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# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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With the positive motivation that we generated during the Refuge and Bodhicitta prayer in mind, we can now engage in our meditation practice. Once the motivation is set, the practice becomes really worthwhile.

[meditation]

As usual, we can set the motivation for receiving 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 Buddha's teachings, as there is no more supreme method than the Mahayana teachings. Then, having listened to the teachings, I will put them into practice well.

## 3.1.2.2. THE WAY OF MEDITATING ON EQUALISING SELF AND OTHERS

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

3.1.2.2.2.1. **Extensive explanation (cont.)**

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

First the commentary presents this argument:

These two situations are not the same as two different people are unrelated, but the hands and feet of one person belong to the same group, and the old and young person and the earlier and later life belong to the same continuum. In the latter situation, it is appropriate for one to help the other, but in the first situation it is inappropriate.

*These two situations are not the same as two different people are unrelated*, refers back to examples that were presented in our last session: the hands can help the feet when they are sore, and the person in the earlier part of their life helps the person in the latter part of their life.

Here the argument is that *the hands and feet of one person belong to the same group and the old and young person and the earlier and later life belong to the same continuum. In the latter situation it is appropriate for one to help the other, but in the first situation it is inappropriate.*

There is also a connotation of refuting the non-Buddhist view that the same self goes from the morning until the evening, as well as from this life to the next life. In fact we regularly hold this misconception ourselves. We have no qualms about thinking that the person who wakes up in the morning is the same person in the afternoon and late in the evening, and that there has been no change from morning to night. We have this notion due to the misconception of viewing the person as being permanent. When one lacks an understanding of impermanence - specifically subtle impermanence - then it does appear that it is the same person. We instinctively think that the person who came in through the door earlier is the same

person sitting on the cushion now, but in fact the moment of the person who came in through the door earlier has already ceased to exist, and there is a new moment of the person now. Thus, we are changing from moment to moment. This misconception that it is the same person from morning to night arises from not understanding subtle impermanence.

Then the following verse is presented as an answer to that qualm.

101. *That called continuum and collection  
Are false, like the rosary and army,  
There is no-one suffering,  
What should they abandon belonging to whom?*

The commentary then explains the meaning of this verse:

Answer: It follows there is no independent group or continuum, because that called continuum and group are falsities labelled on the earlier and later parts of that possessing the continuity, and on the parts of the group; like the rosary and army that are a falsity labelled on their different parts.

As explained in the commentary, *it follows that there is no independent group or continuum, because that called continuum and group are falsities labelled on the earlier and later parts of that possessing the continuity, and on the parts of the group.* The examples given here are *the rosary and army.* What is labelled as rosary is completely dependent on the many beads that make up the rosary — you don't call one bead a rosary; likewise with an army — you don't call one soldier an army. A rosary is dependent on the many parts that are many individual beads, and an army is also dependent on the many parts that are many individual soldiers. This shows that there is no independently existent rosary or army, because each has to depend on many other parts.

A continuum is also dependent on earlier parts and later parts. For example, establishing morning depends on an afternoon and an evening — without an afternoon and an evening one cannot refer to morning. Likewise evening is dependent on earlier parts of the day, such as afternoon and morning. Establishing night depends on there being a morning. Since they are dependent on each other they cannot be truly existent. As they are designated or imputed phenomena they are a falsity and not truly existent. That is what is being clearly explained with these examples.

Next, the commentary presents a further hypothetical argument:

If you say 'Since they are contained by the mind of one person, they fall under the control of that person and therefore, even though they are different from the point of view of object and time, the suffering of one is eliminated by the suffering of the other'.

Then the answer to that argument is:

Because there is no self of the person that is suffering, there is also no happiness or suffering that is controlled by any controller. For this reason, there is no independent possessor engaging suffering and hence, all sufferings of self and others have no distinction. However, there is the suffering of self and other who are nominally dependent on each other, and therefore it is appropriate to eliminate one's suffering.

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This again relates to the point that there is *no* independently existing *self of the person who is suffering*. Therefore *there is also no happiness or suffering that is controlled by any independent controller*.

The next two lines of the verse serve as an explanation of this point:

*102abc. Without a possessor of suffering  
Everything is without distinction*

The explanation of these two lines, as presented in the commentary, is:

For this reason, there is no independent possessor engaging suffering, and hence all sufferings of self and others have no distinction. However, there is the suffering of self and other who are nominally dependent on each other, and therefore it is appropriate to eliminate one's suffering.

Since *there is no independent possessor* who has the experience of *suffering*, there is no *distinction* between the suffering of oneself and the suffering of others in that sense. As there is no independent possessor of that suffering, there is no difference between oneself and others. However, while there is no independent possessor of suffering, there is the suffering of *self and others, who are nominally dependent on each other*. So there is suffering, which arises in dependence on other causes and conditions and, as that is the same for oneself and others, *it is appropriate to eliminate one's suffering*, as well as the suffering of others.

Because suffering is nominally existent, it is possible and thus suitable to eliminate suffering. If suffering were to exist inherently and independently, in and of itself, or from its own side, then it would not be possible to abandon suffering. However, while suffering does not exist independently it does exist nominally, which indicates that it exists in dependence on its causes.

By identifying the causes of suffering one can eliminate the causes, and then suffering will naturally cease. This is the crux of the point, which is that because suffering is dependent on its causes, and not independently existent, one can overcome suffering. Thus it is possible and appropriate to abandon suffering.

When this is understood with respect to one's own suffering, then it can be related to the suffering of others. Just as one's own suffering is dependent on causes and conditions, and thus appropriate and suitable to be overcome, the suffering of others is also dependent on causes and conditions, and thus appropriate and suitable to be overcome.

#### 3.1.2.2.2. Short summary

The relevant lines of verse read:

- 102d. Because it is suffering, it is to be eliminated.  
What use is this definiteness here?*
- 103. The statement 'Why should one eliminate  
The sufferings of others?', is not up for debate.  
If one reverses, then one reverses all,  
If not, then one is like sentient beings.*

Then the commentary explains the meaning of these lines:

Therefore, because the suffering of others is suffering, it is suitable to be eliminated by me. What use is the concrete division into self and other? Since one needs

to eliminate all the suffering of others, there is no argument like, 'Since it does not harm me why should one reverse the suffering of others?' If one reverses one's sufferings because one does not desire them, then it is appropriate to reverse the suffering of everybody. If the sufferings of others are not to be eliminated, then one's own sufferings also become something not to be eliminated, like the sufferings of others. Therefore, because the suffering of others is suffering, it is suitable to be eliminated by me. What use is the concrete division into self and other? Since one needs to eliminate all the suffering of others, there is no argument like, 'Since it does not harm me why should one reverse the suffering of others?' If one reverses one's sufferings because one does not desire them, then it is appropriate to reverse the suffering of everybody. If the sufferings of others are not to be eliminated, then one's own sufferings also become something not to be eliminated, like the sufferings of others. Hence, one should put great importance into eliminating the sufferings of others by cherishing others as one cherishes oneself.

The first part of the explanation presents the absurdity of the very concrete distinction we make between self and other. What is being presented here is that as there is no difference between the need to eliminate suffering within oneself and the suffering of others, one needs to definitely consider removing the suffering of others.

*If one reverses one's sufferings because one does not desire them then it is appropriate to reverse suffering of every living being. If the sufferings of others are not to be eliminated then one's own suffering also becomes something not to be eliminated, like the suffering of others.* What is being explained here is that if one thinks there is no need to eliminate the sufferings of others, then the same reasons should apply to oneself as well; i.e. that there is no need to eliminate one's own suffering.

However the fact is that we do strive to remove any suffering that we experience. *Hence, one should put great importance into eliminating the sufferings of others by cherishing others as one cherishes oneself.* The point here is that the instinctive wish to remove one's own suffering arises because of self-cherishing. There is no reason for striving to overcome one's own suffering other than not wanting to experience that suffering. And this is true regardless of whether we are engaging in Dharma practice or in mundane activities — whenever we experience pain we recognise it as something to be overcome.

That instinctive wish to overcome suffering is due to self-cherishing. So if we can change that attitude to cherishing others just as one cherishes oneself, then removing the suffering of others will become as instinctive as removing one's own suffering.

So we can see that this is very precise advice, using reason and examples. We can see how the text is meticulously presenting the practice of equalising and exchanging self with others, and we need to incorporate these reasons and explanations into our actual practice.

To give an example to illustrate the point, when those close and dear to us suffer, we take the immediate initiative to remove their suffering. The wish to remove their pain and suffering arises in part because they are

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related to me, i.e. one has a strong notion that they are my husband, wife, child or relative. Because of that we feel “I need to remove their suffering”. So our compassion and love and wish to remove their suffering and establish them in happiness is mixed with a self-cherishing attitude. Although there is a level of self-cherishing, we take the initiative to remove their suffering. So we are extending our concern beyond our immediate self. By using this example we can understand that it is definitely possible to generate the wish to remove the sufferings of others by merely focusing on their suffering. The very gross level of self-cherishing focuses merely on one’s own needs. But here we see that although there is some level of self-cherishing, one is extending one’s focus beyond oneself onto the need to remove the suffering of one’s partner, children and so forth.

With this illustration we can see that since it is possible to extend our concerns towards those who are related to us, it is definitely possible to also extend a genuine wish to eliminate suffering and establish happiness for those who are not related to us. This wish can arise when one contemplates the fact that they are suffering and deprived of happiness.

Right now, of course, due to our habituation and strong self-cherishing attitude we may not yet be capable of extending the wish to eliminate suffering and establish happiness much further beyond ourselves. However, if we train ourselves in thinking like this, then through familiarity, it will eventually be possible to generate this attitude: Because others are suffering, I need to take initiative to eliminate their suffering, and because others are deprived of happiness I need to establish them in happiness.

This is a really profound method. As Shantideva explains, the main reason for taking the initiative to eliminate the suffering of others arises from contemplating the fact that they are suffering, and just like oneself, they do not wish to experience suffering; and the main reason to establish happiness for others is because they are deprived of happiness and are in need of happiness, just like oneself. If we really contemplate this point and train our mind in thinking along these lines, then the more we find this to be sound reasoning, the more our mind will be attuned to actually taking the initiative to eliminate the suffering of others, and establish them in happiness.

#### **[Establishing a broad perspective]**

Of course at this stage in our training we will feel that we don’t have this capacity, and that we cannot do much. However, through training our mind by contemplating these points again and again, we are leaving a very strong imprint that carries on from this life to the next life. Because we have implanted a strong imprint of wanting to eliminate the sufferings of others and establish them in happiness, the attitude of cherishing others will be more spontaneous and natural in the next life. Further training in the next life will then strengthen that wish so that it becomes stronger and stronger.

We have to understand that as beginners we cannot expect to develop this in just one lifetime, so we need to establish the basis to engage in the training over many successive lives. By employing this method, even though

we may not see an immediate transformation taking place, every effort we make will eventually be accumulated into obtaining a significant result. We need to understand the importance of not having immediate big expectations of our Dharma practice. Rather we need to see that every small effort that we make now leads to big results in the future. When we have this attitude then we will definitely experience the benefit of the practice in this life as well.

When we view our practice as progressing gradually along the path, we will see that whatever practice we engage in comes down to acquainting ourselves with the means of overcoming self-cherishing, and establishing the mind of cherishing others. This practice not only brings about benefit in this life but implants a positive imprint that helps to establish the basis to engage in this practice over many lives.

As we progressively improve from life to life, we are working towards reaching the ultimate state of perfection, where we have completely eradicated all our negativities or defilements, and acquired all possible qualities —the perfected state of enlightenment. Reaching that state comes about from the practice of familiarising our mind with cherishing others, and then working towards eliminating their suffering and establishing them in happiness to the best of our ability.

We establish the causes for obtaining our goal of liberation and enlightenment by continuing with our meagre efforts in the practices now; it is through continual practice that we accumulate the causes for reaching liberation and ultimate enlightenment. This is how we need to understand the ultimate purpose of our practice.

It might seem that this is a bit of a side-track, but I feel that these are very important points to keep in mind. Accepting that there has been past life and that there will be future life gives our Dharma practice a real purpose. We are not practising the Dharma for some immediate gratification. Rather, we are practising in order to establish the conducive conditions for future lives that will enable us to further progress along the path to liberation and enlightenment.

In order to establish that basis, we have to obtain a good rebirth such as a human rebirth. It is not possible to progress along the path if we take rebirth in a lower realm. It is only on the basis of a higher rebirth and higher status - such as a precious human rebirth - that we can further progress along the path.

Securing whatever practice of Dharma we do now will, at the very least, establish the basis for one to obtain a good rebirth in the next life, which further establishes the means to create the causes and conditions for obtaining liberation and enlightenment. It is important to understand this.

Contemplating in this way will definitely assist us as we approach our death. At that time the only thing that we can rely upon is the Dharma practice that we have established in our life. We are moving further and further away from our possessions and friends in this life, and getting closer and closer to the conditions of our next life, including possessions, Dharma friends and so forth. The

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reality is that we are approaching death, so it is really worthwhile to establish the causes for good conditions in our future life. When we contemplate in this way then we can see the real purpose of the Dharma.

So it is good to have a very clear picture of how we are progressing towards establishing good conditions for our next life, in accordance with the explanations in the Dharma.

As explained in the teachings, the practice that will prevent one from falling into the lower realms is the practice of **morality**. We are all capable of practising morality, and in fact, because we intentionally avoid engaging in the ten non-virtues we are already engaging in that practice. When we establish the practice of intentionally not engaging in the ten non-virtues, then that is the practice of morality. Then there is no question that we will be protected from falling to the lower realms in the next life. So we need to assure ourselves with the firm belief that due to practising morality and so forth, we will definitely be protected from falling into lower realms in the next life. Having strong faith in this way will further encourage us to continue to practise morality and so forth.

The practice that is a cause for one to acquire good conditions to sustain oneself in the next life, such as wealth and so forth, is the practice of **generosity**. That is also something that we are capable of practising now. Generosity is defined as the mind of giving. So we can definitely engage in the practice of generosity. Of course, we need to be generous with material things to whatever capacity we can give, but the main point is to familiarise ourselves with the mind of giving.

The cause that secures a good entourage of friends and companions in the next life is the practice of **patience**, which we can also practise now. That which helps one to create the causes to be able to accomplish what one sets out to do is the practice of **joyous effort**, while the practice of **meditation** develops sound concentration. As you will recall, the chapters of the text present the six perfections, and we need to practise them in order to secure good conditions for our next life.

#### [The real protector]

The real protection against an unfortunate rebirth in the next lifetime is, as the teachings present, the Dharma. Here it is essential that we understand that the Dharma is a quality that is developed within one's own mind. For example, that which protects one from the lower realms is the morality that one observes now by avoiding the ten non-virtues and abiding by the ten virtues. The practice of morality is none other than within one's own mind stream. We make a decision to be moral and our observance of morality is what we develop within our own mind. That which prevents us from poverty is the generosity that we practise now, which is also developed within our own mind stream.

We shouldn't have lofty ideas about Dharma being an external protector. The Dharma is that which is developed within one's own mind. Ultimately, therefore, the real protector is something we have to establish within ourselves. It is essential that we understand that, otherwise we might be misled.

As presented in the teachings on the Three Jewels, the ultimate Dharma Jewel is true cessation and the true path. However true cessation and the true path are only found within the continuum of arya beings. So how can the Dharma Jewel protect us if it is only found within the continuum of arya beings?

We do, however, have a more immediate understanding of how the Buddha Jewel and the Sangha Jewel help us. The Sangha Jewel helps us when the Sangha give us direct assistance, advice and teachings and so forth. So we can see that we receive direct benefit from the Sangha Jewel. Because of our obscurations we may not be able to actually see the Buddha yet, but we are inspired by him and we definitely benefit from the advice and the teachings that he presented. So we can definitely see that we receive benefit from the Buddha Jewel.

However, it is a bit harder to see how the ultimate Dharma Jewel, the true path and true cessation within the continuum of aryas, actually helps us directly. While we may not have yet developed true cessation and the true path, we are nonetheless able to observe morality and practise generosity and patience and so forth. So these practices help us to protect ourselves, we need to view them as being the Dharma Jewel at our level. This is, I feel, a significant point for us to understand.

The beneficiary of the Dharma Jewel within the arya continuum, which is true cessation and the true path, is of course the aryas themselves, and other beings who are able to directly relate to the aryas, and receive teachings from them. The oral teachings of the Buddha are, of course, part of the Dharma Jewel, and that benefits us, since the transformation that slowly takes place within our mind is made possible by the advice and guidance we receive from the teachings of the Buddha.

Although the oral teachings of the Buddha are Dharma, they are not presented as the ultimate Dharma. The ultimate Dharma, which is the real protector, is true cessation and the true path, which are developed within one's own mental continuum.

It is good to understand how this works in relation to oneself.

#### 3.1.2.2.2. Refuting objections

This is subdivided into two:

3.1.2.2.2.1. Refuting that bodhisattvas become overwhelmed by their own suffering through contemplating the suffering of sentient beings

3.1.2.2.2.2. The need to contemplate suffering

*3.1.2.2.2.1. Refuting that bodhisattvas become overwhelmed by their own suffering through contemplating the suffering of sentient beings*

Here the heading is presenting a significant doubt as to whether *bodhisattvas become overwhelmed by their own suffering through contemplating the suffering of sentient beings*.

This is something that we experience at our level. When someone who is close to us experiences difficulties, or hardships, or illness, we feel uncomfortable, and because of our unease and discomfort we take the initiative to help them. Even though their problems make us feel uncomfortable it gives us the initiative to benefit them.

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While we experience some discomfort when others are ill and suffering, that is not what the bodhisattvas experience. They are never overwhelmed by the suffering of others, and they feel no sorrow.

Another significant point is that training one's mind and developing compassion, beginning with those who are close to oneself, is also one of the supreme ways of purifying one's own negative karma.

The verse that relates to this heading reads:

*104. If, 'Since sufferings increase due to compassion,  
Why generate them with urgency?'  
If one contemplates the suffering of migrators,  
How can suffering increase due to compassion?*

The commentary on this verse begins with a hypothetical argument:

If you say 'out of compassion one makes all the sufferings of others one's own, then, one's sufferings become more. Thus, why generate suffering with intensity instead of abandoning it?'

The answer is:

When bodhisattvas contemplate the suffering of migrators, it follows that their suffering does not increase due to compassion, because this compassion eliminates all their feelings of suffering.

The commentary begins with the hypothetical argument, *If, out of compassion, one makes all the sufferings of others one's own, then one's sufferings become more. Thus why generate suffering with intensity instead of abandoning it?*

Bodhisattvas are constantly thinking about the sufferings of other sentient beings, and they are constantly contemplating how to eliminate the sufferings of sentient beings, so it would be absurd for them to be disturbed by that suffering. Thinking about the suffering of others does not cause bodhisattvas any suffering. On the contrary, it actually benefits them.

Initially when one contemplates the sufferings of others it may bring some discomfort, but when one actually forsakes that personal discomfort and thinks about the benefit of contemplating the suffering of others, then that makes the discomfort acceptable.

The commentary then explains that *when bodhisattvas contemplate the sufferings of migrators it follows that their suffering does not increase due to compassion, because the compassion eliminates all their feelings of suffering.*

In fact, contemplating the suffering of sentient beings actually counteracts one's own suffering. From our own limited experience we know that when we take a moment to contemplate the sufferings of others it can definitely help to eliminate our own suffering, because it takes our mind away from our own problems. When one thinks about the plight of others, it definitely helps one to alleviate any immediate discomfort one may be experiencing. If, even at our very ordinary level, we recognise the truth of this, then we can imagine how wholeheartedly and continuously working for the welfare of sentient beings will be a cause to bring great joy and happiness for bodhisattvas.

### 3.1.2.2.2.2. *The need to contemplate suffering*

The point here is that because contemplating the suffering of others can ultimately benefit oneself and help others, there is a definite need to contemplate suffering.

We can leave this for the next session.

A further practical point about how developing compassion for other beings can help to alleviate one's own suffering and bring more mental ease, is that it can definitely reduce anger towards others, as well as reduce jealousy, competitiveness and pride.

These defilements within our mind can cause us a lot of sorrow and angst, but by developing compassion we can reduce anger and relieve jealousy and so forth. When we feel compassion for someone then, rather than feeling jealous, we feel glad when things go well for them, and when things don't go well for them we feel sorry for them. Without compassion, however, the opposite will occur: we start becoming angry and upset when things go well for them, and if things don't go well, we might even be glad.

So we can see how, even at our level, generating some feeling of compassion definitely alleviates negative emotions. And of course the effect on bodhisattvas who continuously benefit other sentient beings will be far greater than anything we experience.

As mentioned in the teachings, the antidote to harmfulness is compassion. When one generates compassion then any thoughts of harm will definitely be overcome. When one does not have harmful intention then one is in a happy state of mind; because there is no intention to go out of the way to hurt and harm others, one's mind will be very comfortable and relaxed. So we can see that how a mind that does not harbour ill-will and harmfulness is a happy mind, and as a consequence the person is a happy person.

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

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