

# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavata*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

19 July 2016

As usual let us spend some time in our meditation practice. [meditation]

It would be good to generate a motivation for receiving the teachings. As everyone already has some understanding of the bodhicitta attitude, reaffirm the altruistic thought of bodhicitta: In order to benefit all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment myself, and so for that purpose I will listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

It is very important that we put into practice what we already understand. We are familiar with generating such positive motivations, and we have familiarised our mind with the bodhicitta attitude. When we put it into practice regularly, then we start to become more and more accustomed to it, which is how we begin to embody that sentiment.

Conversely we could put that understanding aside thinking, "Oh, I've understood that" or "I've already learned that so now I want to learn something different, perhaps something more profound". Of course, there's nothing wrong with practising something new and become familiar with it. However, putting aside what we already know and jumping into something completely new, thinking that it is more profound, is a shortcoming. Often when people hastily engage in something more advanced they are not able to maintain or keep up with it. Then, after a while they become discouraged and put all practice aside! This shows the danger of neglecting what one already knows well, while trying to achieve something grander.

We can gain an understanding of the process of how to progress in Dharma practice from the very title *Lam Rim*, which means the *graduated path* to enlightenment. What does graduated mean? It implies actualising the path to enlightenment step by step.

The way to approach personal practice is encapsulated in advice that the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey-la once gave to Jampa Ignyen (Dr Ian Coghlan) when Geshe-la was in Sydney. Jampa Ignyen had apparently approached Geshe-la for some advice about practising calm abiding. As Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey mentioned to me later, his advice to Jampa Ignyen was "Well, it is good to endeavour to understand and practise something that you are not yet familiar with. However wouldn't it be better to actually work on maintaining what you already have?" Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey-la was referring to his ordination vows. Others, having heard that advice later, commented that it was very relevant and practical advice that was right to the point. Venerable Fedor also mentioned that this was really good advice. Indeed, upholding vows and commitments is the very foundation of one's practice and an integral part of it.

## 2.1.1.2. DEFINITION OF THE TWO TRUTHS

It is essential to understand the two truths, as they are the basis for understanding the entire structure of the teachings. This is the second time that we have covered the ninth chapter in our study group. This is the second time we have studied the entire *Bodhisattvacharyavata* teaching. As you will recall, I taught chapters one to eight on Wednesday evenings.<sup>1</sup> Then, because it was perhaps a little too advanced for some newer students who might be coming on Wednesday evenings, the ninth and tenth chapters were presented to study group.<sup>2</sup> When we think about it, we have been incredibly fortunate to have been able to go through this incredible and profound text, not just once, but twice! I feel that having the opportunity to present and cover such a profound text serves my purpose for being here. Likewise, being able to listen to the teachings and study the text is your great fortune.

We covered the two truths when we studied the *Madhyamaka*<sup>3</sup>, Middle Way text, and we have also mentioned them in the previous nine chapters. For those who are studying this text for the second time, it is good to recall the explanations that are given in the *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way) text and compare that with the explanations given here in the *Bodhisattvacharyavata*.

You will also recall that the entire text of the *Four Hundred Verses*, which presents the intent of Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*, explains the stages of the path based upon the two truths.<sup>4</sup> The first eight chapters are on the stages of the path based on conventional or illusory truth and the ninth and subsequent chapters are an explanation on the stages of the path based on ultimate truth. The *Madhyamaka*, which also presents the intent of the *Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*, explains the *extensive teachings* based on illusory truth, and the *profound teachings* based on ultimate truth.

It is good to have an understanding of the unique structure of the entire path leading to enlightenment:

- The **basis** is the two truths,
- The **path** encompasses method and wisdom and
- The **result** is the two bodies of a buddha.

Through gaining an understanding of the two truths, and by cultivating method and wisdom, one obtains the two resultant bodies of a buddha. The entire structure can also be understood on the basis of the Four Noble Truths. I feel that studying these texts to gain this understanding is one of the best ways to accumulate extensive merit and purify negative karma. Indeed, what better way would there be for accumulating merit and purifying negative karma than contemplating the entire path to enlightenment? It will also leave an exceptionally profound imprint on one's mental continuum.

As mentioned earlier, the definitions and explanation of the two truths are presented in the *Madhyamaka* in detail. You already have the transcripts and it's good to revise them and familiarise yourself with the presentations there. Incorporating the explanation from the

<sup>1</sup> These teachings finished in June 1996

<sup>2</sup> In 2005

<sup>3</sup> Presented from 2002 to 2004

<sup>4</sup> Presented in 2006 and 2007

*Madhyamaka* into the explanation presented here is a good way to gain a deeper understanding of these two truths. It is incredibly meaningful to gain a good understanding of the two for use in one's own practice and meditation, and for explaining and presenting it to others.

#### 2.1.1.2. DEFINITION OF THE TWO TRUTHS

The definition of the two truths in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, is presented in the second two lines of verse 2.

*2cd. The ultimate is not an object engaged by awareness, Awareness is stated to be illusory.*

Before we go further, how would you interpret these lines? Is it sufficient to take the meaning literally as presented, *the ultimate is not an object engaged by awareness, awareness is stated to be illusory*, or is there another interpretation?

*Student:* It's saying that the ultimate is not an object of a mistaken awareness. This refers to the normal dualistic awareness which cannot engage in ultimate reality.

That was a good and accurate explanation. To make it clearer, you need to add that a mistaken dualistic awareness is not able to directly perceive the ultimate.

If we were to take these lines *the ultimate is not an object engaged by awareness, and awareness is stated to be illusory* literally, then it would sound as if the ultimate cannot be engaged by any awareness, because awareness itself is illusory. So interpreting the meaning literally is incorrect.

The explanation of the two truths is covered in two parts:

2.1.1.2.1. The refutation of the school of others

2.1.1.2.2 The presentation of our school

##### 2.1.1.2.1 The refutation of the school of others

This refutation of the other schools is quite clear:

Opponents such as the Red Ones from Toelung, using the first line "the ultimate is not an object engaged by awareness" as a statement, and the later line as a reason, have asserted that ultimate truth is unsuitable to be the object of conceptual or non-conceptual consciousness, because if it is awareness of the object of awareness, then there is a pervasion that this object is illusory truth, as shown in the lower lines. This is completely unsuitable, because if one accepts the non-existence of awareness in the meditative equipoise of a superior, then one supports the texts of *Those Putting Themselves Afar*.<sup>5</sup> They posit that while there is consciousness up to the point of death, the continuity is severed upon death, and you would accept likewise that while there is awareness up to and including the last moment of the path of preparation, that it does not exist while in meditative equipoise on the mode of abiding.

Further, if one does not accept a directly cognised meaning, an object of knowledge that can purify stains, then the elimination of stains becomes impossible, and one will become somebody that singularly or completely denies that a person can be posited as a buddha or bodhisattva.

If one accepts such a phenomenon, then to have ultimate truth as phenomenon but to not have an awareness that realises it, becomes a contradictory

illusory phenomenon. If one asserts that the ultimate is never comprehended, then, since the ultimate cannot comprehend itself, it has nothing that understands it, and thus becomes baseless. If it is like that, then what is the purpose of positing the division of the two truths?

Further, if the illusory is empty of being true, then there is nothing to harm the acceptance that the truth of emptiness is ultimate truth, but lacking that, illusory truth becomes truly existent.

From the *Refutation of Arguments*<sup>6</sup>:

If the mere lack of nature is reversed,  
Then it is established as existing in this very nature.

What is being refuted here is the misinterpretation of the lines *the ultimate is not the object of awareness, and awareness is illusory*. If it is understood to mean that because awareness itself is illusory the ultimate cannot be perceived, then that is completely wrong. These are actually the words of Lama Tsong Khapa, from notes that Gyaltsab Je made when he received teachings from Lama Tsong Khapa. So they are very profound.

It is good to read the text by yourselves, trying to derive an understanding by going through it slowly, reading it and re-reading it to familiarise yourself with it. If you always have to rely on someone else to explain the text to you, then that would deprive you of the opportunity to gain an understanding for yourself. Try not to be discouraged and daunted if you don't understand the meaning the first time you read it, because every time you read it you will get a deeper and more profound understanding. It is quite normal not to gain a complete understanding the first time you read a text. But if you read it many more times, each time you will gain a deeper understanding. This is the proper approach for studying a Dharma text.

Now we come to the actual presentation of our own system or school.

##### 2.1.1.2.2 The presentation of our school

The commentary reads:

The first line shows the definition of ultimate truth and the second line shows the definition of illusory truth.<sup>7</sup>

[Here the translator of the commentary has translated the Tibetan term *kun-dzob denpa* as illusory truth. The literal translation of the Tibetan words *kun-dzob* is all-obscuring or concealing and *denpa* is truth. I personally feel that the usual translation – conventional truth – does capture the intended meaning i.e. truth by mere convention but ultimately not true. However illusory or deceptive truth can also carry that meaning.]

The commentary continues:

Both the earlier and later awareness are dualistic awareness, and not mere awareness, which is from the point of view of the way of comprehension.

<sup>6</sup> Nagarjuna

<sup>7</sup> ed2: Here the translator of the commentary has translated the Tibetan term *kun-dzob denpa* as illusory truth. The literal translation of the Tibetan words *kun-dzob* is all-obscuring or concealing and *denpa* is truth. I personally feel that the usual translation – conventional truth – does capture the intended meaning i.e. truth by mere convention but ultimately not true. However illusory or deceptive truth can also carry that meaning.

Thus it has to be related like this: The examples, the lack of inherent existence of the person and the aggregates, exemplify ultimate truth, and the awareness that is a prime direct perception comprehending them does not engage in the object explicitly by way of them appearing in a dualistic manner but are known by the prime direct perception comprehending them.

This point, *both the earlier and later awareness are dualistic and not mere awareness, which is from the point of view of the way of comprehension*, is as explained previously.

Then the commentary gives the actual explanation of ultimate truth. Persons and the aggregates are illusory truths and *the lack of inherent existence of the person and the aggregates are examples that exemplify ultimate truth. As further presented here, the awareness that is a prime direct perception comprehending them does not engage in the object explicitly by way of them appearing in a dualistic manner but are known by the prime direct perception comprehending them.* Basically what is being explained here is that the lack of inherent existence of a person and the aggregates as perceived directly by an awareness without any dualistic appearance is ultimate truth.

So, the definition of **ultimate truth is: that which is realised in a non-dualistic manner by a direct valid cognisor that realises it directly.**

And the definition of **conventional truth is: that which is realised in a dualistic manner by a direct valid cognisor realising it directly.**

In the past I presented the differences between the definitions of conventional and ultimate truth as presented here in the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* and those that are presented in the *Madhyamaka*.<sup>8</sup>

According to the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, both ultimate truth and the conventional truth are presented as being directly perceived by an awareness, and the significant criterion for both conventional and ultimate truth is that they are cognised directly.

According to the *Madhyamakavatara* the definition of a conventional truth is: **the meaning found by valid cognisor engaged in a nominal analysis, as well as being a nominal cognisor with regard to the found meaning.**

The definition of ultimate truth is: **the meaning found by a valid cognisor engaged in ultimate analysis which becomes a valid cognisor engaged in ultimate analysis with regard to that object.**

So the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* is presenting a more general meaning of the two truths, but that explanation is not pervasive. Whereas the definition presented in the *Middle Way* text is more inclusive, as it includes all of the elements of the actual definition of conventional and ultimate truth.

As mentioned earlier, according to the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, the definition of conventional and ultimate truth is that they are both related to a direct perception, whereas the definition in the *Middle Way* text includes both conceptual and direct perceptions.

In order to understand the differences between the definitions and explanations it is good to refer to the teachings in the *Madhyamaka* text.<sup>9</sup>

Before I go onto the explanation of dualistic appearance perhaps Damien could explain what lack of dualistic appearance means.

*Damien:* Not having dualistic appearance means the object and the mind cognising the object are not one.

What about conventional appearance? Does that mind seeing the object and subject as being one have conventional appearance?

*Damien:* With all conventional appearances the object is seen as different to the mind.

The Tibetan term *nyi-nang-nup* basically means lacking dualistic appearance. There are three types of dualistic appearances:

1. The appearance of conventional or illusory truth
2. The appearance of true existence
3. The appearance of the subject and object as being distinct.

For an arya being in meditative equipoise it is said that all three types of dualistic appearances have completely ceased. In other words, the wisdom directly perceiving emptiness lacks all three types of dualistic appearances. Therefore, as I have explained many times, to the meditative equipoise directly realising emptiness the lack of a vase, for example, is the emptiness of the vase. The lack of a dualistic appearance of subject and object is actually the perception of ultimate truth or emptiness.

This reminds me of the time when Tara Institute was located in St Kilda and I was walking on the pier with Ven. Gyatso one day, someone came up to us and said that he was meditating on emptiness. He said, "Oh, I meditate on nothing. In my meditation I have nothing in mind". He also said, "That makes me feel very happy and very joyful". In fact, although nothingness is not actually emptiness, this would be similar to the state of where all dualistic appearance - i.e. conventional appearance, true appearance, and object and subject being distinct - has completely ceased, and only ultimate truth or emptiness is apparent to that awareness.

This is further explained in the commentary with a quote from the *Madhyamaka* text:

It is like stated in the *Introduction to the Middle Way*  
Mistaken identities such as hairs, etc. [6.29]  
Imagined due to defective faculties,

Due to the affliction of disease such as a high fever there is a *defective faculty* that perceives *hairs* falling out and so forth. These defective faculties are an example of something that is false and not actually existent. The *Madhyamaka* verse continues:

Similarly to pure eyes seeing their nature  
One should know suchness here.

Just like the mistaken appearance of falling hairs and so forth do not occur to pure eyes that have not been affected by an illness, and which see the nature of the object unmistakably, similarly, the pure awareness (i.e.

<sup>8</sup> See teaching of 15 February 2005.  
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<sup>9</sup> See teaching of 10 June 2003.

the wisdom directly realising emptiness) of an arya being who is in meditative equipoise, sees suchness or the true nature of phenomena just as it is. Then, as Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains:

The examples of the person and the aggregates are called illusory truths because the awareness that is a prime direct perception realising it explicitly has to do so in a dualistic manner.

Here we see the meaning of the illusory truth actually being presented. This is exactly as explained earlier.

Thus the line *the ultimate is not an object engaged by awareness* presents the definition of ultimate truth, and the line *awareness is stated to be illusory* presents the definition of illusory truth.

The commentary explains that:

The examples of the person and the aggregates are called illusory truths because the awareness that is a prime direct perception realising it explicitly has to do so in a dualistic manner.

This is an explanation of illusory truth in accordance with the line *awareness is stated to be illusory*.

Then:

One should become acquainted with a more elaborate analysis of this from the commentary on the *Introduction to the Middle Way* composed by Je Rinpoche himself.

Therefore, the need to know thus in detail the detailed definitions of the two truths pervades also the two transcendental wisdoms of a buddha. This is so because although the transcendental wisdom of a buddha knowing suchness understands the world of multiplicity, and the transcendental understanding of the world of multiplicity understands suchness, the understanding of suchness is like water into water, and the understanding of the world of multiplicity is in a dualistic manner.

These explanations have been presented in the past.

What does *the wisdom of a buddha knowing suchness* and *that which understands the world of multiplicity* relate to?

*Student:* Is it the world of multiplicity conventional reality?

*Geshe-la:* And knowing suchness?

*Student:* Ultimate reality

That is indeed the case. *The wisdom of a buddha knowing suchness* relates to knowing ultimate truth, and *understanding the world of multiplicity* relates to conventional or illusory truth. So as explained here, a buddha's mind that knows suchness also understands the world of multiplicity, and the transcendental understanding of the world of multiplicity understands suchness. *The understanding of suchness is like water into water and the understanding of the world of multiplicity is in a dualistic manner.* Even though they understand that a buddha's awareness perceives the world of multiplicity and vice-versa, the way of understanding it is slightly different.

Next:

An argument by an opponent who does not understand the meaning of the commentary on the *Introduction to the Middle Way* at all: It is illogical to

assert that a buddha's transcendental wisdom appears to itself as there are only two ways for it to appear.

The argument here is that it is not possible for a buddha's awareness to appear to itself. If *a buddha's transcendental wisdom* were to *appear to itself* then *there are only two ways for it to appear* – either as being one with each other or separate. As explained here:

If it appears as different, then, since it is impossible for a buddha's transcendental wisdom to be mistaken with regards to the appearing object, one would need to accept that it is different from itself.

If the transcendental wisdom that appears to a buddha's mind were to be separate from the buddha's transcendental wisdom itself, then that would be absurd. That is because it implies that a buddha's transcendental wisdom is not a buddha's transcendental wisdom, because it is separate to itself.

Furthermore,

If it appears as water into water, then it would irrefutably be ultimate truth.

Gyaltsab Je's explanation, which serves as an answer, is:

A buddha's transcendental wisdom realises everything that is established as one entity with itself but is of different isolate on the basis of appearance, and regardless of whether it realises the name implicitly or not, it realises itself although not appearing to itself.

The explanation is that a buddha's *transcendental wisdom realises everything that is established as one entity with itself but is of different isolate* (similar to the aspects of being produced and impermanent) realised *on the basis of appearance. Regardless of whether it realises the name implicitly or not, it realises itself although not appearing to itself.*

What is being established is that a buddha's transcendental wisdom does appear to itself. But you cannot say that things appear implicitly to a buddha's mind, because whatever appears in the buddha's mind has to appear directly. There is no implicit appearance for a buddha's mind. Therefore it has to be established that all objects of knowledge, i.e. all existence, appears to a buddha's mind directly.

The way to establish this is that the transcendental wisdom i.e. a buddha's mind, appears directly to a buddha's transcendental wisdom or mind, however it appears as being separate. It appears directly but as being separate to the buddha's transcendental wisdom. But it's not actually separate because, as presented in the earlier argument, if it appears to be separate then it has to be separate. So, the conclusion is that while the Buddha's mind is not separate from itself, it does however appear as if it is separate. This is the point to be understood. For example, the characteristics of impermanence and production, although being of one nature, are different isolates and so they appear as being separate.

A further explanation to establish one's own system, is presented:

If it is the prime direct perception apprehending blue of an ordinary individual, then it does not appear to itself, as it is impossible for it to be a self-knowing direct perception.

In this system a *self-knowing direct perception* is not being accepted. It is established that when the colour blue appears, the impermanence and the characteristic of being produced and all of that also appear to that same perception.

As further explained:

It is also unsuitable to be posited as realising, on the basis of appearance, the other parts that are established as being of one entity with it. It is singularly an implicit realisation in dependence on the explicit realisation of blue, and one should know that such an implicit realisation is impossible for a buddha.

As mentioned previously, for a buddha there is no implicit realisation – everything is realised directly. In relation to the awareness perceiving blue: it is said that for an ordinary person the awareness perceiving blue perceives that blue directly, and the awareness itself indirectly. Of course you cannot say that a buddha perceives it indirectly, because there is no indirect or implicit realisation for a buddha.

These, of course, are points that I presented earlier in the *Madhyamaka* teachings, so it is good to refer to them.

### 2.1.1.3. IDENTIFYING A PERSON THAT HAS UNDERSTOOD BOTH

This is referring to both conventional or illusory truth and ultimate truth, and is sub-divided into two:

2.1.1.3.1. Divisions from the point of view of a person that wishes to understand the two truths

2.1.1.3.2. Explaining the difference of high and low awareness

#### 2.1.1.3.1. Divisions from the point of view of a person that wishes to understand the two truths

The lines relating to this are:

*3ab. Regarding this, two aspects of transitory beings are seen,  
Yogis and ordinary beings.*

Then the commentary reads:

A person who wishes to comprehend the two truths is a transitory being, i.e., a person labelled in dependence on the aggregates. This is again seen in two aspects: a yogi with the concentration of the union of calm abiding and special insight, who realises all phenomena as being empty of inherent existence, and ordinary beings asserting real existence. This is from the point of view of emphasis. Those that realise emptiness through listening and contemplating, and those whose minds have not been affected by a tenet are included in these classes.

As explained here *two aspects of transitory beings are seen. A person who wishes to comprehend the two truths is a transitory being.* In the Tibetan word *jig-ten*, *jig* is 'transitory'. While *ten* is translated here as 'being' the literal translation of '*ten*' is 'dependent'. Thus, a person is characterised as an entity who is *transitory* i.e. that changes from moment to moment, and is *dependent* upon the five aggregates.

Therefore the definition of a person is one who is labelled in dependence on the aggregates. And as further presented there are two different types of beings:

- *yogis, who, with the concentration of the union of calm abiding and special insight, realise all phenomena as being empty of inherent existence.*
- *ordinary beings are beings who assert real existence, where real refers to functionalities, and existence refers to those functionalities and so forth as existing truly, or having true existence. This includes those asserting real appearance, i.e. actually establishing true existence, such the lower schools – the Vaibhashika and so forth.*

As further explained in the commentary, *this is from the point of view of emphasis* on how it is defined or categorised: *those who realise emptiness through listening and contemplating, and those whose minds have not been affected by a tenet are included in these classes.*

#### 2.1.1.3.2. Explaining the difference of high and low awareness.

We can leave this for our next session.

In preparation, it is good to familiarise yourselves with the explanations in the commentary and complement that with the explanations in the *Madhyamakavatara*. It is good to refer to the notes you have and the transcripts of the *Madhyamaka* teachings. When you refer to both texts the explanations will help to enhance your understanding of the main meaning.

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

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