

Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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26 April 2013

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

During the meditation practice we would have been further strengthening our motivation. However, just as a reminder, let us generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

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

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

We have been covering a very meticulous presentation of how to engage in the practice of exchanging self and other. Just last Wednesday I spent about an hour contemplating these points and it occurred to me what a very profound presentation it is. The term exchanging self and other refers to changing an attitude of cherishing just oneself to an attitude of cherishing others.

Earlier, the text described this in terms of exchanging one's happiness and suffering. Previously one focused only on one's own happiness and removing only one's own suffering, and this is exchanged with a focus on establishing others in happiness and removing their suffering.

Following that, the text explained how, just as one previously cherished one's own body as being very precious and held it as 'mine', one can, through familiarity and training, exchange that view with one that cherishes others in the same way.

Although it's not specifically mentioned in the text, I feel that it is appropriate to include the accumulation of virtue and the shunning of negativity into the practice of exchanging self with other as well. Whereas previously one would have engaged in accumulating virtues just for oneself, and shunned negativity just for one's own purpose, this is exchanged with accumulating virtue and purifying negativity for the sake of other sentient beings.

So you can see how, when we really think about these very meticulously presented points, we can expand our way of thinking with this very profound practice.

These are of course the actual practices of bodhisattvas, but they are also intended for us to engage in according to whatever capacity we have now. When we think about these profound practices we also gain an insight into the incredibly noble and amazing deeds of the bodhisattvas. They are perpetually engaged in these very practices solely to benefit other sentient beings, so their presence is truly marvellous.

Of the two techniques of developing bodhicitta, the seven-point cause and effect sequence, which has been presented in other teachings, and this technique of exchanging self and

other, it is the one presented here that is said to be much more vast and profound.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama praises this often. He praises the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* as being the most supreme text presenting the methods for developing bodhicitta and explaining the deeds of bodhisattvas. In particular he praises this practice of exchanging self and other as the most profound method for developing bodhicitta.

It is good to really take this to heart. We have the opportunity to understand and engage in these practices, so it is important that we don't waste it.

3.2.1. Extensive explanation

This presented with the following three subdivisions:

3.2.1.1. Explaining the way of exchanging self and other

3.2.1.2. The way of following up in thought

3.2.1.3. The way of following up in action

3.2.1.1. EXPLAINING THE WAY OF EXCHANGING SELF AND OTHER

This is subdivided into two:

3.2.1.1.1. Extensive explanation

3.2.1.1.2. Brief summary

3.2.1.1.1. Extensive explanation

This has three further subdivisions:

3.2.1.1.1.1. Meditate on cherishing others

3.2.1.1.1.2. Abandoning cherishing self with effort

3.2.1.1.1.3. Contemplating the faults of holding self as the most important, and the benefits of holding other as the most important

We can see how profound the topic is just from these outlines. The very meticulous presentation also shows us how to engage into the practice in a gradual way.

3.2.1.1.1.1. Meditate on cherishing others

There are five ways of meditating on cherishing others.

3.2.1.1.1.1.1. It is possible to exchange self and other, and vanity is pacified

3.2.1.1.1.1.2. Advice to make an effort to meditate without hope for a ripening result

3.2.1.1.1.1.3. Giving even greater purpose to the benefit of others

3.2.1.1.1.1.4. If one meditates, one is able to generate it

3.2.1.1.1.1.5. Meditate on exchanging self and other because both self and other wish to be freed from suffering

3.2.1.1.1.1.1. It is possible to exchange self and other, and vanity is pacified

This hypothetical doubt is raised:

Argument: I am not able to meditate on exchanging self and other.

This relates to the doubt 'I'm not able to meditate on exchanging self and other' that we may have.

The following lines of verse respond to that doubt:

115. *Just as one generates through familiarity
The awareness of 'mine' for a body lacking self,
Why should one not generate the awareness of
'mine'
For other sentient beings through
familiarisation?*

116ab. *Thus, producing the purpose of others
Vanity and grandiosity do not arise,*

The commentary explains the meaning of these lines as follows:

Answer: Through familiarity, one generates the grasping at 'mine' for the body, even though the body lacks a self. Likewise, why should one not be able to generate the awareness of 'this is mine' through familiarising oneself with cherishing other sentient beings? If one meditates, one can definitely generate it.

As this meditation on holding all sentient beings as self accomplishes the purpose of others, one does not generate feelings of vanity and grandiosity.

As the commentary explains, while in reality our body lacks a self, we instinctively hold the body as self because of our familiarity with that view. That being the case, as the commentary explains, *why should one not be able to generate the awareness of 'this is mine' through familiarising oneself with cherishing other sentient beings?* This rhetorical question implies that if one meditates, one can definitely generate this awareness. Just as one instinctively cherishes oneself now, it is definitely possible to cherish other sentient beings through becoming familiar with the thought of cherishing them.

When the commentary states, *as this meditation on holding all sentient beings as self accomplishes the purpose of others, one does not generate feelings of vanity and grandiosity*, it is saying that because one is totally dedicated to benefitting others, there is no room for vain and grandiose thoughts such as 'Oh, I am so important as I am doing such a great service for others'. That sort of pompous pride will not arise.

3.2.1.1.1.2. Advice to make an effort to meditate without hope for a ripening result

This means that one's practice is to be done without any hope for a good result for oneself. So working for other sentient beings should be free from any thoughts about the ripening of good karma in the future.

The following verses and explanations in the commentary are quite clear. The verse relating to this heading reads:

*116cd. Similar to not expecting a reward
When eating food¹.*

*117. Hence, when protecting self
From some small unpleasantness
Meditate on the mind of protection
And compassion for migrators.*

As the commentary explains:

For example, it is similar to not expecting a reward for eating one's food. Since it has infinite benefits, one should meditate on compassion and protecting migrators from suffering just as one would protect oneself from even small unpleasant words.

The example presented states that one doesn't eat a meal in expectation of a reward. One eats the meal just for the sake of needing to eat. In the Tibetan text the first part of the presentation is *one protects oneself from even a small unpleasant word*. This means that we instinctively protect ourselves from criticism or even the slightest unpleasant words from others. So, just as one protects oneself, one should also protect other sentient beings in the same way, with the understanding that there's infinite benefit in doing so.

The point of meditating *on compassion and protecting migrators from suffering* is that just as one protects oneself from the slightest suffering, likewise out of compassion one needs to protect other sentient beings from experiencing suffering. The point is that it has to be based on compassion, because

without compassion for others, one would not generate the wish for them to be free from suffering.

What is being presented here in simple terms, is that if we wish to know how to protect other sentient beings, then the method is to protect them with a compassionate heart, just like we protect ourselves.

The example presented here is that just as we protect ourselves from hurtful words, likewise we need to protect others. We also need to take the initiative to protect other sentient beings from our own harsh and hurtful words. If we don't like hearing even the slightest unpleasant remark, then this is exactly the same for other sentient beings. So we need to be very careful not to utter hurtful words to other sentient beings. Why? Because just as we are hurt, they are also hurt.

We find many instances of how unskilful and harsh speech causes a lot of hurt and disharmony. Therefore we really need to pay attention to this point. These practices aren't just some sort of explanation to be heard and perhaps forgotten; rather, if we actually apply them in our own practice, then we can derive the intended benefit from these teachings.

3.2.1.1.1.3. Giving even greater purpose to the benefit of others

The verse relating to this outline reads:

*118. The protector Chenrezig
Blessed therefore even his name,
Out of great compassion,
To eliminate migrators' sufferings of cyclic
existence.*

The commentary then explains:

Since one needs to protect sentient beings from even small suffering, the protector Chenrezig blessed out of great compassion even his name to eliminate also the slightest of the frightening sufferings in cyclic existence: 'By thinking of my name may the frightening sufferings of cyclic existence become non-existent.'

In the *Array of Stalks Sutra* it explains it as remembering the name trice.

As explained here, Chenrezig (or Avalokiteshvara), is said to have made extremely powerful aspirations when he was a trainee on the path. When he was a bodhisattva training on the path to enlightenment, out of great compassion and not being able to bear the sufferings of sentient beings, he made very powerful aspirations such as, 'May even merely hearing my name become a means to eliminate the sufferings of sentient beings'.

Due to that combination of great compassion and such powerful aspirations, along with great wisdom, it is said that when Avalokiteshvara became enlightened, merely reciting his name brings great solace for sentient beings. As the commentary says, this is mentioned in the *Array of Stalks Sutra*. Reciting Avalokiteshvara's name is a very powerful mantra, and many people take it upon themselves to recite the Chenrezig mantra regularly as a means to generate compassion and help to eliminate the sufferings of other sentient beings.

I've mentioned previously how, at our level, we also need to take heed of the importance of making strong aspirational prayers. If we think, 'Oh, I'm good for nothing; I cannot possibly achieve anything', then the more we think in that way the less competent we will feel. Regardless of our actual state now, we can definitely have the capacity to generate the grandest aspirations to benefit other sentient beings.

¹ Needs to be read in the context of the first part of the verse.

Such aspirations have great significance. Enlightened beings are equal in being free from all faults, having an omniscient mind and compassion for all beings. However it is said that due to the strong aspirational prayers to benefit other beings when they were training on the path, and the merit accumulated at that time, when they become enlightened they are able to serve specific purposes to benefit sentient beings.

By thinking of my name may the frightening sufferings of cyclic existence become non-existent. Because of the combination of such strong aspirations based on great compassion, having accumulated extensive merits, and generating the great wisdom of omniscience, mantras such as the name of Chenrezig become a very powerful means to eliminate the suffering of sentient beings.

This is actually the meaning of the Tibetan word *jin-lab* that is translated as blessing. *Jin* means to bestow, and *lab* has a connotation of transforming the mind. So when people say 'I received blessings from a deity or holy objects such as statues and so forth', we need to understand that the real blessing is received when the mind transforms into a more positive and peaceful state.

3.2.1.1.1.4. *If one meditates, one is able to generate it*

While the word meditate is used here, the connotation of the Tibetan term is familiarity. So when one becomes familiar with it one is able to generate it, or if one meditates on it one is able to generate it. The next verse is preceded by this hypothetical doubt or argument:

Argument: Although there are many benefits, it is difficult to meditate on exchanging self and other.

At this stage one may acknowledge that there are many benefits from engaging in the practice of exchanging self with other, but think that it is very difficult to practise. One may feel, 'How could I practise it?'

The next verse is one of those verses that is quoted often, which people find to be very significant and powerful advice.

119. *Do not be turned off by difficulty.
Through the force of familiarity
The one whose name instilled fear when hearing
it,
Becomes the one without whom one is joyless.*

The commentary explains:

Answer: One should not be turned off by the difficulty of meditating on it because if one meditates, then one can realise it. Through familiarisation even the enemy whose mere name instilled fear in us when hearing it, becomes later a friend without whom we are joyless.

This presentation is clearly intended to counteract a very familiar mindset that we have that prevents us from engaging in various practices and virtues: 'Oh, it's too hard; too difficult'. The presentation here is that even though something may be difficult, one can master whatever one wishes to accomplish through familiarity.

We need to refer to these points again and again. We can acknowledge our limitations and faults and shortcomings, but we do have a mind, which carries the potential to change and further develop. When we become familiar with something, it is possible to change and adopt it. That is the point we need to remind ourselves of.

If one meditates on or becomes familiar with something then one can generate or realise it. The example to illustrate this is an enemy whose name initially instilled fear in oneself – just

hearing their name instils fear. Yet even with such an enemy, if one attempts to gradually and slowly become familiar with them, then it becomes possible that the enemy will turn into a friend. One can become so close to them that one feels unhappy if they're not present.

Here a complete transformation has taken place: an individual considered to be an enemy, whose presence once instilled a lack of joy and unhappiness, and whose absence caused happiness, becomes so close that without their presence one feels unhappy and joyless. In the past I've shared with you that I've had personal experience of this transformation into friendship through acquaintance and familiarity.

The reverse of this is also true. You might be so close to someone that you could not bear to be separated from them. But later on, even after having been together for ten or fifteen years, now you cannot bear to be in their presence and it makes you unhappy if they're close by. This is due to familiarity with focusing on their faults. When one starts to focus on the faults of others, the mind becomes more and more acquainted with seeing only faults, and that's when the other becomes an arch enemy who one cannot bear to see.

As the great master Atisha very succinctly said: proclaim your faults and hide your qualities; proclaim the qualities of others and hide their faults. This is very profound advice that we need to put into practice.

Indeed, if one starts to become acquainted with seeing the faults of the other, one may reach a point where one doesn't see any qualities. One even starts to actually look for faults in the other, which may very well be just a projection of one's own faults onto them. In either case one may reach a point where one does not see any quality in the other, which causes animosity and anger.

3.2.1.1.1.5. *Meditate on exchanging self and other because both self and other wish to be freed from suffering*

This is again a very logical presentation of how it is reasonable to exchange self with others because oneself and others all wish to be free from suffering.

The verse relating to this is:

120. *They who wish to rescue quickly
Self and others
Should practise the secret advice
Of exchanging self and other.*

The commentary explains:

For those reasons, they who wish to rescue quickly self and others from the faults of existence and peace should practise exchanging self and other, which is the secret Mahayana advice on the ultimate meaning of meditation, which is kept from those who are not a vessel.

In the first sentence, *the faults of cyclic existence* refers to samsara, and *peace* refers to the personal liberation of the lower vehicles. Those who wish to *rescue quickly self and others should practise exchanging self and other, which is the secret Mahayana advice.* Here *secret Mahayana advice* doesn't refer to secret tantric teachings, but rather a secret not to be disclosed to those who have very strong self-interest and thus are not able to relate to these teachings. This also relates to the self-interest of the practitioners of the lower vehicles.

As mentioned further, the *ultimate meaning of meditation is kept from those who are not a vessel.* Here an unsuitable vessel refers the hearers and solitary realisers whose ultimate goal is to achieve personal liberation. For those who have a very

strong self-interest these teachings will not be suitable, because they would not be able to relate to, and practise them.

The ultimate meaning of meditation on exchanging self with other, as presented here, is that it serves as the very foundation of the practice of generating and developing bodhicitta. It is likened to the life-wood, which is the central piece of wood placed in a statue or stupa. Just as the life-wood serves as the central piece of a statue, the practice of bodhicitta is the very centre and life force of the Mahayana and the lamrim teachings.

It is as presented in the beginning of the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

The essential meaning of the Victorious One's teachings,
The path praised by all the holy victors and their children,
The gateway of the fortunate ones desiring liberation

3.2.1.1.1.2. Abandoning cherishing self with effort

This is subdivided into two:

3.2.1.1.1.2.1. Self-cherishing is the cause for all fears

3.2.1.1.1.2.2. It is that which induces all harmful actions

3.2.1.1.1.2.1. *Self-cherishing is the cause for all fears*

The verse relating to this heading is:

121. *Out of those that generate fear for a small object
Due to attachment to their body,
Who would not abhor, like an enemy,
This body that generates fear.*

The commentary further explains:

If due to attachment to one's body, without having exchanged self and others, one generates great fear for even small objects of fear such as scorpions and poisonous snakes, then who that is skilled would not abhor this body like an enemy? It is unsuitable to cherish it.

The commentary explains that, *due to attachment to one's body, which is without having exchanged self and others, one generates great fear for even small objects of fear such as scorpions and poisonous snakes.* We have an instinctive fear of these creatures because of our strong self-cherishing. As that is the case, *then who that is skilled, meaning who that is knowledgeable, would not abhor this body like an enemy?* This is referring to cherishing the body. Obviously we need to have a body, but the implication here is that cherishing it is not suitable.

3.2.1.1.1.2.2. *It is that which induces all harmful actions*

Here 'that' refers to cherishing one's body, which is another way of being attached to one's body. This is what induces harmful actions. The relevant lines of verse are:

122. *Desiring to practise the ritual of curing
The afflictions of the body's hunger, thirst
And the like, one kills birds, fish,
Animals and hides in ambush.*

123ab. *They who, for profit and praise
Even kill their father and mother*

The commentary which relates to these lines is:

Those who cherish self, and out of the desire to practise the ritual of curing the body's afflictions of hunger, thirst and the like, will burn in the hells without respite because they kill birds, fish and

animals, ambush travellers and steal the wealth of others.

In order for the cherished body to receive profit and praise, they even kill their father and mother.

The commentary clearly explains the negative consequences of strong self-cherishing out of the desire to protect one's body. *The ritual of curing the body's afflictions*, refers to protecting one's body from *hunger, thirst and so forth*. To do this individuals engage in negativities such as *killing birds, for food, or fish and animals, ambush travellers and steal the wealth of others*. Then as a consequence of these deeds they *will burn in the hells without respite*. Their negative deeds definitely ripen into this suffering.

As further explained, *in order for the cherished body to receive profit and praise, they even kill those who have been very kind to them, like their own father and mother*. This refers to actual events that have occurred in the past; the king who was killed by his son. There is also another story of the son who killed his mother as a way to gain profit. In fact these events also occur today.

We saw the recent tragedy in Nepal where the whole royal family was assassinated by a prince. He would have been influenced by his uncle or someone else saying, "If you kill your father then you can become king". These unthinkable acts that are perpetrated on those who have been extremely kind to oneself arise from self-cherishing. The desire for gain and profit blinds the perpetrator to the fact that they are harming those who have been extremely kind to them.

We hear on the news about children killing their parents, or parents killing their children and we need to understand that these are the results of the fault of self-cherishing. We cannot think, 'Oh this will never occur to me!' These extreme situations were caused by self-cherishing, and are a reminder that we need to be mindful and careful about our own self-cherishing.

While we can use these explanations to be cautious and mindful about protecting ourselves from a self-cherishing mind, it can also become a means to generate compassion for others when they engage in such negative deeds. Because we know that they are blinded by their own self-cherishing, we extend our compassion to those who engage in such negative deeds. The teachings present many methods for thinking about the faults of self-cherishing.

The remaining lines of verse under this heading read:

123cd. *Or steal offering from the Triple Gem
Burn in the hell without respite*

124. *Hence, who that is wise would not view
This body that is desired, protected
And made offerings to,
As an enemy, and deride it?*

The commentary further explains:

Further, they will steal offerings from the Triple Gem and thus they will also burn in the hells without respite. Thus, who that is skilled will not view this body that is desired, protected and made offerings to on the basis of cherishing it, as an enemy, who will not deride it? One needs to stop all forms of self-cherishing.

They will steal offerings from the Triple Gem, and thus they will also burn in the hells without respite refers to the consequences of cherishing oneself or one's body. *Thus, who that is skilled will not view this body that is desired, protected and made offerings to on the basis of cherishing it, as an enemy? Who will not deride it?* These are rhetorical questions which imply that one really

needs to see self-cherishing as an enemy. The conclusion is that *one needs to stop all forms of self-cherishing*.

We need to understand this explanation in its proper context. Protecting and making offerings to one's body as a means of sustaining one's body in order to benefit others is of course most suitable. The *Four Hundred Verses* mentioned that by understanding this body as being a vehicle to benefit others, one needs to sustain, and nourish it. One definitely needs to protect this body, which has been acquired through the practise of morality, as a means to benefit others. The longer we can sustain this body, the more opportunity we will have to practise morality and so forth.

3.2.1.1.3.1.3. Contemplating the faults of holding self as the most important and the benefits of holding other as the most important

This is subdivided into two:

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1. A list of the faults and benefits of cherishing self and other

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.2. It is appropriate to abandon self-cherishing

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1. A list of the faults and benefits of cherishing self and other

Here there are two subdivisions:

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1. Extensive explanation

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.2. Short summary

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1. Extensive explanation

This is subdivided into five:

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.1. From the point of view of generosity

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.2. From the point of view of harm

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.3. From the point of view of praise and fame

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.4. From the point of view of inducing action

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.5. From the point of view of benefit and happiness

3.2.1.1.3.1.3.1.1.1. From the point of view of generosity

The verse relating to this is:

125. *Saying, 'If I give, what shall I use?,'
Is the way of ghosts; the egotistical thought.
Saying, 'If I use, then what will I give?,'
Is thinking about others; the Dharma of gods.*

The commentary explains:

The way of ghosts, the egotistical thought, where out of miserliness one thinks, 'If I give my wealth to others, then what will I use?' generates fear. The thought of, 'If I use it, then what will I give to others?' is only about the welfare of others. It is the Dharma of the gods and gives rise to all that is good and perfect.

Everyone is afraid of *ghosts*, and here they are used as an illustration of something that causes fear. *The egotistical thought, where out of miserliness one thinks, 'If I give my wealth to others, then what will I use?' generates fear.* This fear of having nothing left if we were to give to others is a thought that brings about miserliness. This prevents generosity, and thus prevents one from accumulating the virtue and merit that, in the long run, will be beneficial for oneself. That is a thought that should generate fear!

Whereas *the thought of, 'If I use it, then what will I give to others?'* is the thought that equals the beneficial thoughts of *the gods*. There are those who are concerned that if they consume too much themselves they will have nothing left to give to others; such genuine concern arises from a mind of cherishing others and wishing to benefit them. So they don't use too much for themselves for the fear of not having enough to share with others. Some even have a hard time

eating, thinking 'If I eat this then how could I feed others, who are much more disadvantaged than me?' There are people who think like this, and these noble thoughts are equal to the gods.

3.2.1.1.3.1.2. From the point of view of harm

The verse reads:

126. *If one harms others for the purpose of self
One will fall into the hells and the like.
If one harms self for the purpose of others
One will attain all good perfections.*

The commentary explains:

If one inflicts harm on others, such as killing, in order to attain happiness for oneself, one will fall into the hells and the like. If one harms and gives up one's body and wealth for the happiness of others, then one will attain all good perfections.

This is basically an account of cause and effect, and the consequences of karma. As mentioned here, *if one inflicts harm on others, such as killing, in order to attain happiness for oneself*, then while the intention might be happiness the consequence will be falling into the hells and suffering. Rather than happiness, one will in fact, only experience suffering.

From a worldly perspective, giving up *one's body and wealth for the happiness of others* may be even seen as a foolish act. "How foolish of them to give away their *body and wealth* to others". But when done with the proper intention, with the mind of cherishing other sentient beings, *then one will only attain the good perfections*. So the benefit of cherishing others is, as explained here, good consequences and results.

While these explanations are quite clear, the main point is to take them as a personal instruction and put them into practice; then they will become more meaningful. Often people comment, 'Oh, I've studied Buddhism for a while but how should I practise?' The answer is 'Put into practice what has been presented here'. When we actually put this reasonable and practical advice into practise, then that is when we derive the greatest benefit from the teachings.

Even spending some time reading and contemplating the meaning of this text, will definitely bring great solace to one's mind, making it calmer and more subdued. So, there is great benefit in doing that.

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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