eliminate this suffering of the foot?* This shows the absurdity of not following logic. While the foot is separate from the hand, if there is pain from a thorn in the foot, then even though the hand is separate from the foot, it can eliminate the suffering of the foot by taking out the thorn.

We can see how the reasoning in relation to the first hypothetical argument has been meticulously presented. If one sees that just because others' suffering is not one's own as a reason not to eliminate their suffering, then all this reasoning is presented to show this is a flawed conception.

The next reads:

100. *If, 'though unsuitable, here
It engages due to grasping at self.'
This unsuitable self and other,
What can they do? They are to be abandoned.*

The commentary explains it as an argument:

Argument: Even though it is inappropriate for one to eliminate unrelated suffering, here it is appropriate for one to eliminate the sufferings of the other because the bodies of earlier and later lives, and earlier and later moments of this body are all held by one person as mine due to familiarisation.

Then provides an answer:

Answer: What can that unsuitably held as independent self and other accomplish? They are

suitable to be abandoned because the grasping at the self of person is mistaken and generates all faults.

This presents a way to back up the earlier hypothetical argument. In thinking it is not necessary to remove the sufferings of sentient beings because it is unrelated to oneself, the reason presented is that it is not the same here, because here the suffering to be removed is related to oneself from this life to the next life, and from earlier moments to the next moments, because this body *is held by one person as mine due to familiarisation.*

As a way to refute that counter argument, the commentary explains, *what can that unsuitably held as independent self and other accomplish?* This means that what you hold as being related from this life to the next life, and from earlier moments to the second moments, as an independently existent self. The 'experiencer' is seen as being one independently existent self that is experiencing the sufferings from this life to the next life, and from earlier moments to later moments.

If we hold onto the individual self, i.e. the person as an independently existent self, then what can that independent self accomplish for others? This means that you cannot actually accomplish anything by grasping at an independently existent self.

What is explained in conclusion is, *they are suitable to be abandoned because the grasping at the self of person is mistaken and generates all faults.* This very notion of an independent self that experiences suffering from earlier moments to the next moments, from one life to the next life, is in fact the misconception of grasping at an independent self which is the root, and fundamental cause, of all faults. It, *generates all faults* and thus is what has to be completely abandoned. Holding onto such misconceptions is completely wrong.

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

*Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson
Edit 1 by Jill Lancashire
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
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