
Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual, we will generate a pure, positive motivation for receiving the teachings, one not stained by self-interest.

You are all aware of what the bodhicitta motivation entails. As I regularly mention, even if we do not have the capacity to fully comprehend the bodhicitta motivation, we can all understand how every sentient being does not wish for any kind of suffering and spontaneously wishes to achieve every happiness. So we can ensure that whatever we do, in terms of listening to teachings and putting them into practice, is for the purpose of benefiting other sentient beings – eliminating all their suffering and presenting them with the highest happiness.

It is important to reflect on the essential points encompassed by the term 'bodhicitta motivation'. A bodhisattva is defined as a noble being whose **mind** is imbued with the aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all living beings – the bodhicitta mind – and their actions are to engage in the six perfections. This is what characterises a bodhisattva's state of mind and their deeds.

Next, to get an overview of the entire path taken by a bodhisattva to achieve enlightenment, as I have often mentioned, the *basis* is the two truths [conventional and ultimate truth]. The *actual path* encompasses method and wisdom and the *result* encompasses the two main bodies of the Buddha [the rupakaya and the dharmakaya]. When one reflects on this overview of the path to enlightenment, it will have an effect on one's mind.

In the teachings, as Mahayana practitioners we begin our practice by generating the bodhicitta motivation. But we must really take to heart what this entails: we have to at least generate a similitude of the bodhicitta motivation in our mind, and our actions should also be a similitude of the six perfections. We should ensure that in our everyday actions we engage in a similitude of the six perfections – generosity, morality, patience, joyous effort, meditation and wisdom. If we assume that we are a Mahayana practitioner and act otherwise, then we are not getting the essence of these points.

This is really important. Normally, we might say, "Oh, but I have a very busy life", but we can, in fact, reflect on these points wherever we may be, and whatever we are doing. And when we have time for practice, we need to bring these points to mind. As I share with you regularly, if you spend some time reflecting on this, and try to take it to heart and implement it in your practice, you will definitely get the benefit. When the benefits start to dawn upon you, this will help transform and subdue your mind. Otherwise, we will be practitioners in name only.

As mentioned earlier, the path encompasses the two collections of method and wisdom. Accumulating merit is said to be the supreme method, and the supreme means

to accumulate merit is the generation of bodhicitta. Without bodhicitta, one cannot possibly attain one of the two results of the path – the rupakaya or form-body of a buddha, and the dharmakaya or truth-body of a buddha. The substantial cause for attaining a buddha's form-body is generating bodhicitta, and then further developing and maintaining that. The cause to achieve the dharmakaya or the truth-body of a buddha is gaining the supreme wisdom, the wisdom realising emptiness. Therefore, the study and recollection of emptiness is essential to achieve our goal of enlightenment, which is encompassed in these two bodies of a buddha - the form-body and the truth-body.

We normally say, "Yes, I aspire to achieve enlightenment", but what does it actually entail? What is the specific method and wisdom that one has to actually cultivate and generate? When we relate to the teachings in this way, we can see that it is a systematic, logical and reasonable approach to achieving the goal of enlightenment. And the teachings are presented in this way by none other than the incomparably kind and compassionate Buddha. Seeing how the teachings of the Buddha are presented can actually move our mind. When we see the real value of the teachings and how they are presented in such a systematic and approachable way, this can help us to be inspired and to generate strong admiration and faith in the Buddha and his teachings.

When we engage in the teachings in this way, with this understanding, it helps us to rapidly increase our understanding of the Dharma, and our intelligence and wisdom also increases.

Did you understand the explanation of Verse 44 from last week's session? Specifically the point that the first two lines state the proposition, and the second two lines state the reason. Was that clear to you?

44 *If the root of the teachings is the essential
bhikhu,
Even the essential bhikhu is difficult to abide.
The mind endowed with an object,
Has difficulty even to abide beyond sorrow.*

[Some students respond to Geshe-la] What you are referring to is what was mentioned in the explanation of how the monks and arhats serve as the essence of the Buddha's teachings. Right? However, I'm referring to this particular point that the first two lines serve as a proposition and the second two lines state the reason.

Without going through too much further elaboration, we'll just look at this syllogism: Take the subject, 'a hearer arhat as you assert' – it would be difficult to establish them as an ultimate bhikhu who is the essence of the Buddha's teachings, because their minds still possess grasping at true existence, and thus have difficulty in abiding beyond sorrow.

Thus the hearers, who are proponents of the **Hinayana** tenets, assert that one does not need to gain the realisation of emptiness in order to become an arhat. That is their assertion. The **Mahayana** refute that assertion by saying: "While you [Hinayanas] may accept arhats as being the essence of the Buddha's teachings, if they were to be devoid of having the wisdom realising emptiness, then it would be impossible to establish them as the

essence of the Buddha's teachings, because without that realisation of emptiness they could not possibly go beyond sorrow and achieve liberation".

Basically the proponents of the two lower schools, the **Vaibhashika** and the **Sautrantika** assert that by gaining the realisation of the lack of a self-sufficient and substantially existent person and further meditating on it, one will attain liberation. Thus they assert that one does not need to have the realization of emptiness to become an arhat.

The **Prasangika** say that you cannot become an arhat without the realisation of emptiness. That is because one cannot overcome the grasping at an inherently existent self by merely abandoning grasping at a self-sufficient substantially existent self. Thus, they say that while the mind still possesses grasping at true existence, it is difficult to establish a true or ultimate bhikhu, i.e. an arya being, who has the direct realisation of emptiness.

In fact all the schools below the Prasangika assert that one need not gain the realisation of emptiness of phenomena to become an arhat. They only assert that the realisation of the selflessness of the person is sufficient to become an arhat. According to the **Mind Only** and **Svatantrika-Madhyamika** schools, grasping at true existence is the obscuration to omniscience, and not an afflicted obscuration. It is only the **Prasangika-Madhyamika** who assert that grasping at true existence is an afflicted obscuration, and that in order to overcome the delusions at the very root and become an arhat, one has to realise the selflessness of persons as well as phenomena. This is why, as mentioned previously, the Prasangika assert that whoever has the realisation of emptiness necessarily has to be a proponent of the Prasangika tenets.

There are said to be eight unique presentations of the **Prasangika** system; one of them is the assertion that grasping at true existence is an afflicted obscuration. Another unique presentation is that if one is an arya or superior being then one necessarily has to have the realisation of emptiness.

Following that point, we went through refuting the lower schools' assertion that one will gain liberation by merely meditating on the path of the sixteen aspects of the four noble truths. The Prasangikas' refutation led to the explanation that there are both subtle and gross aspects of the four noble truths; I wonder if you understood that point?

There is a distinction between the gross and subtle aspects of the four noble truths. These were quite clearly presented previously.¹ For example, with respect to the second noble truth - the truth of origination - the craving imbued by the transitory collection of grasping at a truly or inherently existent self is the *subtle truth of origination*. And the *gross truth of origination* is the craving imbued by the grasping at a self-sufficient and substantially existent person.

With respect to the first noble truth - the truth of suffering - the contaminated aggregates obtained through grasping at an inherently existent self or person are the *subtle truth of suffering*. Whereas the contaminated aggregates

obtained through the view that holds onto a self-sufficient, substantially existent person is the *gross truth of suffering*.

Regarding the third noble truth - the truth of cessation - the *gross truth of cessation* is gaining the understanding of the lack of a self-sufficient, substantially existent person, and further meditating on that to eventually obtain a cessation of the manifest level of the delusions. Realising the emptiness, or the lack of inherent existence of the nature of the mind, and further meditating on it and perfecting that realisation to obtain the cessation of completely abandoning grasping at true existence, is the *subtle truth of cessation*.

Similarly, with the fourth noble truth - the truth of the path - the realisation of the lack of a self-sufficient, substantially existent person is the *gross truth of the path*. Whereas gaining the realisation of the lack of an inherently existent self or person is the *subtle truth of the path*.

As explained earlier, with respect to impermanence, which is the first aspect of the truth of suffering, all schools make no distinction between subtlety and grossness. It is not as if the Prasangika assertion of impermanence is more subtle than the lower schools. There is no such distinction, because impermanence is accepted by all schools as being the momentariness of all functional phenomena, and this is the subtlest level of impermanence. Momentariness is the definition of impermanence that is asserted by all schools.

Also, with the second aspect of the truth of suffering, there is no distinction of subtlety and grossness. Regarding emptiness, the person being empty of self-sufficient, substantial existence is gross emptiness, whereas the person being empty of inherent existent is subtle emptiness.

All the remaining aspects of the four noble truths can be understood in the same way. When one understands the four aspects of the truth of suffering, then that can be related to the four aspects of the truth of origination, four aspects of the truth of cessation, and the four aspects of the truth of the path. They are all similar.

From this presentation, one can also understand that the Prasangika and lower schools differ in their distinction between the subtlety and gross understanding of the twelve interdependent links.

2.2.2.1. ESTABLISHING THAT ONLY THE WISDOM REALISING EMPTINESS IS THE PATH TO LIBERATION FROM EXISTENCE

2.2.2.1.2. Establishing it with logic

2.2.2.1.2.2. Establishing it with shared reason

2.2.2.1.2.2.3. Refuting the answer to this (cont.)

Following from our last session, we are now on the second verse under the same heading:

47. *Craving arises from the condition of feeling,
And they have feeling;
It abides for some whose
Mind is endowed with an object.*

As the commentary explains:

A person who has not realised emptiness has not abandoned in the slightest the ignorance grasping at the true existence of feeling, and through the condition of feeling, such a person would generate

¹ See the teaching of 23 July 2002.

craving for not being separated from happiness and wish to be separated from suffering. Because we posit that the arhats have the grasping at inherent existence of feeling, then craving is existing in the continuum. For as long as the mind that possesses the object that is perceived as truly existent is manifest in the continuum of the person, for that long it is impossible to stop the manifest craving that is induced by it.

As explained clearly in the commentary, the *person who has not realised emptiness* implies someone who has not overcome the grasping to true existence. Such an individual *has not abandoned in the slightest the ignorance grasping at true existence of feeling*. As I have explained previously, this is something we can understand from our own experience. For as long as we grasp at a feeling, then due to that grasping we will grasp at the feeling of happiness and crave pleasurable sensations, and not want to be separated from pleasure. We will also crave to be free from unpleasant feelings or suffering. This is something we can all naturally relate to. If we strongly grasp at feeling, we will naturally want to grasp at happy or pleasurable feelings, and not want to experience any unpleasant feelings or suffering.

It is also quite clear here that *because we posit that the arhats have grasping at inherent existence or feeling, then craving exists in the continuum*. Again, as mentioned previously, the **Prasangikas** are responding to the lower schools by saying: "Because what you call an arhat has grasping at the inherent existence of feeling, a craving will definitely exist in their continuum". The reasoning behind this assertion is that, *for as long as the mind that possesses an object, i.e. perceiving the object as truly existent, manifest in the continuum, it will be impossible to stop the manifest craving induced by that grasping at inherent existence*. This is quite clear.

2.2.2.1.2.2.4. *Showing that even those merely wishing to attain liberation need to meditate on emptiness.*

The verse relating to this heading reads:

48. *The mind lacking emptiness
Will arise again despite ceasing,
Like the absorption without recognition.
Thus meditate on emptiness.*

The commentary explains:

Although the manifest afflictions are temporarily stopped in a mind that is devoid of the realisation of the person and the aggregates as being the emptiness of being inherently established, they will again become manifest, just like in the case of the absorption without recognition.

Therefore, not only to attain omniscient consciousness, but also to attain the result of an arhat, or whichever result one wishes to attain, one should definitely desire to meditate on the emptiness that negates the subtle object of negation.

In the statement, *Although the manifest afflictions are temporarily stopped in a mind that is devoid of the realisation of the person and the aggregates*, both selflessness or emptiness, which is that the lack of inherent existence of the person and the aggregates are presented as what is to be realised.

Even while one is devoid of that realisation, the manifest afflictions may be stopped temporarily. It says here that

the manifest afflictions are temporarily stopped through meditating on the selflessness of the self-sufficient, substantially existent person. Through that meditation, one can overcome the manifest level of afflictions, which are temporarily stopped.

However, *they will again become manifest*: that is, the afflictions will become manifest, and the reason used here to establish that is the example, *just like in the case of absorption without recognition*. The *absorption without recognition* - or 'equipoise of no-discrimination' as some translate it - is a meditative state in which all the gross sensation in the meditator's mind is completely stopped. They have no gross conceptions based on gross sensation or feelings in their mind. All of that is completely stopped.

In that meditative state or absorption, all recognition or discrimination temporarily stops. Later, however, when the meditator comes out of that meditative state, all the gross sensations and concepts will resurface. That is because the meditator has not actually stopped recognition or discrimination altogether; they still have discrimination or recognition in their mental continuum. Thus, when they come out of that meditative state or absorption, discrimination will resurface. This illustrates how all of the manifest afflictions are only temporarily stopped because, just like in the case of the absorption without recognition, they can reoccur.

Therefore, not only to attain omniscient consciousness or the omniscient mind, but also even to attain the result of an arhat, or whichever result one wishes to attain, one should definitely desire or one has to meditate on the emptiness that negates the subtle object of negation. As specified here, the meditation on emptiness has to serve as a means to negate the subtle object of negation. This is not just any kind of negation, but the subtle object of negation.

According to the **Prasangika**, the subtle object of negation relates to both the person and the aggregates. Thus, the inherent existence of a person is the object of negation based on a person, and the inherent existence of the aggregates is the object of negation in relation to the basis of the aggregates. The Prasangika assert there is no coarseness and subtleness in relation to the selflessness of a person and the selflessness of phenomena. They do not assert a distinction between coarseness and subtleness in relation to the basis of imputation or the object itself, but they do in relation to the *mind* that realises or perceives the object.

All the **lower schools** below the Prasangika, on the other hand, assert both a coarse and subtle person and phenomena. The selflessness of a person is said to be coarse selflessness, whereas the selflessness of phenomena is said to be subtle selflessness. Only the **Prasangika** assert that there is no distinction between the two.

Now, when we say the object of negation has to be eliminated or refuted in order to gain an understanding of the emptiness of the person and aggregates, we need to first understand what is to be negated.

If a person were to exist inherently, how would they have to exist? If the aggregates were to exist inherently, how would they have to exist? As you already know, if a

person existed without depending on any other factors – such as aggregates or any other causes and conditions for their existence – that would mean the person exists inherently. Likewise, if the aggregates did not depend on any causes and conditions or other factors for their existence, then the aggregates would have to exist inherently. Since a person cannot possibly exist without depending on aggregates and other causes and conditions for their existence, a person therefore lacks inherent existence. This is also true for the aggregates.

The commentary continues to present this point:

Tseg Wang-juk Sengye and others interpret the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* as saying that hearers and self-liberators do not realise the selflessness of phenomena, and posit the fault of non-pervasion for inferring the result from the cause for the line, 'craving arises from the condition of feeling'. Regarding this, the sun of the earlier ones had not risen and it is advice unsuitable to arise collectively.

Master Shantideva posits the true-grasping at the person and phenomena as affliction. If one wishes to understand this topic extensively, then one should read the great commentary that was composed by Je Rinpoche himself on the *Introduction to the Middle Way*.

These points are quite easy to understand, as they have been presented earlier.

The commentary next presents this comment:

There now follows three verses starting with, 'If the words attributed to sutra' which attempt to show reasoning why the Mahayana sutras are the words of the Buddha. There is no occasion to see how they could come above the lines, 'If the root of the teachings is the essential bhikhu', and in addition, the *Great Commentary* states that they are not the words of the master Shantideva.

So the following three verses are said by the *Great Commentary* not to actually be *the words of Shantideva*. However, they are presented here as a supplement to the main text.

49. *If the words attributed to sutra
Are regarded as teachings of the Buddha,
Then why do you not regard most
Of the Mahayana in the same way as your
sutras?*

The commentary states:

However that may be, their meaning is: If the words that show the higher training of the mind belong to the sutras, those that show the training in morality belong to the Vinaya, and those that show the training in wisdom are not in contradiction to the Abhidharma and are posited as the words of the Buddha, then, as the Mahayana sutras show mostly the three trainings, why are they not accepted as the words of the Buddha?

As clearly presented here in the commentary, *if the words of the Buddha that show the higher training of the mind belong to the sutras, those that show the training in morality belong to the Vinaya ...* This explanation is based on the Tripitaka, or the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings. All of the teachings in the Tripitaka are words of the Buddha which belong to either the sutras, the Vinaya, or to the wisdom basket. The counter-argument by the **Prasangika** is that, as the bulk of the Mahayana teachings

fit into one of these three baskets, then why are they not accepted as the words of the Buddha? This implies that they should be.

The next verse reads:

50. *If because of only one
All become faulty,
Then why, through one concordant sutra,
Are not all teachings of the Conqueror?*

As the commentary explains:

If you assert all Mahayana sutras as faulty on the basis of the reason that there is one sutra on which you do not realise the complete definition that you posit to be the word of the Buddha, then why do you not assert all Mahayana sutras as the words of the conqueror when you see the definition that you posit to be the word of the Buddha complete on one Mahayana sutra?

If you assert all Mahayana sutras are faulty based on the reason that there is one sutra on which you do not realise the complete definition that you posit to be the word of the Buddha – in other words, if there is one Mahayana sutra that doesn't fit into this definition of the Tripitaka, or the Buddha's words, then this counter argument is presented.

... then why do you not assert all Mahayana sutras as the words of the conqueror when you see the definition that you posit to be the word of the Buddha complete on one Mahayana sutra? This implies that, in following your reasoning, it should be accepted as the words of the Buddha. The next counter-argument to that is:

Argument: If the extensive *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* and so forth were the word of the Buddha ...

The main difficulty they find in accepting the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* as the word of the Buddha is because of statements such as: "... there is no eye, no ear, no nose ..." and so forth, as in *The Heart Sutra*. They would see that as contradictory to Buddha's words. So it follows that:

... then Mahakashyapa should realise their subject, but he does not. Therefore they are not the word of the Buddha.

What the **Hearer** proponents are presenting is a meticulous argument, saying that the council of the seven prominent disciples of the Buddha who compiled the Buddha's words, (Mahakashyapa being one of the main disciples of the Buddha) should be able to understand the subject. Thus they are arguing that Mahakashyapa did not understand this subject, so how could it be the words of the Buddha?

The verse relating to that reads:

51. *The words are not comprehended
By the great Mahakashyapa and so forth.
Who would disregard them
Just because you do not realise them?*

As the commentary explains:

Answer: Who would disregard the extremely profound, that is asserted to be difficult to comprehend by Mahakashyapa and so forth, as the word of the Buddha because you do not comprehend it? That is unsuitable.

What is being thus explained here is that there are certain words that are extremely profound, such as those that relate specifically to the presentation of emptiness.

Because the nature of the presentation on emptiness is profound, it was *difficult to comprehend by Mahakashyapa and so forth*, meaning the other disciples. So they had difficulty accepting it as word of the Buddha because they did not comprehend it.

This is virtually saying that if it could not be comprehended by the great Mahakashyapa and so forth, how could it be understood by you? That would not be a suitable reason to say that it is not the words of the Buddha.

I was hoping that by the end of this year we could finish this chapter, but it seems like that might be quite difficult.

Once we have completed the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, my intention is to teach *Lamp of the Path*, by Atisha. This is a text I had a keen interest in studying when I was quite young and I really paid a lot of attention. Because I have a fair bit of familiarity with this text, I feel that it would be an appropriate text to teach.

His Holiness presented this teaching in Sydney, as you would recall. I have received it prior to that. His Holiness was using the commentary by Panchen Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsan and had mentioned that the lineage of this commentary is quite rare, quite an explanation based on the commentary as well.

The reason I am announcing the next teaching topic is so that you may start to collect some commentaries and translations and become familiar with them.

Since that text is the basis of all other Lam Rim teachings, going through it will be a good way to go over the main points of the Lam Rim teachings. It is considered the very root of all Lam Rim teachings – it is the main source.

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

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