

---

# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

༄༅། །བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའི་རྒྱུད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

10 May 2016

---

Engaging in the *tong len* meditation practice is highly meaningful. Of course, it is good to reflect on the actual meaning of the practice. The text that we are studying here meticulously and succinctly presents logical reasons to think about why we need to benefit others. Basically it is because we have not thought to benefit others that we have experienced so much loss, so many problems; all because of the lack of that positive attitude.

What has one gained from merely focusing on one's own purpose until now? Nothing but more problems and difficulties! Our present condition is the result of thinking only about fulfilling our own purpose. This clearly shows the great disadvantage of thinking in this way. We can see that the great enlightened beings, on the other hand, have achieved the ultimate state of enlightenment because of having solely contemplated the purpose of others.

In terms of the *practice*, as we recall from earlier presentations, we first generate the mind that wishes to benefit others, followed by the wish to achieve enlightenment; whereas, in terms of actually *achieving the goal* one first attains enlightenment, whereby one is able to fulfil the purpose of others.

As presented in the seven-fold cause and effect sequence for developing bodhicitta, the preceding causes – particularly developing great love, great compassion and the superior intention – are all methods for developing the wish to fulfil the purpose of others. Based on having developed these minds one then generates the mind of bodhicitta, the determination to achieve enlightenment to fulfil the purpose of all living beings. Thus one must first fulfil one's purpose – which is to attain enlightenment – so that one is able to completely fulfil the purpose of other sentient beings, which is to be free from all suffering and established in the ultimate state of happiness.

Based on this systematic and logical presentation we need to utilise the good conditions we have right now to familiarise the mind with the wish to benefit others, to fulfil their purpose. As mentioned earlier in the text (verse 130), leaving aside elaborate explanations, one can understand the disadvantage of cherishing oneself by looking at the difference between ordinary sentient beings and the Buddha.

Referring back to the seven-fold cause and effect sequence, the six causes are preceded by the foundation practice, the development of equanimity. Equanimity is where one generates an unbiased mind towards all living beings. One further strengthens this basis by generating the mind that recognises all beings as having been one's mother, followed by remembering their kindness, and then generating the wish to repay that kindness. These

first three of the six causes are the foundation for fulfilling the purpose of others.

Next, one strengthens the wish to benefit all mother sentient beings by contemplating that the best way to repay their kindness is to remove all their sufferings and establish them in the ultimate state of happiness. When one develops the intense mind of genuinely wishing all beings to be endowed in happiness, this is known as heart-warming love. Then, when one wishes all beings to be completely free from suffering, one will have developed great compassion.

One further enhances that great love and compassion by going beyond the mere wish for others to be endowed with happiness and free from suffering, and actually taking personal responsibility to free all beings from suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness. This is when one develops superior intention. Having developed superior intention, one questions whether one has the ability to free all beings from suffering right now. It becomes evident that one is lacking that ability. When one further investigates who may have that ability, one sees it is not the foe destroyers who have reached the state of self-liberation – such as the hearers and solitary realisers – neither do bodhisattvas who have reached even the highest level, such as the tenth ground. It becomes clear that it is only the Buddha, the fully enlightened being, who has the full capacity and ability to fully benefit sentient beings.

At this stage, one makes a strong resolve to achieve enlightenment for the purpose of all sentient beings, to free them from suffering and lead them to ultimate happiness. When one develops that mind unceasingly and spontaneously, one has actually developed bodhicitta. This is how we need to understand the stages.

Most of you already know this presentation quite well, but I am reminding you so that you put it into practice; that is what I feel is most essential. The main point is to integrate what you have learned into your practice. While I cannot claim to have advanced a great deal in my practice, I can assure you that from the very beginning of my attempts at study, I have always been keen to try and put whatever teachings possible into practice. As a consequence of that, I naturally have a strong inclination to put whatever I learn into practice, rather than just gaining knowledge from the teachings of the texts.

When students comment 'I have done a lot of study, now what should I practise?', this is a clear sign that, from the start, their study was never really done with the intention of doing practice. If one intended to put one's study into practice as a priority from the very start then, as one studied, one would have naturally found ways to put what one learned into practice. As one's knowledge of the teachings progressed, one's means for developing one's practice would have naturally increased. The main point here is to put whatever one has understood into practice: do not leave it for later on, but apply it in one's daily practice right now.

As you will have noticed, I have emphasised again and again in Study Group on Tuesday nights, and also on Wednesday evenings the need to put whatever one understands into practice. This is my only concern. I

don't have any great concern that you won't understand or learn, but I am reminding you to put your understanding into practice.

As I mentioned in a recent teaching at the Drol Kar Centre, I practice what you already know. I am not engaged in any profound practices that are beyond your conception and understanding. We are not deprived of the lack of understanding of the Dharma, but we do lack the habit of putting it into practice. Indeed, all of you have already gained quite a good understanding of the Dharma, in relation to others in this country who have no access to the Dharma. What may be lacking though, is actually putting your understanding into practice.

When we put our understanding into practice, it will definitely help subdue our mind, and when the mind is subdued, the mind is much happier and gentler. Otherwise there could be the great fault that the knowledge we have gained only becomes a means to increase our delusions, such as pride, anger or attachment. What could be worse than for a follower of the Dharma to be obsessed with attachment? As practitioners, we need to be mindful of this. If one has attachment to one's own beliefs, and aversion towards others' views for example, that is a big downfall, whether it is towards other religious seekers or others in general. This is what poisons the mind. Individuals who hold this sort of mindset cannot be called true practitioners. I am constantly careful about falling victim to these kinds of negative states of mind myself. I feel it is really important that, as true Dharma seekers, we remain mindful of not allowing the knowledge we have gained to become a poison for our mind, rather than a remedy to subdue the mind and overcome the delusions.

Now we come to the next heading in the text. More elaborate explanations were given last time about the preceding verse, which explains that if one does not completely give up the focus on oneself, one will not be able to abandon suffering. The example given is that if one does not let go of fire, one is unable to stop being burned. These are good, practical analogies given to illustrate the need for us to abandon suffering.

### 3.2.1.1. EXPLAINING THE WAY OF EXCHANGING SELF AND OTHER (CONT.)

#### 3.2.1.1.2. Brief summary

##### 3.2.1.1.2.1. The way of exchanging self and other

136. *Thus, to pacify harm to oneself  
And to pacify the suffering of others  
One should offer oneself to others  
And hold others as oneself.*

The commentary explaining this verse is:

Since disregarding others and cherishing self is the source for all that is undesired, one should give up cherishing self and cherish others as oneself, offering oneself for the purpose of all sentient beings, so as to pacify harm to self and the sufferings of others.

The commentary explains the meaning quite clearly. To emphasise the points we need to put into practice, the first part mentions: *Since disregarding others and cherishing self is the source for all that is undesired.* In other words, cherishing oneself is the source of all our misery and shortcomings. In relation to experiencing difficulties and

problems, we often hear people ask, 'Why me? Why am I suffering?' If one is really keen to know, then when one investigates it becomes clear that one's problems arise because of self-cherishing. In fact, it is the combination of self-grasping and self-cherishing: it is said that self-grasping is likened to a king and self-cherishing is like the king's minister. Just as a minister would follow the king's every command, similarly the self-cherishing mind follows every command given by the self-grasping mind.

In this way, the self-cherishing mind engages in a lot of negative deeds under the command of the self-grasping mind. As a consequence one experiences a lot of suffering, problems and difficulties. So, as mentioned here, this mind is the source of all that is undesired, thus *one should give up cherishing self, and instead cherish others as oneself, offering oneself for the purpose of all sentient beings.* Spending some time contemplating these points by reading this verse and reflecting on the meaning becomes a practice in itself. I would consider this a real form of meditation. Putting it into practice is what we need to do after gaining some understanding.

This explanation is presented quite succinctly. First, the faults of self-cherishing are explained as the source of all that is undesired and all our problems. This is followed by the actual practice of exchanging self and other: one gives up cherishing self and instead cherishes others. Just as one cherished oneself previously, one exchanges that by focusing on others. That is the actual exchange that one does in the practice of exchanging self with others.

The next verse under the same heading reads:

137. *I say 'I am under the control of others.'  
Mind, understanding this with certainty  
You shall from now on think about nothing else  
But accomplishing the welfare of all sentient beings.*

'Mind, you should understand with certainty that from now on I am under the control of others. From today onwards you shall think only about accomplishing the welfare of sentient beings and not about other things such as accomplishing only the purpose of self.'

Having presented the need to exchange self with others and to engage in the practice of cherishing others, the text reprimands one to be really mindful. Once one has committed to cherishing other sentient beings more than oneself, then one puts oneself in the service of others, allowing one to be under their control. Here it is suggesting pointing the finger at oneself, saying, *From today onwards I shall only think about accomplishing the welfare of sentient beings and not about other things such as accomplishing only the purpose of self.* The advice here does not suggest going around instructing others, but rather taking this practice upon oneself. It is about adopting this mindset and making the resolve oneself to serve other sentient beings. This is really a pith instruction for bodhisattvas' practice, so we need to be inspired to follow the example here and put it into practice as much as we can. When we take this advice as personal instruction, it serves its purpose: it becomes meaningful by enhancing one's practice of compassion.

The points presented here again emphasise how one should integrate Dharma practice in one's own mind. If

the practice is left on one side, and oneself on the other side, then one falls short of really utilising what is being presented here.

### 3.2.1.1.2.2. Stopping wrong actions upon having done the exchange

Having made a resolve to exchange oneself with others, one needs to back that up by stopping all wrong actions. This is what is being presented next.

*138. It is unsuitable to accomplish the welfare of self*

*With eyes and the like that belong to others.*

*It is unsuitable to mistreat them with the eyes*

*And the like that are for their purpose.*

If one dedicates oneself as a servant for sentient beings then it is unsuitable to use one's eyes and the like to mistreat them. It is unsuitable to look angrily at sentient beings with the eyes that belong to them or to use these eyes to achieve only one's own welfare. One needs to achieve their purpose.

Since it is unsuitable to mistreat sentient beings with eyes and the like that belong to them, if one recognises that one mistreats them with the three doors, one needs to restrain oneself again and again upon contemplating the faults.

As the commentary explains, after having exchanged self with others, one needs to dedicate oneself to being a servant of sentient beings. This is in line with comments I have made on Wednesday night that, as far as my motivation is concerned, I see myself as someone who is in the service of you, the listeners. While I may be sitting up here on the throne, as far as my motivation and attitude are concerned, I am down there with you, serving you. We can see that Shantideva is emphasising this point here.

When one has entrusted oneself as a servant to other sentient beings, one should not mistreat them, for example, by looking inappropriately at them: *it is unsuitable to look angrily at sentient beings with the eyes that belong to them*. In other words, having dedicated oneself to benefiting others, one does not use one's eyes to give them dirty looks, or use one's limbs, arms or legs to make inappropriate gestures, by hitting, pushing or kicking others and so forth. If one has taken to heart the commitment to cherish other sentient beings, these ways of mistreating others are totally inappropriate.

Instead, one should use one's eyes to only look compassionately and gently upon others. As mentioned in one of the earlier verses, the mere sight of other sentient beings should immediately cause one to recall that 'it is by this very sentient being that I shall become enlightened'. Shantideva mentions how when one sees other sentient beings one should look upon them with a compassionate attitude. If we are not careful, when we have a disagreement with someone or when someone happens to pass by, it is easy to give them a dirty look or make an inappropriate gesture. We need to be mindful of this. As the commentary continues, when *one recognises one has mistreated them with the three doors* – that is through one's physical actions, one's speech or one's mind – at that time one should *restrain oneself again and again upon contemplating the faults*. This is how we need to guard our three doors.

While not mentioned here specifically, mistreating others occurs when we engage in any of the ten non-virtues, so a succinct way to remember how to guard our three doors is to restrain oneself from the ten non-virtues – such as not engaging in covetousness, harmful intention or harbouring wrong views, in relation to the mind. Whenever one notices any of these states of mind arising, one should recognise it and restrain oneself.

It is good to note again the difference between restraint and protection. When any of one's three doors are already engaged in a harmful activity, one needs to apply restraint. Protection, on the other hand, means not allowing one's mind to go towards that negativity from the very beginning. As the text on moral conduct, the Vinaya explains, among the restraints, restraining one's mind is supreme, because when one restrains one's mind, one naturally refrains from all the non-virtues of body and speech. When one is not able to restrain one's mind, one finds oneself engaging in physical and verbal misdeeds.

To give an illustration, if one is unable to restrain one's mind from the influence of anger, due to that angry mind one would not hesitate to use harmful speech against others, hit, or even kill them. However, if, from the very beginning, one doesn't allow the anger to dominate the mind, this will naturally protect one from verbal and physical misdeeds. When we derive the essence of the text, we can then find ways to put that meaning into practice.

### 3.2.1.1.2.3. Practising faultlessly

*139. Then, having to put sentient beings first,*

*Whatever is observable on one's body*

*By stealing from it*

*One uses it for the benefit of others.*

For this reason, having to put the purpose of sentient beings first, one views without forgetfulness the food, clothing and others that one observes on one's body by stealing from it - that is giving up grasping at these objects as mine, one uses them for their benefit, as a servant would use the food, clothing and other resources of the master.

As the commentary explains, after one has made the resolve to serve other sentient beings, whatever one normally uses them for to sustain one's body such as food, clothing and the like, as if stealing from one's own body, one uses it only to serve other sentient beings. As the commentary further clarifies, this means giving up grasping at these objects as 'mine'. So while one still needs to use resources, one uses it with the attitude that it is for the purpose of other sentient beings. For example, when the servants of a king partake of the clothing, food and so forth that are provided to them by the king, they have no sense that they own those things. The servants' food and so forth are provided to sustain them as a way to further serve the king. Likewise, when we partake of food and so forth, we need to do so with the attitude that this is a means to serve sentient beings. Even offering one's food and drink is in line with what is being explained here, keeping the attitude always that one is nourishing oneself in order to serve other sentient beings.

The advice presented here is very beneficial, even in everyday life. If we were able to really have consideration

---

for others, always engage in appropriate gestures in relation to them, and always see oneself as their servant, then from one's own side one will only be engaged in positive interactions. There is no doubt this will create the basis for good relationships and good communication with others.

Of course, there are times when in spite of engaging in the means to benefit others, they are still not happy and may show a lack of respect, appreciation and even distance themselves from one. However although they harbour such attitudes, if one actually puts this advice into practice then at least from one's own side one will not have done anything wrong, and there is no reason for one to feel bad. So regardless of how others treat you, if you engage in the practice as presented here, it makes one's life really meaningful.

I have heard that some couples make agreements to treat the other as 'number one'; some even demand the other 'you have to treat me as number one'. If both sides treated the other as number one, then that would be a good mutual relationship. But if one demands the other to treat them as number one, but in return they don't treat the other as number one, then that is not fair. The main point here is that if there is mutual concern, where both treat the other as a priority, a benefit can be derived.

Indeed, we can see many instances of those who take the initiative to go beyond their own selfish needs and think about others. Some parents have commented that one of their children always shares with others and has concern for others. That child is naturally seen as being very considerate and good. Within families, we can see those who have consideration for other members of the family and have genuine concern about the others' welfare; a family member takes the initiative for the well-being of the family as a whole, whereas others are always thinking about their own selfish needs. Even in worldly society, when someone is seen as selfish and only thinking of themselves, they are not held in high esteem. So we can see that the advice presented here relates to everyday life as well.

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

*Transcript prepared by Judy Mayne  
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine  
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe  
Edited Version  
© Tara Institute*