

Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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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]*

As usual, let us set our motivation for receiving the teachings. It is important to generate a bodhicitta motivation as much as possible, even if it is at a very basic level, such as a contrived bodhicitta motivation. When a positive motivation is generated from both sides – from myself as the teacher and yourselves as the listeners – then through that combination of positive motivations we can definitely derive some benefit from our gathering.

As I usually remind you, it is important to be clear about our motivation in all our activities. Whether that activity is virtuous or not is dependent on the preceding intention or motivation. So it is really important to be mindful of that. Indeed, any activity or behaviour that we may adopt is preceded by an intention generated in our mind. Thus there is no activity that is not a consequence of such an intention. Therefore the teachings indicate that the mind is the forerunner of all activities; good or bad.

Trying to maintain a positive frame of mind at all times really helps to secure whatever activity we engage in as most meaningful and beneficial. As I mention regularly, it is not as if we can separate our actions from our state of mind, because there is no action that is not preceded by an intention in our mind.

I've related this story to you previously: one of the younger geshees once asked me, "How does one engage in meditation?" My response was, "by always maintaining a virtuous frame of mind". I emphasised that not being separated from a virtuous mind is my definition of meditation. Then the young geshe put his hands together and said, "Well, that was an unsurpassable personal instruction!"

In the past I've shared stories where I've responded to the queries of younger geshees who are teaching now, and who have many students themselves. For some reason they seem to be fond of having discussions with me, and I respond quite candidly to them. Sometimes I get carried away but I feel that sharing these stories can be relevant and helpful.

2.2. Establishing that even just to obtain Liberation one needs to recognise emptiness

2.2.2. Answer (cont.)

2.2.2.2. ESTABLISHING IT AS THE PATH TO THE NON-ABIDING NIRVANA¹

It is good to take note of the explanations here, because they are very meticulous and precise explanations of this topic. So if we pay attention, we can derive a good understanding.

The verse reads:

52. *For the sake of those suffering due to ignorance
They attain freedom from the extremes of
attachment and fear
And achieve an abiding in cyclic existence.
This is the fruit of emptiness.*

The commentary explains:

The attainment of the non-abiding nirvana definitely depends on the realisation of emptiness. That is because ordinary individuals are attached to the true existence of the aggregates and have fallen into the extreme of eternalism, where they circle in cyclic existence under the control of karma and afflictions. Hearers and self-liberators generate fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence, and have fallen into the extreme of nihilism, where they take the going beyond sorrow that has merely cut birth in existence as their main goal of attainment.

For the sake of the miserable sentient beings circling in cyclic existence due to the delusion that the self and the aggregates exist truly, superior bodhisattvas who are free from these two extremes have achieved an abiding in cyclic existence due to the power of their compassion. This is the fruit of realising emptiness, because if they were devoid of the realisation of emptiness, then although they may abide in cyclic existence, by experiencing true sufferings of cyclic existence, they would become weary and fall into the extreme of nihilism.

In essence, what is being presented here is the faults of being separated from the wisdom realising emptiness and great compassion. This is a precise presentation of, firstly, the faults or the disadvantages of lacking the wisdom realising emptiness, and secondly, lacking great compassion.

The disadvantages of not gaining the realisation of emptiness.

As explained in the commentary, *the attainment of non-abiding nirvana definitely depends on the realisation of emptiness*. That is because *ordinary beings are attached to the true existence of the aggregates and have fallen into the extreme of eternalism, and so are attached to the true existence of the person and the aggregates*.

This means that through grasping at a self of person and aggregates, ordinary beings fall into the extreme of eternalism, *where they circle in cyclic existence under the control of karma and afflictions*. So the consequence of grasping at truly existent persons and aggregates, and not overcoming that grasping by gaining the realisation of emptiness, is that ordinary individuals fall into the extreme of eternalism, and so circle in samsara.

As explained in the commentary, *ordinary individuals are attached to the true existence* and so forth. It is good to take this as a personal instruction by relating it to oneself. What does 'ordinary being' mean? Ordinary beings are those who are ignorant of grasping at a self. Thus, if one grasps at a truly existent self then one is an ordinary being. In order to take this as a personal instruction, we need to apply it to ourselves, rather than relating it to other individual beings. For as long as we have not exhausted previously created karmas, and continue to create new karma uncontrollably due to ignorance of grasping at true existence, then we will definitely be propelled into cyclic existence over and over again. This is what circling in cyclic existence means at a personal level.

¹ This heading, and the next one were introduced in the teaching of 20 September 2016.

The key factor that propels one into cyclic existence is, as mentioned here, falling *into the extreme of eternalism*. The extreme of eternalism is to be understood as holding onto the person and the aggregates as being truly or inherently existent. Of course this is not to say that one cannot accumulate good karmas and merit, but until and unless one has overcome grasping at true existence, and completely nullified it, whatever karma one creates will be just another cause to be reborn in cyclic existence.

Another way of putting it is that until one gains the wisdom realising emptiness, one cannot possibly overcome the root cause for circling in cyclic existence. And for as long as one is reborn in samsara due to ignorance, one will inevitably experience the various types of sufferings.

The fault of lacking great compassion

As the commentary explains, *hearers and self-liberators generate fear of the sufferings of cyclic existence, and have fallen into the extreme of nihilism where they take the going beyond sorrow, which has merely cut birth in existence, as their main goal of attainment*. The driving motivation of hearers and self-liberators on the Lower Vehicle or Hinayana path is wanting to be free from personal suffering. You can't blame them for that; we can relate to wanting to be free from suffering. In fact there is a great danger that we fall into their way of thinking. When we are really weary and fed-up with suffering it is very easy to be driven to just wanting to be free from suffering, and not give much thought to the welfare of all other sentient beings.

When the driving motivation is wanting to be free from personal suffering, then for as long as individuals are on the hearer and solitary-realiser paths, the underlying motivation will always be the dominant force that pushes them towards their goal of self-liberation. It is not as if hearers and solitary realisers - and arhats in particular - don't work for the welfare of other sentient beings, but it cannot be compared with the driving motivation of a bodhisattva, whose only wish is to achieve enlightenment for the sake of benefiting all sentient beings. So the driving force for bodhisattvas to attain enlightenment is to benefit all sentient beings; whereas the driving force for the hearers and solitary realisers is to attain liberation in order to be free from suffering. Thus, hearers and solitary realisers have fallen into the extreme of nihilism.

The commentary goes on to state *that hearers and solitary realisers have fallen into the extreme of nihilism where they take the going beyond sorrow, that has merely cut birth in existence, as their main goal of attainment for the sake of the miserable sentient beings circling in cyclic existence due to the delusion that the self and the aggregates exist truly, superior bodhisattvas who are free from these two extremes have achieved an abiding in cyclic existence due to the power of their compassion*. What one should note here is that all superior beings have equally severed the karma that projects one into cyclic existence, and whether they are a superior bodhisattva, superior hearer or solitary realiser, they will not newly create the projecting karma that propels one into cyclic existence by virtue of being an arya superior being.

Why are superior beings called superiors? Some explain it as being because they are superior to lower beings on the path, but that is a very limited understanding. In the context of the commentary, 'superior' has the connotation of being exalted. That which makes them superior is their state of mind. So the term 'superior' does not refer to the external appearance of a person, but rather to their state of mind. What makes

them a superior is that their mind is free from grasping at a self. Because they are free from the grasping at a truly existent self, they will never again create projecting karma, which is a cause to be reborn in cyclic existence. That is because they have gained the realisation of emptiness, and are thus free from being controlled by grasping at a self.

What motivates one to create the karma that projects one into cyclic existence again? It is grasping at a truly existent self, which uncontrollably motivates one to create karma. Then that karma, created through the influence of grasping at a self, becomes the karma that projects one into cyclic existence over and over.

When the reverse takes place, where one's mind takes control over the grasping at true existence, at that time grasping at true existence cannot overpower one's mind and influence it to create karma. That is when one has true control over one's mind. Thus the precise controlling factor is gaining the realisation of selflessness or emptiness. When one's mind is dominated by that wisdom realising emptiness, then that nullifies grasping at true existence, and thus the creation of karma that propels one into cyclic existence completely ceases. As the antidote, which is the correct understanding of emptiness, becomes stronger in one's mind, the opponent, which is self-grasping or grasping at a self, naturally becomes weaker and weaker.

The commentary states that *this is the fruit of realising emptiness, because if they were devoid of the realisation of emptiness, then they would abide in cyclic existence, experiencing the true suffering of cyclic existence*. If bodhisattvas were to abide in cyclic existence without the realisation of emptiness, then they also have to experience the true sufferings of samsara, just as we do. Any happiness we experience is only a temporary, fleeting pleasure, and not real happiness. Whereas the sufferings we experience are true suffering. So a bodhisattva without an understanding of emptiness would experience the true sufferings of cyclic existence and *become weary*, and that would influence them to *fall into the extreme of nihilism*. If they were weary about their own suffering, then that would cause them to lose interest in benefitting others, and they would strive only for self-liberation, and thus fall into the extreme of nihilism.

The happiness that we experience is not true happiness, because all happiness and pleasure that we experience in samsara is necessarily contaminated. Therefore, as the teachings explain, the samsaric happiness that we experience is necessarily one of the three sufferings, specifically the suffering of change.

We can relate to this with our own experience. When we are very cold we experience the first moment of being in the sun as being very pleasurable, and we experience happiness. But if we remain in that hot sun, very soon we start to feel very uncomfortable, and we want go back to the cold, which would then be experienced as pleasurable. But then that changes after a short time and we feel uncomfortable again. As explained in the teachings, the nature of what we perceive as happiness is actually contaminated happiness. The fact that happiness does not last is because it is contaminated.

2.2.2.3. THUS, ADVISING THAT IT IS SUITABLE FOR THOSE WISHING FOR LIBERATION TO MEDITATE ON EMPTINESS

The verse reads:

53. *Thus it is not valid
To repudiate the side of emptiness.
Therefore, free from doubt
Meditate on emptiness.*

As the commentary explains:

Thus, it is invalid to repudiate the side of emptiness, as it was explained earlier, because it will also be contradicted by the reasons explained below. Therefore, even those wishing to attain the enlightenment of the hearers and self-liberators should meditate on emptiness free from doubt. True-grasping is the affliction of ignorance that becomes the root of cyclic existence and without negating its grasped or apprehended object it is impossible to attain liberation.

If you recall, the proponents of the lower schools such as the Vaibhashikas and the Sautrantikas, say that there is no need for the realisation of emptiness. The commentary responds, saying that *it is invalid to repudiate the side of emptiness. As it was explained earlier, and because it will also be contradicted by the reasons explained below.* This indicates that further reasons will be presented to explain why it is necessary to meditate on emptiness.

The commentary says, *therefore even those wishing to attain the enlightenment of the hearers and self-liberators should meditate on emptiness free from doubt. True-grasping is the affliction of ignorance that becomes the root of cyclic existence, and without negating its grasped or apprehended object it is impossible to attain liberation.*

This reminds me of a debate in my early days when I was in Varanasi. During a debate session I quoted a few lines from the *Compendium of Knowledge* where it says, 'while there is no beginning to cyclic existence, the end can be seen when one realises emptiness'. The example that is given is that, 'although there is no beginning to a seed, the end of a seed can be seen when it is destroyed by fire'.

One of those attending the debate session was the late Geshe Lobsang Gyatso who was the founder of the School of Dialectics. He came up to me afterwards and said, "Oh, you really made a very good point in the debate", and then we had a further discussion about it.

The point is that what ends cyclic existence is seeing that the cause of cyclic existence is grasping at a truly existent self. Until one can see that this grasping can be destroyed, it is quite impossible to comprehend that there can be an end to cyclic existence. When one is able to negate grasping at a truly existent self, then it is possible to attain liberation and thus end cyclic existence.

Again, taking this as a personal instruction, what is being presented here is that grasping at a self is the root cause of cyclic existence. What that implies is that unless and until one overcomes self-grasping, one cannot possibly overcome the root cause of cyclic existence. Overcoming self-grasping refers to looking within oneself, and being able to identify the grasping at one's own self.

How do we go about holding this mistaken view? How does it manifest? How does that then become the cause for our own cyclic existence? When we are able to identify that grasping within ourselves, then it is like a doorway that opens the possibility for ending our own cyclic existence.

Otherwise, as in the analogy in the teachings, it would be like trying to look for the thief in the plains when they've actually run into the forest. If one knows that the thief has run into the forest then it would be really foolish to be looking around in the plains and trying to find the thief there, when in fact they've run into the forest. In other words it's the wrong place to look for the thief. Similarly we need to be identifying the self-grasping within ourselves!

Next is a presentation on afflictive obscurations and the obscurations to knowledge. The verse further explains the need to meditate on emptiness to attain liberation.

54. *Emptiness is the antidote against the darkness
Of afflictive and knowledge obscuration.
How can those wishing for quick omniscience
Not meditate on it?*

The commentary explains:

Since the wisdom realising emptiness is the antidote against the darkness of the afflictive obscurations and the obscurations to knowledge, how can those wishing to quickly attain omniscient transcendental consciousness, which is free from the two obscurations, not meditate on this emptiness? If one is separated from it, one will not even abandon the seed of the afflictive obscurations.

The seeds of the obscurations to knowledge are the final imprints of the afflictions, and the manifest obscurations to knowledge are the part that is the true appearance of functionalities and so forth. But to posit everything that appears as truly existent as the obscuration to knowledge is unsuitable.

First of all, as defined in the teachings, an obscuration is that which hinders the obtaining of either liberation or omniscience.

There are two types of obscuration:

1. Afflictive obscurations which are specific obscurations that hinder the attainment of liberation;
2. Obscurations to knowledge or omniscience, which hinder the attainment of omniscience or enlightenment.

All afflictions and their seeds lie within the category of **afflicted obscurations**. There are the afflictions themselves and the seeds of these afflictions, which have the potency to generate future afflictions. Both the seed of the afflictions and the afflictions themselves are afflicted obscurations.

The **obscurations to knowledge** or **omniscience** are the imprints of those seeds.

Therefore as the commentary explains, *since the wisdom realising emptiness is the antidote to the darkness of the afflictive obscurations and the obscurations to knowledge, how can those wishing to quickly attain omniscient transcendental consciousness that is free from the two obscurations not meditate on this emptiness? If one is separated from it, one will not abandon even the seeds of the afflictive obscurations.*

As explained further, *the seeds of the obscurations to knowledge are the final imprints of the afflictions.* As specifically mentioned here, the seeds of the obscurations to knowledge are the final imprints of the afflictions.

And the manifest obscurations to knowledge are the part that is the true appearance of functionalities and so forth. The appearance of true existence is said to be a manifest obscuration to knowledge. The seeds of the obscurations to knowledge are the final imprints of the afflictions, which are the cause of the appearance of true existence.

However as the commentary further mentions, positing *everything that appears as truly existent as an obscuration to knowledge is unsuitable*. This means that while true existence itself is an obscuration to knowledge, whatever appears as existing truly doesn't necessarily have to be an obscuration to knowledge. An example of an appearance of true existence that is not an obscuration to knowledge is the eye consciousness of an ordinary being. For the eye consciousness of an ordinary being, there is an appearance of true existence, but the eye consciousness itself is not posited as an obscuration to knowledge.

Thus, as explained, the final imprints of the afflictions are the **seeds of the obscurations to knowledge**, and due to the imprints the parts that make true existence appear to the mind are the **manifest obscurations to knowledge**.

If we take ourselves as an example, when we see a person or the colour blue, it appears to us as solidly existing from its own side. When someone walks in the door, they don't appear as being dependent on different parts, causes and conditions. Rather they appear as solid and existing from their own side; that is how it appears to our eye consciousness. That is the appearance of true existence.

The commentary continues with a summary of what has just been explained. It is presented first as an argument:

Summary

Argument: One should not meditate on emptiness as one is afraid of emptiness.

The opponent is saying, "I don't wish to meditate on emptiness, because it makes me afraid. Why should I meditate on emptiness if it makes me afraid?"

Of course we can't blame anyone for having this fear if they are not familiar with an understanding of emptiness. If one attempts to actually meditate on emptiness with only a partial or incorrect understanding of emptiness, then that can bring about the wrong conclusion that nothing exists. If one thinks that nothing exists, then one has a feeling of losing the sense of reality, which can cause strong fear to arise.

Without a proper understanding of emptiness there is the danger that one will fall into the extreme of nihilism. For example, if we were to take the words of the *Heart Sutra* literally - that 'there is no eye, no ear, no nose', and so forth - then we could start thinking, 'if I don't have any of my senses, then perhaps nothing exists'. If one fails to understand that the implicit meaning of 'no eye', 'no ear' and so forth, is that there's no inherently existent eyes, there's no inherently existent ear, and no inherently existent nose and so forth, and takes the words in the sutra literally, then one has come to the wrong understanding.

One should be able to immediately understand from this passage in the *Heart Sutra* that there is no inherently existent eye and so forth. That is what is meant by emptiness of eye - that it is empty of being an inherently existent eye. When we apply this understanding of emptiness to the entire *Heart Sutra*, then we can imagine how powerful and profound even one recitation of the *Heart Sutra* will be.

If we can develop our understanding of what emptiness really means, and take the time to contemplate it, then due to our acquaintance with the correct understanding of emptiness, we will definitely be suitable recipients for receiving the profound teachings on emptiness; if not in this life then in future lives. As suitable recipients of the profound teachings of emptiness, through hearing the teachings on emptiness we will be able to spontaneously

gain the realisation of emptiness. As explained in the *Madhyamakavatara*, the Middle Way teaching, 'Merely hearing the word 'emptiness' moves a suitable recipient to the point where the hair on their body stands on end spontaneously, and tears flow from their eyes uncontrollably'. That is an external sign that one is a suitable recipient for the profound teachings on emptiness.

As Lama Tsong Khapa mentions in his teachings on the *Madhyamakavatara*, 'even if these signs don't occur, someone who listens to the unmistakable teachings and instructions on emptiness from a qualified teacher, and then thinks about it and contemplates it again and again, can be a suitable recipient of the profound teachings of emptiness'. I've explained this many times previously. These are really important points to bear in mind. Being a suitable recipient of the teachings to the point of gaining a real and profound understanding of what emptiness means, is based on the acquaintance with emptiness that we develop now.

When I taught the *Madhyamakavatara*, the Middle Way teaching, there were some who commented that although they didn't really understand much of it, it moved them to tears. So I'll take that as a good sign. Indeed, the teachings on emptiness do really seem to move the minds of some people. When they hear these teachings their minds are soothed and become very calm. That is definitely a sign that emptiness has a positive effective for some fortunate individuals.

We will conclude the teaching here and with the remaining time we will recite the dedication chapter of the *Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, and dedicate it to Susanna's mother who has just passed away.

Doing a practice like this together, or by oneself, dedicating it to someone else with a good intention and a good motivation, will definitely benefit them. Not only will they benefit, but we will benefit too because we're dedicating our prayers to them. As Lama Tsong Khapa mentioned, when you dedicate yourself to benefitting others, your own needs and purposes will also be fulfilled. This is a really significant point: when we do something for the benefit of others, we also receive benefit from that.

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

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