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## Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

21 June 2016

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation.  
*[meditation]*

Now 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 so for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teachings, and put them into practice well.

In our meditation session we attempted to familiarise our mind with love and compassion, which is essential if we are to fully develop these attitudes. Indeed these very positive states of mind are essential assets for personal wellbeing. Acknowledging this, we need to ensure that we are never separated from love and compassion, which of course is done by familiarising our mind with them again and again. To remind you, love is a state of mind that cannot bear to see others being deprived of happiness, and wishing them to be endowed in happiness; compassion is the state of mind of not being able to bear seeing others suffering, and thus wholeheartedly and sincerely wishing them to be free from every type of suffering.

When we understand this spontaneous wish for others to be happy and free from suffering, we can see that is the basis for a genuine concern for others, which contributes to their wellbeing. We know the value of love and compassion when others express genuine concern for us, wanting us to be happy and free from suffering. From our own experience we know that when we feel this great affection from others we respond in a very positive way; it makes us feel appreciated and very comfortable and trusting. If it brings such wellbeing to us, then we can understand that it will be the same for others as well. So when we really think about the value of love and compassion, we can see its essential value as the best companion that one could ever have.

The way to really familiarise our mind with love and compassion is by constantly investigating how best to further develop these states of mind. How does it develop and how is it expressed? How does love increase? How can compassion increase? Investigating in this way, we need to find the best conditions to increase the mind of love and compassion within ourselves. How is it received by others? How does it make oneself feel? The more we investigate along these lines, the more we will see the core value of love and compassion, and the more we will be inclined to embrace and develop it further.

The reason why I emphasise these points again and again is so that we can all see the value of love and compassion. However the most important thing is to actually put it into practice. Indeed, for us who consider ourselves practitioners, there is no more important practice than

developing love and compassion, not to mention it being the essence of the Mahayana practice. If one wishes to subdue one's mind, there is no greater practice than acquainting one's mind with love and compassion. If one wishes to overcome delusions, to purify negativities and accumulate merit, there is no greater practice than developing love and compassion.

If you want your Dharma studies to serve as a means to subdue your own mind, then it essential to embrace the importance of developing love and compassion and treat it as your core practice. But if you treat the Dharma like a normal academic study for grades and qualifications, as a means to further increase pride, and a sense of competitiveness with others, to increase anger, jealousy, attachment and so forth, then you need not develop love and compassion. If one's Dharma study becomes a means to further increase the delusions, then rather than overcoming them, it completely defeats the real purpose of that Dharma study.

We need to really understand the crucial benefits of love and compassion – if there was no-one with love and compassion, then there would be no-one to provide help in times of real difficulty and strife. Indeed, the only person who does come to one's aid is someone who has a genuine concern for one's wellbeing, and thus genuine love and compassion. Those who lack love and compassion will not come to one's aid. So we can see how love and compassion serve as the basis for the wellbeing of all.

Of course I am not implying that you are not making any effort to develop love and compassion; I am just emphasising these points as a way to further encourage you, based on my own meagre attempts of putting this into practice myself. I am not claiming that I have developed any great realisation of love and compassion, but nevertheless I take it as the essence of my practice. On a daily basis, I spend significant time trying to develop these states of mind. For example, when doing the prayer of the Four Immeasurables in any practice, I spend some time thinking about each of these points, followed by developing a mind of superior intention, and then I try to really focus on that for a while.

I try to do my best to put these noble intentions into practice on a daily basis, and I see a definite benefit even from my meagre attempts. I find that it can really move my mind, which brings me great solace. I feel it is worthwhile to share this experience with you as a reminder. As someone who is getting on in years I am sharing the experiences and value I have gained from my practices over the years; although you might already be quite advanced and more skilled than me. It may well be the case where the students are more advanced than the teacher!

There are people who come up to me and say, "Oh, I want to be like you". These are just ordinary people who I don't normally associate with or are even people I know. I'd like to respond by saying, 'If you really want to be like me then you could try doing the practices that I do'.

The practice of love and compassion is not unique to Buddhism; indeed it is common to all religions and

universally embraced as being an essential quality. Every religion has the message of serving others, being good to others, and bringing benefit to others. All religions commend serving others, being kind, acting morally and so forth, in order to benefit others, make them happy, and release them from fear and suffering. While I am not sure if they would extend that notion to all living beings, it definitely applies to all humankind. Without love and compassion how could one ever bring about happiness for others, and generate the wish to remove their suffering? Because of their intention to benefit others, to bring them happiness and remove their suffering, we can see that love and compassion is definitely expressed and practised in other religions. As Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned, if one wishes to benefit others, one has to have the wish for others to be happy and free from suffering. So he is effectively saying that without wishing other's to be happy and be free from suffering, there is no way that one will generate the intention to benefit others. Thus, there is no way that one can truly benefit other sentient beings without generating unconditional love and compassion.

Therefore developing the mind of love and compassion is essential for benefiting others. In essence, we need to recognise that our most valuable inner asset is the basis for developing love and compassion. If one's love and compassion increases then one can be sure that one's practice is hitting the mark, and that one is deriving the essence from one's practice. As Lama Tsong Khapa also mentioned, the true sign of one's practice taking effect is when one notices that love and compassion is increasing in one's heart. Then delusions will decrease, and the mind becomes more subdued, and one generates stronger faith in the deities, one's guru and the buddhas, and thus the mind becomes more attuned to the Dharma. These are all clear signs of one's practice taking real effect.

### 3.2.1.3.2.3. Investigating the faults of the body

3.2.1.3.2.3.1. *The fault of not knowing contentment (cont.)*

3.2.1.3.2.3.1.2. **It is appropriate to meditate on non-attachment for the body.**

We can see that the advice given here specifically applies to the ordained community. Indeed, when Shantideva first gave this teaching it was to an assembly of ordained Sangha. So the very profound advice presented here is for ordained Sangha to put it into practice. The relevant lines of verse begin with:

**176cd. They who are independent from everything  
Do not experience a cessation of their  
perfection.**

The commentary on these two lines explains:

A person with less desire and with knowledge of contentment, who is independent from everything such as body or possessions, will not experience the cessation of the qualities of their perfections. It is impossible for them to lack the necessities of life.

This emphasises that when one practises less desire and has an understanding of contentment, then one actually experiences an unceasing abundance of the qualities of the perfections, wealth and so forth. By implication, those with strong desire and a lack of contentment will be deprived of real wellbeing, specifically they will be

deprived of a happy state of mind. This is really very direct advice.

If desire and attachment and a lack of contentment were to bring about an abundance of things, and wellbeing and enjoyment and a happy state of mind, then we would have to be the perfect example of that. But are we contented? Do we lack for nothing? Do we have an abundance of happiness and joy and perfections? In fact we are not experiencing any great sense of joy or happiness at all.

Indeed, as explained in the teachings, the more we crave, the more we want. The analogy presented in some teachings is it is like trying to scratch an itch; the more you scratch, the more you feel the itch. Likewise, when one lacks contentment and has a lot of desires, then that only brings more turmoil and dissatisfaction. The point being presented here is that those who have less desire and who practise contentment are much happier and joyous.

We can see that this is really relevant for ordained communities of monks and nuns. We can see that those who practise sincerely, such as Christian monks and nuns, definitely have less desire and a great deal of contentment. Apparently monks and nuns in some Christian orders have no personal belongings at all, not even a bank account, and they rely upon whatever the community has. They live a very simple life. I personally know a nun who used to live here.<sup>1</sup> She is a bit older than me and I used to see her in the past, although I haven't seen her for a while. She told me that she became a nun when she was seventeen years old, and then dedicated her life to service for others and caring for them. I was very inspired, and told her, 'You can feel totally confident that you have led a very, very good and admirable life'. We can see that when you put being contented and having less desire into practice, it does indeed bring a great sense of joy.

The Kadampa Mind Training teachings give these specific instructions. 'There are four conditions for arya beings to practise simplicity: less desire, knowing contentment, easy sustenance, and easy fulfilment'.

'The first is not to desire abundant and nice things for one's livelihood, and to abandon all wants.' This implies not having strong craving for, or attachment to, things in general, and one's belongings in particular. Again, this advice is being specifically directed to ordained Sangha.

'The second is to be content with bare necessities.' Knowing contentment means being content with the bare necessities.

'The third is to be sustained by meagre robes, bedding and food.' This refers to being happy with meagre belongings such as one's robes, begging bowl and other things of poor quality, and with what is just enough to sustain oneself.

'The fourth is to be satisfied with meagre alms, material gain and respected service.' The three previous points referred to sustenance in relation to actual things, like belongings and so forth. This specifically refers to being content with offerings and praise and service.

<sup>1</sup> Sr. Maeve O'Brien

This is a description by the Kadampa masters of how to be content with meagre belongings, and meagre sustenance, such as food and alms and service. The lay community can also learn from this advice. Through being content with the basic requirements for sustenance, life becomes much easier, and there are fewer disturbances in life. We can see that the more we need, the more hectic our life becomes, and that is because we are not content with just meagre sustenance. We want more and more things, and that brings more and more turmoil. These are very important points.

If one does not apply the antidote for overcoming desire, then the consequence is that desires will just increase more and more, to the point where they cannot be satiated. When one allows desire to run rampant then there is no fulfilment. The only outcome is to desire more and more, and thus one never finds an opportunity to feel contented and happy. So although these instructions are specifically for ordained Sangha, they can also be applied to the lay community.

The main advice is to practise contentment with one's life. Although you may not be able to practise to the extent of ordained Sangha, you can generate the mind 'I am quite content, and I am happy with what I have', and not aim for more than meeting one's basic needs. By practising in that way, even just a bit, one begins to feel quite grateful and content with what one has, or what one is earning. That brings a sense of ease and can reduce a lot of stress and anxiety. So this is a very worthwhile practice to implement.

The next verse under this heading reads:

**177. Therefore one should not give  
The physical desires a chance to increase.  
Not apprehending anything attractive  
Is a wholesome phenomenon.**

As the commentary explains

Therefore, since the desire that craves enjoyment for the sake of the body increases further and further if one does not rely on the antidote, one should not give craving for sense objects a chance. The non-apprehension of an attractive object to which the mind would be attached to is a wholesome phenomenon that is the supreme wealth.

This is similar to the advice in the Kadampa text, which mentions that the best wealth is to be content with what one has. Really, the essence of what is being presented here is that the very purpose of wealth is to be satisfied with it. Contentment is the supreme wealth. That is the point.

**3.2.1.3.2.3.2. The fault of being motionless**

The verses under this heading are:

**178. Its final conclusion is to separate,  
It is motionless but moves through the force of  
others.  
The impure body is terrible,  
Why hold on to it as your own?**

**179. Irrespective of whether one is alive or dead,  
What does this illusory machine do for me?  
What difference between it and a heap of earth?  
Alas, you do not eliminate pride.**

The commentary explains:

This body will reach the final conclusion of becoming ashes, at which point it ceases. It cannot move by itself but has to move through another, i.e., the thoughts. Since the physical aggregate of impure flesh, blood and so forth is the source for many terrible frightful dangers, why do you hold on to it as your own?

Since one even needs to experience the sufferings of the lower realms if one holds on to it as one's own, irrespective of whether one is dead or alive, what does this illusory machine of a body do for one? It does not have the slightest use. What difference is there between an immovable heap of earth and this body? Oh dear, since you cannot bear craving for the body, alas, why do you not eliminate the pride that is a smug mind arising in relation to the body? Abandon pride in all its aspects!

*The body will reach the final conclusion of becoming ashes* refers to the disintegration of the body into ashes when it is cremated, which is a reminder of death and impermanence. *It cannot move by itself but has to move through others*, refers to the importance of thoughts or the mind. Indeed the body cannot function without the mind.

Furthermore, *the physical aggregate of impure flesh, blood and so forth are the source of many terrible frightful dangers*. Pointing out the faults of the body like this reduces strong attachment to the body. So if this body is nothing more than just a combination of flesh and bone and so forth, and is the source of frightful sufferings, *why hold on to, or grasp at it?*

*Since one needs to experience the sufferings of the lower realms if one grasps on to it as one's own* refers to the fact that when one grasps at the body strongly, then that produces the sufferings of the lower realms. The implication of *whether one is dead or alive, what does this illusory machine of a body do for one?* is that ultimately the body is of no use. So *what difference is there between an immovable heap of earth and this body?*

Then as words of lamentation, the commentary says, *Oh dear, since you cannot bear craving for the body, alas, why do you not eliminate the pride that is a smug mind arising in relation to the body? Abandon pride in all its aspects!*

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3. The fault of being deluded**

This is subdivided into four

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3.1. Deluded with regard to what is good and what is harmful**

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3.2. Deluded with regard to what is high and what is low**

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3.3. Refuting arguments in this regard**

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3.4. Although craving for the body is the source for many faults, it needs to be protected to take the essence of the freedoms and endowments**

**3.2.1.3.2.3.3.1. Deluded with regard to what is good and what is harmful**

The verse relating to this reads:

**180. By following the advice of the body  
One accumulated needless suffering  
And generated attachment and anger.  
What to do with that which is like a piece of  
wood?**

The commentary explains:

Mind, by following the body's advice for admiration and praise, you accumulated many needless

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sufferings. Although supporting the body that generates much attachment and anger in relation to benefit and harm, since this body is like a piece of wood that cannot repay the kindness, what use is attachment to it? It is unsuitable.

The explanation in the commentary is presented as a dialogue with the mind. Saying that you – mind - put so much time and effort into sustaining and caring for this body but a lot of attachment and anger arises as a result. There is attachment to what seems conducive for the body, and anger or aversion to that which is not conducive. So in the process of trying to care for this body one engages in actions influenced by strong attachment and aversion or anger. Therefore, in caring for one's body one has accumulated a lot of negativities. But *the body itself is like a piece of wood*, meaning that having put so much effort into sustaining the body, what do we get in return?

This explanation is not hard to understand; the main point is for us to try to put it into practice.

Then the commentary explains:

Although one has supported it with enjoyments, it is suitable to be even the food for vultures and the like. Since it has no attachment or anger towards the benefit or harm it receives, why does one have attachment for it? It is unsuitable.

As clearly explained here, *although one has supported it with enjoyments* i.e. various types of sensual pleasures, in the end *it is only suitable as food fit for the vultures and the like*. This means that at the end, one's dead body is fit only for food for animals. Furthermore *it has no attachment or anger towards the benefit or harm*. The body itself does not express any attachment or aversion; it has no sentiments when it receives benefit or harm. So 'Mind, why do you have attachment and aversion? If the body has no sentiments when it is benefited or harmed why, mind, do you respond in that way?' This is a logical rhetorical dialogue with the mind to reduce attachment and desire.

When we actually contemplate these points and see their logic and reasoning then it can definitely help to reduce any strong attachment we have to our body. That is the significance of this point.

With the remaining time we will read Chapter 10 of *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* dedicating it to our friend Catherine Waters' mother, who passed away recently, and to others who have requested prayers.

We often pray for the kin of those associated with Tara Institute. Even though they don't come along themselves, parents of students are often very appreciative of the changes they see in their children since they have become Buddhists.

In the past I have given an elaborate explanation of how to visualise benefit for all sentient beings in general, and one's parents in particular. There are many whose parents may not be with us at this time, but there is definitely significant benefit in dedicating this practice to one's parents, and others who have requested prayers. Basically, to dedicate means to develop a strong wish for whatever aspirations one has to actually become true. So

the simplest way for us to generate the most positive aspirations is to recite the tenth chapter, and strongly wish for all these aspirations to be fulfilled exactly as intended.

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

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