

# Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Based on the motivation that we generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice.

*(Pause for meditation)*

We can now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines, 'For the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will engage in and listen to the teachings'. Generating this motivation is also a reminder of the goal that we're seeking to achieve, which is Buddhahood – thus it refreshes our mind to reflect on what Buddhahood actually entails.

As we attempted in our short meditation practice, we must try to incorporate the *giving and taking* practice in our daily lives, as way to transform and subdue our minds. If we don't use these profound practices and techniques as a means to subdue our mind, then we won't find any other methods – there are no other means.

Following on from where we left off in our last session, we are now on the third sub-heading, which is:

### 3.2.1.3. THE WAY OF FOLLOWING UP IN ACTION

#### 3.2.1.3.1. Actual (cont.)

##### 3.2.1.3.1.2. Sincerely accepting oneself to be lower for the purpose of others

Here there are three subdivisions:

###### 3.2.1.3.1.2.1. Analysing one's faults

###### 3.2.1.3.1.2.2. Confessing having harmed sentient beings

###### 3.2.1.3.1.2.2. Diligently take the lower place

It is good to derive an understanding from the outline itself. As presented, it is very reasonable to accept oneself to be lower than others, for if we can't practise taking a lower position, then there's no way that we can actually benefit others.

When we engage in reading a Dharma text, it is good to try to derive an understanding from every angle of the presentation, such as from the outline itself. Indeed we can derive the text's essential meaning just from the outline, which is intended to summarise the main point being presented. Here, the main point is accepting oneself to be lower for the purpose of benefiting others. Contemplating this point for a while can move our mind, and thus one derives more benefit from what is being presented in the text.

###### 3.2.1.3.1.2.1. Analysing one's faults

161. *I shall separate from my happiness  
And attach the suffering of others to me.  
Say, 'Why do you act like this at any time?'  
Investigate your own faults.*

I shall separate myself from all my happiness such as food, clothing and so forth, and give them to others. I shall attach the sufferings of others to myself and

accept them. Bodhisattvas should investigate their faults by asking themselves from time to time, 'Why did I do this?'

The first two lines refer to the practice of giving and taking, the meditation practice we attempted to engage in earlier. Essentially the point of the practice, as it says here, is to *separate myself from all my happiness such as food, clothing and so forth*, meaning one will not cherish these things and instead give them to others. In the practice of giving and taking, this is the practice of giving: giving all of the goodness one has. Then *I shall attach the sufferings of others to myself* – this is the taking part. These are the two immaculate presentations of the giving and taking practice.

Next, the text explains that *bodhisattvas should investigate their faults by asking themselves from time to time 'Why did I do this?'* In other words, those training as bodhisattvas should investigate their minds by regularly asking themselves about the intentions behind their thoughts and actions. The main point of this practice is to detect any faults that may arise in the trainee's mind.

We need to take this as a personal instruction; we need to be familiar with the practice of checking our mind for any faults that may arise. Even just reading these words and contemplating them for a few moments, and then investigating the mind can be an essential meditation practice.

Occasionally one may feel a bit down, unhappy and so forth. At that time, rather than letting our unhappy, depressed mind carry on unchecked, it would be far better to take some time to read a text like this. We can first make strong supplications to Shantideva, seeking the blessing to be able to gain the understanding and realisation of these essential points. Spending a few moments contemplating these words would really help the mind to become more settled, to experience a sense of happiness and peace.

When we apply this technique and contemplate the meaning of the text, it will definitely stop negative states of mind, such as feeling melancholic or feeling down. When this positive effect takes place, we will begin to notice a great difference in our present way of thinking and attitude, compared to before we met the Dharma. We will notice how, previously, we succumbed to negative states of mind, feeling as if there was no way out of our depressed state. But now, having met with the teachings and having contemplated them, we can see that a shift has taken place, and that our mind has become more expansive. This is the benefit of having access to the teachings and the Dharma. But if we don't put this advice into practice, we will not get much benefit from it.

Initially, there is the fault of not knowing the Dharma. But once we know the Dharma and understand it, the next fault we need to overcome is not putting it into practice. We need to overcome both these faults in order to derive benefit from the teachings.

###### 3.2.1.3.1.2.2. Confessing having harmed sentient beings

We should pay attention here to the meticulous presentation of the subject matter. Having taken the advice to investigate one's mind, one checks whether there are any faults or not. In summary, the faults would

be in relation to whether one has harmed sentient beings. If we detect any faults, we need to do what is presented here next – confess to having harmed sentient beings. As soon as we detect that we have engaged in some negative mind or actions that have harmed sentient beings, we need to immediately confess that as a way to purify it.

162. *Although others have created wrongs,  
I shall make them my faults.  
Although I have committed a small fault,  
I shall make it known to many beings.*

163ab. *By proclaiming the renown of others  
I will play down my own renown.*

Although others commit faults such as harming one, bodhisattvas should make these their own faults and carry the burden of experiencing the results themselves. Although one has committed small faults with regards to sentient beings, one should make them known to many beings and accept one's faults.

If I hear of the fame of others and hear that they are being talked about pleasantly, I will praise them even more and play down my own renown.

As explained in the first part of the commentary, *although others commit faults such as harming one, bodhisattvas should make these their own faults and carry the burden of experiencing the results themselves.* This is a profound way of implementing the understanding of karma. If one experiences harm from anyone, that harm is none other than the result of one's own previous karma. If we had not created the karma to experience harm, then no one would be able to harm us. If one implements that understanding of karma, then one can see harm from others as being one's own fault: that is, if someone harms us, it is basically the ripening of our own previously created negative karma.

We can also implement our understanding of the practice of patience here, particularly the patience of not retaliating. When others harm us, normally the intention to retaliate arises: we feel that this harm is unjust, that the other is harming us without any particular cause or reason from our side. But again, if we implement our understanding of karma – that the harm we experience from others is the result of the ripening of karma that we have created previously – then this can prevent us from immediately seeing the other as being at fault, and thus prevent us from generating the wish to retaliate and become angry with them. We should take the initiative to put this into practice, as it is the optimum way to protect one's mind. In the event that others cause us harm, even if it's just hurtful words, then our mind will not be disturbed and will remain peaceful if we employ the practice of patience of not retaliating. That is how we get the benefit.

We can also relate to a good analogy presented in Geshe Chekawa's Seven-Point Mind Training teachings, which I think we did in a course last year, of an arrow hitting a target. As explained in the analogy, if there were no target set up, there would be no way for the arrow to hit the target, so the arrow hitting the target is based on the fact that a target was set up. It's as if it is the target's fault that the arrow hit it, because if the target hadn't been set up, the arrow wouldn't have been able to hit it. So this analogy shows how we experience the results of karma ourselves – if we hadn't created the karma, we wouldn't

experience the harm. When we create the karma of harming others in the past, we 'set up the target', and the harm we now experience from the other is like the arrow hitting the target. Contemplating in this way, one takes the initiative to carry the burden of experiencing the results oneself.

The commentary continues, *although one has committed small faults with regards to sentient beings, one should make them known to many beings and accept one's faults.* This is again presenting the practice of proclaiming one's faults, even though they are minor. Rather than finding excuses or trying to hide our faults, we should proclaim them and make them known. This protects one from concealing these faults and creating more negativity and incurring more faults in future. These are very profound practices, so we should put them into practice.

In a confession ceremony for the ordained, there is a part where the abbot asks: 'Have you seen the faults as faults?' to which the response is, 'Yes, I have'. This is followed by, 'will you commit to refrain from the faults again in the future?', and again the intended response is 'Yes, I will'.

The commentary further explains:

If one hears of the fame of others and hears that they are being talked about pleasantly one praises them even more and plays down one's own renown.

Here again, it is profoundly explained that when bodhisattvas hear of others' qualities, they will take the initiative to even further expand on those qualities, and play down their own. A perfect example is His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who always says, 'I am just an ordinary human being and I don't have many qualities' – taking a lower position from his side, while praising others to great extent. Indeed he goes to great lengths to praise the goodness of others, such as their respective faiths and good deeds. This is a clear sign that His Holiness is putting the bodhisattva deeds into practice.

In relation to the earlier point, even if one's own faults are small, a bodhisattva will take the initiative to proclaim those faults and make them known to all, rather than conceal them, so that others are not misled and deceived. And if others have some renowned qualities, the bodhisattva will make that even more widely known.

If we can incorporate these practices to some extent into our own lives, it will bring great solace to the mind. If we can make it a habit to praise others' qualities, and when others' qualities are talked about, to agree with that, it will help one's own mind be free of negative attitudes such as jealousy, and will bring much more peace to one's mind.

In fact, we need to be very mindful when others' qualities are mentioned, because how are we to know who is, or is not, a bodhisattva? A bodhisattva may be anywhere at any time. We need to be very careful on this point.

3.2.1.3.1.2.2. *Diligently take the lower place*

163cd. *I shall order myself to achieve  
Every purpose, like the lowest of servants.*

164. *Since his nature is faulty,  
Do not praise partial adventitious qualities,  
Just as nobody knows, although they are  
there,  
Any of their qualities.*

I shall order myself to achieve every purpose of sentient beings without pride, like the lowest of servants that is ordered to carry the greatest of burdens.

Think of yourself as being in the nature of having faults and if the thought arises to praise oneself for at least some small partial qualities of listening and so forth, think: Just as nobody can see the qualities of the bodhisattvas they look at, I shall not praise even a partial adventitious quality. I shall not proclaim my qualities.

What is being explained here is that, for the purpose of benefiting sentient beings, one needs to relinquish any sense of pride when engaging in activities to serve them. When doing activities that may be considered lowly, such as taking care of the elderly or sick, there might be occasions where one has to clean them after they have defecated, for example. If one generates the mind, 'I can't do that. It is not my job. I am not the sort of person who would do this sort of thing', that sense of pride will prevent one from engaging in that service. So, if one is in a position of caring for the elderly or one's own parents, one carries out any task to serve them without any sense of pride, not hesitating to clean up a mess, or clean dirty sheets. One will be willing and glad to do that. This is an example of how, when one takes this teaching to heart and does not hold a sense of pride, one is able to engage in any activity without thinking it too lowly. If one has a sense of pride, it will prevent one from engaging in practical ways of benefiting others according to their needs. It can really prevent a lot of beneficial deeds and acts that we can do for others.

The commentary then says *think of yourself as being in the nature of having faults*. This is again a means of overcoming pride. As soon as one thinks, 'I am someone who has faults', it will lessen any contempt for others or pompous feelings about oneself. If the thought arises to praise oneself, or that others should praise one for smallest partial quality of listening, or the small good deeds one has done, or the partial good qualities one has, then one should think, 'Just as nobody can see the qualities of the bodhisattvas they look at, I shall not praise even a partial adventitious quality of mine. I shall not proclaim my qualities.' This is the practice one needs to adopt.

### 3.2.1.3.1.3. A summary of how to practise

*165. In short, whatever harm you inflicted on others,  
For the purpose of self,  
May that harm fall upon me  
For the purpose of sentient beings.*

In short, mind, whatever harm you have inflicted on sentient beings since beginningless time for my purpose, may that harm fall upon me in order to accomplish the purpose of sentient beings.

Here, the commentary explains that one reprimands one's own mind, saying that since beginningless time one has inflicted so much harm upon others. Keeping this in mind one makes the aspiration, *may that harm fall on me, in order to accomplish the purpose of sentient beings*. This is implementing the earlier practice of giving and taking, where one takes the suffering upon oneself. It is another way of seeing the appropriateness of taking the harm of sentient beings upon oneself.

The next verse is prefaced by the hypothetical query, *one may think: 'I cannot carry the burden of others' suffering.* The verse which serves as an answer to that is:

*166. One should not make it aggressive  
And wrathful  
But bashful, shy and controlled  
Like a young bride.*

One may think: 'I cannot carry the burden of others' suffering.'

Answer: 'The bodhisattva should not make their mind aggressive and wrathful but bashful, shy and controlled like a young bride.'

Query: How then should the mind abide?

Answer: Like a new bride it should be bashful, afraid of the criticism of others and of controlled behaviour. In the *Great Commentary* it is translated as *rough*.

The commentary's presentation of this hypothetical doubt is reasonable, because earlier it was advised that one should take the harm of all sentient beings upon oneself for the purpose of benefiting them. However one may then think, 'How can I carry that burden of others' suffering?' and feel overwhelmed. Thus the text explains that, *The bodhisattva should not make their mind aggressive and wrathful but bashful, shy and controlled like a young bride*.

I don't know if it's the tradition here in the west, but in Tibet, when a new bride is brought out of the house to meet the groom, she is very shy and bashful. This example illustrates how one should be timid when it comes to faults, always being mindful to maintain the quality of shyness, knowing that if one were to engage in a fault, it would be really shameful. As the commentary further explains, *like a new bride it should be bashful, afraid of the criticism of others and of controlled behaviour*.

All eyes look upon a new bride, seeing every minor mishap or mistake, so in order to prevent that, she would have a controlled demeanour. Likewise, to prevent one from engaging in faults, one should engage in the practice of what is called shame and embarrassment. Shame is felt in relation to one's own mistakes. If one knows about one's faults, it would be a really shameful admission, so one practises shame. Whereas embarrassment – some translations use the term consideration for others – relates to one not bringing about disgrace to others. Practising refraining from faults ensures that we do not embarrass others.

The earlier point that one should be like a new bride 'bashful, afraid of criticism of others and having controlled behaviour' incorporates the two points just mentioned: practising shame and embarrassment. In fact, without incorporating these two aspects of shame and embarrassment, there is no way one could properly avoid incurring faults.

To further illustrate this point, as explained in the *Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, both shame and embarrassment are essential to protecting one's commitments and vows and not incurring faults. Consider how it is not befitting for oneself to break the vows and commitments one has taken. One reminds oneself, 'I should not engage in this great misdeed'. By having shame for one's misdeeds, one avoids creating negativity. Further, when one thinks about all the gurus, buddhas and bodhisattvas being witnesses, engaging in

this negativity would be inappropriate in the presence of these great beings, who always know what one is doing. By thinking about how this misdeed would be a disgrace to all one's gurus, buddhas and bodhisattvas, one will avoid it – this would then be practising what is called embarrassment.

Of course, this is why, when we take vows and commitments, we envision all the buddhas and bodhisattvas being present, as a way to remind oneself in the future that all buddhas and bodhisattvas have been witness to one taking those commitments and vows. So if one were to breach these commitments and vows, it would be a disgrace to all those buddhas and bodhisattvas. Contemplating this helps us to refrain from misdeeds and negativities; if we have engaged in negativities, this reminds us to practise confession.

It is good to bring that awareness of the presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas at all times when engaging in practices, such as offering water bowls, when we visualise that these great beings are actually present, and offer them the offering substance. I personally feel a bit uncomfortable when I offer cold water in the winter, so I try to make it a little bit warm! This is mentioned in some of the practices, where in very hot weather, one imagines that the *argham* or drinking water is cooling; then, when it is cold, imagine that the water – or the substance one transforms into nectar – is warm. Otherwise, we will just go through the rituals, saying *argham*, *padyam*, and so on, but not really have much feeling for what we are doing, and not derive real benefit from it. Of course, it won't make much difference to the objects of our offerings, the buddhas and bodhisattvas, but from one's own side it is a good way to take the initiative and make offerings that would be appropriate at the time. Some who may not be aware of why this practice is done might be critical saying, 'How come you are offering warm or hot water in the water bowls?'

### 3.2.1.3.2. *One should take control of one's mind when following up the exchange of self and other in action*

Here again, the commentary outline is meticulously presented. When engaging in the practice of exchanging self and others, one should be mindful of having control over one's state of mind.

This is subdivided into four.

3.2.1.3.2.1. How to subjugate abiding with excitement

3.2.1.3.2.2. The faults of working only for one's own purpose

3.2.1.3.2.3. Investigating the faults of the body

3.2.1.3.2.4. Taking control of one's mind

#### 3.2.1.3.2.1. How to subjugate abiding with excitement

167. *Do this and abide like this.*

*Do not act like that*

*Take control of it like that*

*If it transgresses then subjugate it.*

One should think about the benefit of others and abide with one's actions accordingly. Like taming a horse, make yourself suitable to practise virtue. 'Mind, if you do not desire to act in this way, then I shall take control of you with mindfulness and introspection.' If the mind transgresses these antidotes then subjugate and subdue the mind.

The analogy here likens making oneself *suitable to practise virtue* to the task of taming a wild horse: when an untamed horse is finally tamed, it becomes really serviceable. You can then put that horse to any task and it can perform the task well. This analogy shows us how to control the mind and make it serviceable through the technique of developing calm abiding.

When we engage in the practice of focusing the mind, we will eventually reach a state where the mind becomes serviceable. At this point, you can put the mind to the task of maintaining a single-pointed focus on an object. This is what is being mentioned here. If the unruly mind starts to misbehave and refuses to listen to one's commands, one should reprimand it by saying, '*Mind, if you do not desire to act in this way then I shall take control of you with mindfulness and introspection*'. The two mental factors presented here as the most essential tools for taming the mind are mindfulness and introspection. Earlier, the text presented shame and embarrassment as the two essential tools that provide the means for us to conduct proper physical behaviour. As presented in many other teachings, mindfulness and introspection are the two most essential tools we require to control the mind.

I regularly emphasise these two states of mind, mindfulness and introspection, as most essential for maintaining the integrity of one's positive thoughts and a virtuous frame of mind. As explained in the teachings there is no way that one can have adequate control over one's mind without these two essential tools.

As I have presented many times previously, mindfulness is the state of mind that maintains a constant awareness of the object and does not forget it. Introspection is the state of mind that maintains vigilance over whether the mind is maintaining that focus or not. If it is found that the focus on the object is not maintained, it will bring the focus back. That is the function of introspection. These are the two essential tools to be incorporated within our practice in meditation and outside of it. The commentary concludes here, *if the mind transgresses, then apply the antidotes and subdue and subjugate the mind*.

The next verse relating to this heading is:

168. *Mind, if you do not act like this,*

*Despite having been advised,*

*Then all faults arise from you.*

*Hence you need to subjugate it.*

'Mind, if, despite advising yourself in this manner, you do not act accordingly with the excuse that you are under the control of the afflictions, you need to subjugate it, because the self-cherishing mind becomes the basis upon which all present and future faults rely upon.'

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse quite clearly: as a way to reprimand one's mind, one engages in a dialogue with it. I have previously shared my opinions and advice on how talking to oneself is a way to be mindful. Here my advice is being backed up by this presentation, which advises one to reprimand one's mind by saying, '*Mind, if, despite advising yourself in this manner, you do not act accordingly with the excuses that you are under the control of the afflictions, you need to subjugate it...*'.

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Often we might think, 'Yes, I do agree I need to control my mind, I have no qualms about that, I see the value of it, but my mind is influenced by attachment and anger and there is nothing I can do about it'. So sometimes one uses the afflictions as an excuse not to subdue the mind.

The advice being presented here is that when the self-cherishing mind acts cunningly like that, using excuses, saying 'Oh well, the afflictions are too strong and powerful so I can't do anything about it', 'I cannot help feeling angry and attached', then at that point you need to become even sterner with your self-cherishing mind. The meaning of subjugate here is of being stern. First, we need to try to talk to the mind kindly, but if that doesn't work, then we may have to take stronger measures and be stern with it. That is how the advice to be stern is being presented.

What is clarified in the text is that the referent mind is the self-cherishing mind, as it reads - *because the self-cherishing mind becomes the basis upon which all present and future faults rely upon* – so it is the self-cherishing mind that needs to be tamed and subjugated. We try to tame it gently first with nice words and try to appease it, but if the self-cherishing mind is still reluctant and tries to put up a fight, finding excuses to go on causing you trouble, you have to subjugate it.

The ways of subjugating it are presented next; not allowing it to find excuses and using other logic presented in the next verse, which will be covered in the next session. The essence of this is that one says to oneself: 'Previously, I did not recognise you as being a devious, faulty state of mind, and you had complete control over me. You did whatever you wanted and brought me only trouble. But now I have seen you for what you are. You are a troublemaker! You can't fool me anymore, and I am going to now take control over you. I am not going to allow you to control me any longer and destroy me as you did in the past. In the past, I did not know any better, but now I am a different person. Now I know how you have been devious and have cunningly harmed me.'

So in this form of dialogue, just as we would have with someone else when we argue with or admonish them. It is quite common, in a conflict, for people to start off by trying to talk and negotiate. Occasionally, however, one might say, 'OK, I've reached the point where there are no more words or explanations left to be said, and I cannot reason with you anymore'. That is when that person might start using force, being stern. This is the approach to apply to overcome one's faulty, self-cherishing mind.

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

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