
Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation we generated during the refuge and bodhicitta prayer, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice. *[meditation]*

The hallmark of having meditated on exchanging self and other is that the love and compassion in our heart increases. So it is good to check as to how effective the practice has been by gauging how much love and compassion has increased.

While there are subtler levels of suffering that one can focus on, in general it is obvious how sentient beings are experiencing great suffering and are deprived of happiness. Not bearing to see sentient beings deprived of happiness and wishing them to be happy is what is called love, and not being able to bear sentient beings' suffering and wishing them to be free from suffering is compassion. Meditating again and again on cultivating these attitudes, and thus familiarising one's mind with them, brings about a real transformation in one's mind.

When one realises how, despite developing this noble wish, sentient beings are still continuing to lack happiness and experience suffering, a deep sense of personal responsibility for establishing them in happiness and freeing them from suffering begins to develop. One sees that it is crucial to take up the responsibility for establishing sentient beings in ultimate happiness and freeing them from all suffering, because merely wishing them to be happy and free from suffering has not brought about any change to their situation.

For that mind of taking personal responsibility to generate spontaneously, one needs to have first familiarised one's mind with the development of love and compassion. This means meditating again and again on love and compassion, and acquainting oneself with these states of mind. Without first familiarising oneself with love and compassion, the initiative to take on the responsibility for leading all beings to happiness and freeing them from all suffering will not arise.

The most supreme method for enhancing love and compassion is the technique of giving and taking, which is the meditation practice we have just engaged in. Familiarising ourselves with this practice means meditating on giving and taking again and again. Without familiarising and acquainting ourselves with the wish to give, for example, we won't be able to give. Even though we may have the ability to do so, what prevents us from giving is the lack of familiarity with the mind of giving. Similarly, taking the suffering of others upon oneself is also based on familiarising one's mind with that practice. Even if we have the ability to take responsibility to help others to be free from suffering, if we don't do so it is because we lack that familiarity. So familiarising

one's mind again and again with the practice of giving and taking is essential.

Indeed, the practice of giving and taking is really the core practice of the bodhisattvas. It is through acquaintance with this practice that one enhances and strengthens the mind of love and compassion to the point of taking on the personal responsibility for bringing happiness to others, and removing their suffering. Then one will be able to develop what is called the superior intention, which is the mind developed just prior to generating actual bodhicitta.

If, after having meditated on the seven-point cause and effect sequence, one has not yet developed the superior intention, then by engaging in the practice of giving and taking, one will definitely be able to develop this mind. As this is such a powerful practice to benefit others, we can see why it is a core practice of bodhisattvas.

From the very outset the very purpose or goal of meditating on the seven-point cause and effect sequence is to benefit other sentient beings, i.e. to free them from all suffering and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness. That goal is then further enhanced throughout the developmental stages of the awakening mind.

On a personal level it is important to try to gauge whether our practice has produced any fruit, and the extent to which an unbiased love and compassion towards all beings has developed. As we develop our practice we need to further strengthen it, not leaving it at a mere wish. Rather than just wishing, for example, 'it would be nice if I could do the giving and taking practice', it means really developing the sentiment 'I need to be fully taking on that responsibility' from the depths of one's heart. That is the key point.

An example of the difference between a mere wish to practise, and the actual practice is, for example, gauged by our reaction when seeing someone who is deprived of food and who is really hungry. If you have the ability to help alleviate such a person's immediate suffering of hunger by giving them some food, but do not actually take the initiative to do so, then although you may wish them to be free from the suffering of hunger, you have not actually put that wish into practice. That would be a clear sign that your practice has remained mere words, and that you have not really taken it to heart.

This may appear to be a very simple practice. However it is at this level initially that we need to begin our practise. At our level now we don't have the ability to engage in high-level practices like the bodhisattvas, who are able to give away their flesh, their blood and their bodies to others. But we do have the ability to practise giving food to those who are hungry.

Having attempted to meditate on love and compassion, and engage in the practice of giving and taking, it is reasonable to ask whether there has been any actual transformation taking place within our minds. One way to gauge whether a transformation has taken place would be to look at whether our attitudes have changed. For example, prior to our attempts to engage in developing love and compassion, when we saw a disagreeable person experiencing difficulties or undergoing some sort of suffering, we might have spontaneously thought 'Oh, that serves them right. They deserve to suffer'. Rather

than wishing for them to be free from suffering, we added on more suffering in the sense of thinking that it serves them right.

Likewise when a disagreeable person lacked happiness we would have felt that it served them right, and that they were not entitled to any happiness. So rather than wishing others to be established in happiness, we wanted them to lack happiness, and rather than wishing for the other to be free from suffering we might have even wished them to experience more suffering. This is the extent of the negative mind and attitude that we might have harboured previously.

Having then taken the initiative to voluntarily engage in the practice of developing love and compassion one focusses on all beings in an unbiased manner, seeing them equally deserving happiness, and to be free from suffering. One meditates on this point and familiarises oneself with it again and again. The hallmark of this practice having taken effect is when we see that same disagreeable person suffering later on, we feel 'Oh, how wonderful it would be if they would be free from this misfortune or suffering'. And when we see those who are deprived of happiness, we begin to feel how unfortunate it is that they lack happiness, and how wonderful it would be if they could be established in happiness.

When that attitude arises readily, then that is the true sign that a transformation has taken place. At our level we are not yet able to actually generate bodhicitta. However, through familiarity we can definitely acquaint our mind with love and compassion, and develop that to the point of sincerely wishing others to be happy and free from suffering. That is such a wonderful state of mind to be in, and such a radical change from our earlier ways of thinking.

Developing such a mind of unbiased love and compassion towards others, wishing them to be endowed in happiness and free from suffering, regardless of who they are – whether they are disagreeable, or an object of earlier disagreements – will definitely bring great benefit to both oneself and others.

So whilst we have not yet developed the awakening mind of bodhicitta, this incredibly positive transformation of our previous attitude to one of unbiased love and compassion is a very sound foundation for developing bodhicitta. It is good to keep this mind.

When we really think about the benefits of developing such attitudes we can unhesitatingly accept that love and compassion is the root of all happiness, and that it is the very essence of one's life.

In terms of happiness in the world in general, at a societal level and within a community, love and compassion is definitely the basis for true wellbeing. The person who has a mind of love for others will not have any intention to harm others, because the intention to harm cannot arise when there is love for others. Without such an attitude one could defiantly harm others, but when there is true love and compassion, the attitude of harming others cannot arise. The only thought that would arise would be the wish to benefit them. When that attitude is prevalent, how could there be harm and violence in a community?

We need to constantly check the extent to which our love and compassion has developed and increased. With this habit of investigating and employing constant vigilance over our state of mind, our practice will stabilise and become more durable. By practising in his way we are also securing our own happiness. As I've regularly emphasised, the consequence of losing love and compassion is equivalent to the loss of our own happiness. It would be pitiful if we allowed that to happen.

Maintaining a genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness is directly related to generating love and compassion, and then maintaining and further enhancing that love and compassion. This practice will be really meaningful because it is done with logic and reason through tested experiences. Then we will have utilised our intelligence and wisdom appropriately.

If one doesn't utilise one's intelligence to further enhance love and compassion as a basis for one's own happiness and for the wellbeing for others, then our intelligence will not only have gone to waste but could potentially even be harmful. So we need to pay careful attention to this.

Leaving aside the importance of love and compassion on a large scale, we can see the consequences for a couple when love and compassion weakens. That is when harmful intentions start to develop. It may start slowly with bickering and hurting each other with words and so forth, but as that love and compassion and genuine concern further declines, then more extensive harm starts to occur.

3.2.1.1. EXPLAINING THE WAY OF EXCHANGING SELF AND OTHER

3.2.1.1.2. Brief summary

3.2.1.1.2.3. Practising faultlessly (cont.)

Now we need to come back to the text, otherwise we will not cover much of it.

The following explanations give very precise instructions on how to engage in this practice of exchanging self and other. The commentary on verse 139 reads:

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.

The commentary meticulously explains how to put love and compassion into practice for the reasons that have been presented earlier. For *the purpose of putting sentient beings first, one views without forgetfulness the food, clothing, and resources one uses for one's body by stealing from it.* [Other translations use the word 'snatching' instead of stealing.] As the commentary explains, stealing or snatching from the body means giving up grasping at these objects as mine. So one develops the mind of giving up grasping at these objects, one's resources and so forth, which are used to sustain one's body as 'mine', and uses them for the benefit of other sentient beings.

Reflecting on these passages is really a form of meditation, and will really help the mind to settle down. I guarantee that if you are in a disturbed state of mind,

then contemplating these points will help to settle down your mind, and pacify it. It is good to sit down at times to read the text, and reflect on its meaning.

3.2.1.2. THE WAY OF FOLLOWING UP IN THOUGHT

The earlier verses have indicated the necessity of practising exchanging self with other. Having reached the point of actually practising exchanging self with other, this next section explains how to follow it up in thought.

This section is divided into two:

- 3.2.1.2.1. Indicating
- 3.2.1.2.2. Explaining

3.2.1.2.1. Indicating

The verse relating to this is:

*140. Having made those lower and the like into self
And having made self into others,
With a mind free of discursive thoughts
Meditate on jealousy, competitiveness and
pride.*

The commentary explains:

Bodhisattvas focus on other sentient beings that are lower, equal and superior and take them as self and hold the self as other. Having thus exchanged the focus of grasping at self and others, one should induce certainty and meditate, if the meditating bodhisattva's name is Devadatta, with a mind free from doubting discursive thoughts on jealousy for Devadatta, competitiveness if equal and pride if lower.

As presented here, *bodhisattvas focus on other sentient beings that are lower, equal and superior and take them as self and hold the self as other*. Basically the practice that is being presented here is a way to overcome these faulty states of mind of jealousy, a sense of competitiveness, and pride.

When the bodhisattvas engage in practice they use every means and method to apply antidotes to counteract such faulty or negative states of mind. What is being presented here is how to use occasions where one actually feels jealous as a means to overcome jealousy. Likewise, with using occasions when competitiveness arises as an opportunity to apply an antidote for overcoming a sense of competitiveness, and using occasions where pride arises, to apply an appropriate antidote to overcome the negative or faulty state of mind of pride.

Jealousy is a mind that is unhappy about the success of others, unable to bear seeing success, good qualities and achievements of others. With equals, there's a sense of **competitiveness** where one feels uncomfortable when one's equals are doing better, or there is a sense of, 'I should be better than them'. With those who are lower or inferior to oneself in some field, one has a sense of **pride**, and feelings of contempt for them. These are really faulty states of mind that are the causes of negativity. The implication here is that we need to apply antidotes to overcome these faulty states of mind.

The commentary also presents an illustration of how to counteract these three faulty states of mind. To counteract jealousy, one engages in the practice of putting oneself in the place of the other, and assuming the higher place. To overcome the mind of contempt and pride over those who are lower, one places oneself in the lower state. So exchanging one's own position with the object of the deluded thought is the way of counteracting these

negative states of mind: if it is jealousy of one who is higher, then putting oneself in that state; if it is contempt for the lower, then taking the lower position oneself; and it's the same with competitiveness i.e. exchanging oneself with the other.

Of course there's no room for these negative states in the minds of actual bodhisattvas. That's because they've already engaged in the practice of seeing the faults of such negative states of mind. When the bodhisattvas were in the early stage of their practices, if there was even the slightest hint of jealousy they were able to immediately recognise that, and immediately see the shortcomings of jealousy, which counteracted that jealousy. Likewise there is not much room for pride to arise in a bodhisattva's mind. At early stages of their practice if there was the slightest chance for pride to arise, they were able to apply the methods and means to immediately counteract and overcome this negative state of mind.

Of course the practices presented here are for trainees on the bodhisattva path.

3.2.1.2.2. Explaining

Explaining is subdivided into four:

- 3.2.1.2.2.1. The way of meditating on jealousy for the higher
- 3.2.1.2.2.2. The way of meditating on competitiveness for the equal
- 3.2.1.2.2.3. The way of meditating on pride for the lower
- 3.2.1.2.2.4. The results of the meditation

3.2.1.2.2.1. The way of meditating on jealousy for the higher

The way of meditating on jealousy for the higher is subdivided into two:

- 3.2.1.2.2.1.1. The way of meditating
- 3.2.1.2.2.1.2. The way of practise after the meditation

3.2.1.2.2.1.1. The way of meditating

This is how we need to meditate on jealousy. The relevant lines of verse read:

*141. He is praised but I am not,
We do not find gain like him,
He is praised but I am criticised,
He is happy but I have suffering,*

*142ab. I have to do the work
While he abides happily;*

Then the commentary explains:

When the bodhisattva Devadatta meditates on exchanging self and other, Devadatta is praised by others, but having taken sentient beings as self, one is of lower qualities and will not be praised. One does not find necessities for happiness in the same way as Devadatta and although the bodhisattva Devadatta is praised, we sentient beings, are criticised. He is happy and we sentient beings have suffering. We have to do the work of carrying, but Devadatta abides happily.

This is a clear explanation of how jealousy is developed in the mind when another is praised, such as when *Devadatta is praised by others*. *Having taken sentient beings as self, one is of lower qualities and will not be praised*, refers to feeling jealous because we, oneself and others, are not praised. Another example is when the other finds *the necessities for happiness*, and *we sentient beings are criticised*.

We are jealous because *he is happy and we sentient beings have suffering. We have to do the work of carrying, but Devadatta abides happily.* Jealousy develops from thinking, 'How come they get all the good things? That's not fair!'

When we see how jealousy arises, we can see that just avoiding such states of mind overcomes jealousy, and thus it serves as an antidote for overcoming jealousy. This presentation also applies to the way in which pride is developed; the same contemplation also counteracts pride very effectively.

While these are analogies of how jealousy and so forth arise, they do not apply to actual bodhisattvas. Rather they are part of training in how to counteract jealousy and so forth.

The remaining lines of verse presented under this heading are:

**142cd. He is great in the world
But I am known for my lack of qualities.**

**143. What should one do without qualities?
We are all endowed with qualities.
There are those that are lower than him
And there are those with regard to whom I am higher.**

The commentary then explains:

This bodhisattva is greatly renowned in the transitory worlds for his ethics, listening and so forth, but I am known for inferiority and a lack of qualities. Through effort you achieved qualities but what should we, the sentient beings without qualities, do? We sentient beings shall all practise to become endowed with qualities.

That we are low and he is high is posited relative to each other. Thus there are occasions in relation to others with superior qualities that these bodhisattvas are inferior, and there are occasions in relation to the other inferior sentient beings that I am superior. Therefore there is no need for us sentient beings to be discouraged and we should practise with effort for complete enlightenment. One should meditate on holding others as self, by thinking in this way.

The first part of the commentary indicates that *this bodhisattva is greatly renowned in the transitory worlds for his ethics, listening and so forth.* The jealous mind thinks, 'Oh, this bodhisattva is renowned for his ethics and his learning and so forth, but I'm only known as inferior and lacking qualities'. *Through effort you achieved qualities but what should we, the sentient beings without qualities do?* is a lamentation: 'We don't have any qualities, so we are shunned'. One way to overcome such sentiment is to think that if *we sentient beings practise*, we will all become *endowed with qualities*.

The earlier part of the commentary is a presentation of an attitude that can wear you down. You feel, 'Oh, he's so renowned, and I don't have any qualities', and when you think in that way then your mind becomes weighed down by a lack of confidence and so forth. The line *we sentient beings shall all practise to become endowed with qualities*, shows us that as we have the ability we can gain qualities. This is a sentiment that will uplift the mind and make it courageous.

As a way of overcoming a mind concerned about him being high and me being low the commentary says, *we are*

low and he is high is posited relative to each other. This presentation shows us that, there is, in fact, no ultimate high position, and no ultimate low position. What is considered as being high or low is all relative to each other. That is the main point here. As specifically explained here, because it is relative, *there are occasions in relation to others with superior qualities that these bodhisattvas are inferior*, and likewise, *there are occasions in relation to the other inferior sentient beings where I am superior*.

Therefore there is no need for sentient beings to be discouraged and we should practise with effort for complete enlightenment. This is followed by the conclusion that, *one should meditate on holding others as self, by thinking in this way.*

This section has dealt with the qualities of hearing, listening, learning, and so forth. Next comes this hypothetical argument:

Argument: You are lower than the bodhisattva Devadatta due to degenerated ethics and view.

Having indicated ways of overcoming feelings of despondency because others have other higher qualities, this hypothetical argument relates to the thought, 'Oh, I'm still *lower than the bodhisattva Devadatta due to degenerated ethics and view.* His ethics and view are so much better, and that's why I'm lower'. In response to this, these two lines of verse are presented:

**144ab. Ethics, view and faults
Are out of our control as they are powered by
the afflictions.**

The commentary answers the hypothetical question saying:

Answer: The degenerated ethics and view, faults due to lifestyle and so forth, i.e., degenerated view and action, are due to the power of the adventitious mental afflictions and not faults I created purposely under my own power.

As explained here very precisely, *degenerated ethics* i.e. behaviour and so forth *and faulty view, faults due to lifestyle and so forth*, are *due to the power of the adventitious mental afflictions and not faults I created purposely under my own power.* We need to remind ourselves of these essential points again and again in relation to both others and ourselves. It is not the individual being who is at fault, rather the faults are due to the influence of the mental afflictions. It is the afflictions that are at the fault rather than the individual person, whether it is oneself or others.

This is in line with the explanation in Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Verses* where it indicates that the Buddha does not see other individual beings as faulty; rather he sees the delusions within their mind as the fault. These are essential points. When one reprimands oneself one needs to understand that, 'It is due to the delusions in my mind that I'm engaging in such negative behaviours, or holding faulty views. So if I overcome these delusions, then all will be rectified, and all will be good.

It is, of course, due to delusions that we engage in behaviour that is clearly harmful to ourselves and others. No-one with any intelligence wants to engage in behaviours and acts that are clearly harmful. Yet, uncontrollably, we still engage in such actions or deeds because of the strong influence of the delusions.

When the delusions are overcome then such negative behaviours and faulty views will all naturally subside. The point here is that it is within our own hands: if we do not want to experience the consequences of ill-behaviours and faulty views, then we need to overcome the delusions. Then the negative consequences will pass us by.

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The emphasis here is on *the power of the adventitious mental afflictions*. The Tibetan word *lu-pur-wa* - translated here as adventitious - has the connotation that it arises intermittently or occasionally. So by implication these mental afflictions are not permanent, i.e. due to certain conditions they arise, but when the conditions are not met they are not there. Thus, because they arise occasionally, they are not a permanent entity of the mind and can be totally removed.

Amongst several analogies presented in Maitreya's *Uttaratantra*¹, one is that the delusions are like clouds in the sky, in that they arise occasionally and are thus adventitious. Proof that the clouds are not a permanent entity of the sky is seen when the wind blows the clouds away, and the real entity of a clear and blue sky becomes evident.

Another analogy to illustrate that the delusions are adventitious that is presented in the same text, is that they are like murky water. If the particles of the dirt that make the water appear murky were to be one with the entity of water, then they would be inseparable, and the murky water will always remain murky. However the fact that the dirt particles are adventitious means that after some time the dirt settles down, and the water becomes clear.

The delusions are adventitious in the sense that they are not intrinsically one with the mind; they arise due to certain causes and conditions. The main point is that the delusions can be separated from the mind, and therefore the mind can be freed from the delusions.

A contemporary analogy is desalination projects, which are possible because of the fact that salt can be separated from seawater. If the salt and water were not separable then there could be no such projects. I have heard that desalination is quite expensive. The point of the analogy is that if salt and seawater were one entity then the water and salt could not be separated. Likewise, if the delusions were of one entity with the mind then they could not be separated from the mind, and one would always be affected by them.

The main point here is that mental afflictions are adventitious, which means that they can be separated from our mind.

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

¹ *Great Vehicle Treatise on the Sublime Continuum*, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins
Chapter 8