
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 prayers, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice. *[meditation]*

Now generate the motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

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

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

It is essential that we regularly pay attention to the noble intention to benefit others, uphold this intention as most essential at all times, and not be separated from it. One should even resolve that 'I will not allow the noble intention to benefit others to ever degenerate; I will never allow my mind to be separated from this intention'. This approach would be most beneficial.

When we ensure we uphold this noble intention at all times, and make every attempt to strengthen and maintain it, that in itself becomes one way of fulfilling the purpose of studying this text on the bodhisattvas' deeds. The text presents profound ways of practising this noble intention and generating bodhicitta. If we can put time and effort into studying these profound instructions, it can actually help us generate this noble intention, maintain it, and provide a purpose for studying this text.

To adopt a practical approach to generating a virtuous mind, and as a means to accumulate extensive virtue, consider the example of saving money. If we took the initiative to save one dollar a day, by the end of the month we would definitely have saved thirty dollars. Think about accumulating a stock of virtues in the same practical way by undertaking small virtuous deeds daily. If we can ensure we put effort into accumulating *some* virtue daily, then after some time that will accumulate to become a great stock of virtuous merit.

The buddhas and great masters have given very practical advice as a means to accumulate virtues and shun negativity. The Buddha said: 'Don't neglect small virtues thinking that there is no benefit; don't adopt small misdeeds thinking that there is no harm'. One should not discard small deeds, good or bad. If we think 'Oh, that's such a small positive deed there's no point adopting it', or 'Oh, it's such a small negative deed there's no problem adopting it', then we are disregarding the power of good deeds, and the gravity of negative deeds.

An analogy presented by the Buddha is drops of water filling a container; where one drop at a time will fill even a large container. This analogy reinforces the point that the small virtues we accumulate can become great virtue in the end. An analogy to illustrate how even small harms can cause great destruction is the way a tiny spark can cause a

huge fire. Even though a spark may be very small, when placed on a stack of hay it can ignite and very soon large flames can completely burn down a stack of hay as huge as a mountain. This is a practical example used to caution us not to underestimate the power of even small good deeds, or the destruction of small negative deeds.

This is how the incomparably kind Buddha gave advice so we can achieve these goals. If we pay attention we can see how significant and beneficial this approach is for us. I'm sharing these points to encourage you to put into practice whatever you have learned, beginning with adopting small virtues and shunning small misdeeds. The very purpose of studying the Dharma is to use it as a means to subdue our minds. If that is the purpose, then without practising the Dharma there is no way to subdue the mind.

When we actually pay attention and start practising what we know, we will definitely begin to see a significant change over time. Contemplating the great value of virtue, and the need to acquaint ourselves with virtue again and again, becomes a means to remind oneself to protect whatever virtuous positive mind one has at any cost. This is essential.

1.1. General meaning (cont.)

The commentary reads:

While various commentaries on this text present it to teach that hearers and self-liberators do not realise the selflessness of phenomena, this being a mistaken meaning of the text is clearly cognised and shall be explained.

As I have presented this previously, as a way to reflect on the meaning of this point, I'd like you to present the reason why it says here that it is a mistake to assert that *hearers and self-liberators do not realise the selflessness of phenomena*. In other words, why do hearers and self-liberators definitely need to realise the selflessness of phenomena? Majola, you can give an explanation.

Majola: One has to realise both - the selflessness of the person and the selflessness of phenomena - not only selflessness of person.

Geshe-la: But this doesn't relate to the main point. The text isn't referring to the selflessness of person; it's talking about the selflessness of phenomena. This is reflected at the start of the text. Damien, you can try to explain the reason? So, basically why do the hearers and self-liberators need to realise selflessness of phenomena? This is the main point.

Damien: Because they conceive the aggregates to be inherently existent it's not possible to realise the selflessness of the 'I'. They have to realise the selflessness of phenomena because if they adhere to conceiving that phenomena are inherently existent or truly existent, then they cannot possibly realise the selflessness of person.

Geshe-la: This doesn't relate to the main point being presented here either! I've explained many times previously why hearers and self-liberators definitely have to realise the selflessness of phenomena. Why is that so? This is the main point here. It is stated here in the commentary that other commentaries mistakenly present that the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* teaches that hearers and self-liberators do not realise the selflessness of phenomena, is mistaken. In other words, it is saying that they have to realise the selflessness of phenomena. Right?

Damien: Because they are liberated.

Geshe-la: It is not referring to those who have attained liberation; it is referring to hearers and self-realisers in general!

I have worked hard to explain these points to you in the past but you seem to have not retained any of the points that I have explained previously! I've mentioned many times – over 100 times – that grasping at the self of phenomena is a deluded obscuration. So is this clear; do you understand the point? It seems that you still haven't understood the point! Perhaps Denis would be better at explaining it!

Denis: In answer to the question I would say that the antidote to ignorance is the realisation of emptiness, which is the lack of inherent existence of self and phenomena.

Geshe-la: That is a much better explanation.

The grasping at the self of phenomena is a deluded obscuration, and in order to overcome it one has to realise the selflessness of phenomena. Without realising the selflessness of phenomena one cannot possibly overcome the deluded obscurations. So, according to the Prasangika, grasping at a truly existent self of phenomena is a deluded obscuration.

What is being presented in this phrase is that *while various commentaries on this text, i.e. the Bodhisattvacharyavatara, teach that hearers and self-liberators do not realise the selflessness of phenomena, this being a mistaken meaning of the text is clearly cognised. This means that it is clearly understood that this is mistaken, which will be explained.* It is clearly saying that hearers and self-liberators definitely have to realise the selflessness of phenomena.

The first line in the verse reads, *the Able One explained all these different branches for the purpose of wisdom.* The commentary explains:

These branches can refer merely to calm abiding which is explained in the eighth chapter, or it can refer to all the remaining perfections starting with generosity. There are these two systems, and although the first system is feasible from the point of view of the relation of the earlier and later chapters, here it is better to follow the second system.

So these branches can specifically refer to how to develop calm abiding (as explained in the eighth chapter), but it can also refer to all the other perfections. What is being presented here is that it is better to follow the system which relates it to all the other perfections. Prior to explaining the meaning of the whole verse, the commentary first explains what 'these branches' refers to.

Having said that, it is good to relate these branches to the other perfections such as generosity and so forth, this doubt is then raised:

The doubts with regards to, 'the branches of generosity and so forth were taught for the purpose of wisdom' are eliminated as follows.

The commentary continues:

In general generosity and the other perfections do not need to precede the realisation of suchness by way of listening and contemplation ...

This is quite clear. Then it further explains:

because although one needs to build up merit to realise emptiness, the practices of a bodhisattva, such as explained here, do not have to be preliminaries.

The commentary clearly says that in order to realise emptiness one definitely has to accumulate merit, but the perfections of generosity i.e. generosity accompanied with

bodhicitta, and so forth, do not have to be the specific preliminaries.

As further explained:

This is similar to the two modes of realising suchness through listening and contemplating as explained by the master Shantarakshita.

The commentary then goes on to explain that:

One also does not need them as preliminaries to generate a mind-transforming experience of emptiness, because then they would also have to precede other realisations such as an experience of impermanence. One also does not need them as a preliminary for the generation of superior insight realising emptiness from meditation, because although they do not first engage in the practices of a bodhisattva, hearers and self-liberators realise suchness in the way that was mentioned earlier.

Next a hypothetical doubt is presented:

If you say: They were taught for the purpose of wisdom, because the wisdom realising emptiness is the substantial cause for the dharmakaya, and the methods of generosity and the other perfections are the simultaneously acting conditions, and one needs the benefit of generosity and the other perfections to achieve the result of wisdom.

Although one does need these causes and conditions to obtain the *dharmakaya*, (a buddha's truth body) the hypothetical doubt raises the issue as to whether the branches of generosity and so forth were taught specifically for the purpose of wisdom for this reason.

The answer encapsulates why this not the case:

Answer: In that case one could also turn it around and say that wisdom was taught for the purpose of the other perfections.

Because the other perfections are also needed to achieve the *rupakaya*, (a buddha's form body) one could say that wisdom was taught for the purpose of the other perfections. When you turn it around it should also apply, but that is clearly not the case.

Having refuted the earlier hypothetical assertions that the branches of generosity etc. were taught for the purpose of wisdom, now the commentary explains the actual reason.

Thus, without the wisdom realising emptiness one cannot exhaust the seeds of either of the two obscurations, and although one does not need to be adorned with infinite merit to eliminate merely the seeds of the afflictive obscurations, one does need infinite merit to eliminate the seeds of the obscurations to knowledge. As this text is mainly from the point of view of eliminating the obscurations to knowledge it says, 'these branches are taught for the purpose of wisdom'.

The purpose of presenting wisdom here is because it serves as a means to overcome the obscurations to knowledge. In order for wisdom to become a means to eliminate the obscurations to knowledge, it definitely has to be backed by the other perfections based on bodhicitta. In this way we need the practices of the perfections of generosity, ethics, patience, and so forth.

While the realisation of emptiness is needed to overcome both the deluded obscurations as well as the obscurations to knowledge or omniscience, one does not need the backing of extensive merit such as the six perfections to overcome the deluded obscurations. The main emphasis presented here is

that the wisdom realising emptiness is not specifically the means to overcome the deluded obscurations, but rather to abandon the obscurations to omniscience. Therefore, the branches, i.e. the perfections of generosity and so forth, are definitely needed as a way to accumulate the extensive merit to overcome the obscuration to omniscience.

The deluded obscurations are, for example, grasping at the true existence of self and phenomena. The imprints of these the delusions, including these misconceptions of grasping to the self of person and phenomena, are said to be the obscurations to omniscience.

The Prasangika specifically explain that due to the imprints of the delusions one still has the appearance of true existence, and these mistaken appearances are actually the obscuration to omniscience.

Let's clarify the difference between deluded obscuration and obscuration to omniscience. With every delusion, such as attachment, there is a distinction between the seed of the delusion and the imprint of the delusion. The seed of delusion is defined as that which serves as a cause for a similar delusion to occur in the next instance. Given the definition of a seed, then for as long as one has the seed of attachment, that attachment will be perpetually generated until the seed of attachment is completely abandoned.

Although one has abandoned the seed of attachment, one still has the imprint of attachment. This is also true for all the other delusions, and it is the imprints of the delusions that cause the mistaken appearance of true existence. Even when one has abandoned the seeds of delusions, there's still an appearance of true existence, up until the point that one completely abandons the imprints of all delusions.

So according to the Prasangika view, all sentient beings' sense faculties will necessarily have this mistaken appearance of true existence because, by definition, a sentient being is a being who has not overcome the imprints of the delusions.

An illustration of when the sense faculty itself is influenced by a mistaken perception of true existence, and how this causes a mistaken appearance, can be seen on a grosser level with the mind of sleep. During sleep we have what is called the sleep consciousness to which all dreams appear. In the dream state we see horses, elephants, houses etc. which are mistaken appearances because they do not really exist. In dreams they appear to the mind as actually existing, but in fact they do not really exist as they appear; they are non-existent.

In syllogisms, the example used for things lacking true existence is that they are like a dream. Things in a dream appear to be real but they actually don't exist. Likewise, truly existent phenomena do not exist.

It is said that it is only a buddha's mind that does not have any mistaken appearances, because a buddha has completely eliminated the very imprints of all the delusions. Thus, for a buddha's mind there is no mistaken appearance whatsoever. For example, an arhat who has overcome the seeds of delusions still has mistaken appearance of true existence, because they have not yet abandoned the imprints of the delusions. So until one achieves buddhahood one has not overcome the mistaken appearances.

Further, the commentary explains that:

It is master Nagarjuna's position that true-grasping is an afflictive obscuration, and this master asserts the same.

It is just as explained.

Next there is a presentation further explaining why calm abiding, in this context, is also a specific prerequisite (or means) to develop special insight.

The commentary explains:

From the *Sutra Perfectly Condensing Dharma*:

If one places the mind in equipoise one knows the absolute, just the way it is.

Also from the *Compendium of Trainings*:

The Able One said, 'in equipoise one knows the absolute, just the way it is'.

From these quotations we can see the specific reference that the way of obtaining special insight in order to know existence *just the way it is*, is dependent on having first developed calm abiding. So we can see why there are commentaries that take this literally and thus don't refer to the other perfections as a cause for developing special insight.

The commentary concludes:

'Equipoise' refers to calm abiding, and 'knowing just as it is' refers to superior insight, and therefore the perfection of meditative stabilisation explained in the eighth chapter is a causal branch for the wisdom explained here.

1.2. Auxiliary meaning

In the text, verse one comes under this heading:

1. *The Able One explained all these branches
For the purpose of wisdom;
Therefore, those who wish to pacify suffering
Need to generate wisdom.*

The commentary explains:

As one wishes to pacify the sufferings of cyclic existence of self and others, one needs to generate the wisdom realising selflessness. The earlier explained branches of generosity and the other perfections, that is, all the collection of causes, was taught by the Buddha for the purpose of generating the wisdom realising emptiness.

In the first sentence, the word 'selflessness' relates specifically to the selflessness of phenomena. Of course it also covers the selflessness of person, but here it specifically relates to the selflessness of phenomena, as explained previously. When one gets the main point, from then on one can relate to the rest of the explanations in the text and derive the essential meaning. That's the way to study the text; first understand the main point then the rest will follow logically.

According to this system, the wisdom realising selflessness relates to the wisdom realising emptiness. Thus, the selflessness mentioned here relates to the way grasping at an inherently existing self is the root cause for all the delusions and sufferings. Because it is the root cause of all delusions it is the root cause of all sufferings. Is this understood? So if *one wishes to pacify the sufferings of cyclic existence of self and others, one needs to definitely generate the wisdom realising selflessness. Why?* Because one needs to overcome grasping at an inherently existing self.

When the commentary refers to *the earlier explained branches of generosity*, it is referring to the earlier chapters e.g. chapter three and four onwards. In summary, the *branches of generosity and the other perfections* refers to all the *collections of causes, which was taught by the Buddha for the purpose of generating the wisdom realising emptiness.*

Having eliminated the presented doubts, one can now gain a clear understanding that while, in general, it is not necessary for the perfections of generosity and so forth to precede gaining the wisdom realising emptiness, they are presented first here, because the ultimate intent of this text is to generate the wisdom realising emptiness that serves as an antidote to the obscurations to omniscience.

We can see how the commentary meticulously presents the meaning of the first verse by providing a comprehensive and complete approach; first eliminating any doubts that may arise in understanding the point being presented here, followed by the actual explanation of the verse.

It is good for us to have gone through this process to uphold an accurate understanding of what is presented here. If we allow various personal doubts to surface then there's no end to it, but to eliminate specific doubts as means to get a clearer understanding of the meaning presented here is really good. The main point is thus emphasised: *As one wishes to pacify the sufferings of cyclic existence of self and others, one needs to generate the wisdom realising selflessness.* All these branches were explained by the Able One for the purpose of wisdom. So this is clear.

2. THE METHOD OF HOW TO GENERATE THE WISDOM REALISING SUCHNESS

This is subdivided into three:

- 2.1. The presentation of the two truths
- 2.2. Establishing that even just to attain liberation one needs to realise emptiness
- 2.3. Explaining extensively the reasoning that established emptiness

2.1. The presentation of the two truths

This has two subdivisions:

- 2.1.1. Actual
- 2.1.2. Refuting objections of the no-need and no ability regarding emptiness

Again we can see the meticulous way the text is presented with these headings to clarify the structure.

2.1.1. Actual

This is subdivided into three:

- 2.1.1.1. The division of the two truths
- 2.1.1.2. The definition of the two truths
- 2.1.1.3. Identifying the person who has understood both

2.1.1.1. THE DIVISION OF THE TWO TRUTHS

The first two lines of the next verse come under this heading:

*2ab. The illusory¹ and the ultimate
These are asserted as the two truths;*

The commentary reads:

The *Compendium of Trainings* quotes the *Sutra of the Meeting of Father and Son*,

The Tathagata comprehended thus the illusory and the ultimate and exhausted the possibilities for that to be known into illusory truth and ultimate truth.

Because the Tathagata sees perfectly in emptiness, knows perfectly in emptiness, manifests as well in emptiness, therefore he is called all-knowing transcendental wisdom.

As the commentary presents, *that to be known*, refers to objects of knowledge i.e. all existence, since whatever exists

has to necessarily be perceived by an awareness. That which is to be known is understood by the Tathagata, the all-knowing one, *as illusory truth and ultimate truth*. The Tathagata has, *exhausted the possibilities for that to be known*, meaning that he sees that there is no other way for something to exist than either as an illusory truth or an ultimate truth. There is no possibility of a third way of existence for objects of knowledge.

It further mentions, *because the Tathagata sees perfectly in emptiness, knows perfectly in emptiness, manifests well in emptiness, therefore he is called all-knowing transcendental wisdom*. The reason the Buddha is posited as omniscient or all-knowing is because he directly and simultaneously perceives the illusory truths and ultimate truths that encompass all existence or objects of knowledge. Only a buddhas' mind is able to perceive both truths directly and simultaneously at one time. So that's why a buddha is omniscient.

[A part missing from the translation of the commentary, which explains the meaning of these quotations, is inserted here.]

The commentary reads:

From the above quote *comprehended thus* indicates the basis for division of objects of knowledge. *Exhausted*, indicates the definite division into two truths. And because the Tathagata fully comprehends both truths, he is posited as *all-knowing*.

The quote says, *the Tathagata comprehended thus*, which indicates the basis of the division of objects of knowledge. This means that when objects of knowledge are divided, they are divided into two; *illusory truth and ultimate truth*. And the object of knowledge itself is the basis of the division of the two truths.

Thus, the explanations stating that the intention of the *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Deeds* is that ultimate truth is not an object of knowledge or that it cannot be known by any awareness are wrong explanations.

The meaning here is quite clear. Then it further explains:

The nature of the division is into a twofold division of illusory truth and ultimate truth.

An example of the two divisions of the two truths would be the aggregates and the person itself. The aggregates and person are examples of illusory truth and the lack of true existence of the aggregates and person are examples of ultimate truth.

It continues:

Although there can be different connotations to a division, here, it is to be of one nature but to be of a different isolate.

And explains:

As both have a nature, it is impossible for them not to be of one or different nature.²

Both illusory truth and ultimate truth *have a nature*, and because of this they have to be in relation to each other, they have to be either *of one* or of a *different nature*.

² Trans: There is a difference between saying *one nature* and *of one nature*. For two phenomena to be of one nature they need to have two different natures, or entities. The two truths are not only two different natures, but two clearly distinct mutually exclusive natures, which are yet of one nature.

Ed2: It is difficult to find an exact translation for the Tibetan term *ngo-wo*, translated as 'nature' in the commentary. Other translations use the word 'entity' rather than 'nature'.

¹ See the discussion of the use of this term in the Translator's Introduction to the commentary.

The commentary further explains:

If the subject is of different nature from the lack of true existence, then the faults outlined in the *Elucidations of the Thought* apply; such as that it would become truly existent. Moreover, if they are not different, then the faults explained there apply as well.

The aggregates, and the lack of true existence of the aggregates, for example, are of one nature.

The next point explains, *Moreover, if they are not different, then the faults explained there apply as well.* Using the example of the aggregates, if the aggregates and their lack of true existence were to be the same, to be one and not separate, then there is falsity there because each has distinct terms.

If we say 'one nature' it may sound like they are actually the same, but this is not saying that they are exactly one.

The commentary explains:

Therefore, they are of one nature but of different isolate, just like produced and impermanent.

The conclusion is that they are of one nature, *but of different isolates*, just like produced phenomena and impermanence.

This sheds light on *The Heart Sutra* when it says, 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form'. It is presenting exactly the same point; that they are of one nature but of different isolates. There are different terms for form and emptiness because they are different isolates, however they are of the same nature. That is why *The Heart Sutra* explains that form is emptiness and emptiness is form.

Likewise produced phenomena and impermanence. When you say something is produced, it also implies it is impermanent. When you say something is impermanent it also implies it is produced. Again, both are of the same nature, but are different isolates.

The commentary continues:

So, the basis for division, object of knowledge, is comprehensively divided into the two truths. The nature of the two divisions is that the meaning found by a nominal prime cognition is illusory truth, and the meaning found by an ultimate prime cognition is ultimate truth.

Before our next session please read a bit and try to go over the points I've mentioned this evening, because I will test you again in the next session.

The point of the presentation is that you start to accumulate understanding, so that when this is taught next time, it is readily accessible to you. If the earlier explanations have not sunk in, then it has not served its purpose.

A classic example of this is presented in the teachings with a saying 'Like a yeti catching marmots!' Apparently a yeti, which is an ape-like creature, attempts to catch and eat marmots. These small animals always look around, then hide under the ground as soon as something comes along. So when the yeti tries to catch marmots for its meal, it goes to the marmot nest and attempts to catch the young ones. After catching one, the yeti sits on it, but then gets up to catch another one. When it stands up the first one escapes. So the yeti keeps catching one marmot after another, but at the end, there is only one left. Let's hope this example doesn't apply to your retaining the meaning of the teachings, letting go of an earlier understanding each time a new one is presented. If

you employ mindfulness on the teaching, you will be able to remember the points.

Let it also not be like the example of a leaky vase as presented in the Lam Rim teachings, where when you have a leak in the vase, then no matter how much water you put in, it just goes out the hole.

Another example from the Lam Rim is to be free from faults like a stained or dirty vase. If you put a nice substance like delicious food into the vase it will be contaminated by the stains. This analogy illustrates how one should be free from the fault of stained motivations, which are basically negative intentions. This means that while one is receiving the Dharma, if one's motivation is stained, or one has negative intentions, then although the presentation is a cause for liberation and enlightenment, because of the stained intentions it misconstrues that information and uses it in an incorrect way, and so actually prevents it from becoming a cause for liberation and enlightenment; that is because it is stained by negative intentions.

A third example from the Lam Rim is not to be like an upturned vase. You cannot pour anything into an upside-down vase. As much as you pour, nothing goes in. This is analogous to being at a teaching place but with one's mind completely distracted outwardly. When in meditation, the mind is going on the market, on friends, on home, on many things. The mind completely goes outside. Completely empty; not emptiness but just empty like the leaky and upturned vase with nothing inside. The main point again is to read the text and prepare yourselves.

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

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