

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual, let us spend some time in our meditation practice.
(*pause for meditation*)

It is good to generate the bodhicitta attitude, the most positive motivation for receiving the teachings. Spending ample time generating such a state of mind with the sole wish to benefit other sentient beings is most essential.

2.2.2.3. ADVISING THAT IT IS SUITABLE FOR THOSE WISHING FOR LIBERATION TO MEDITATE ON EMPTINESS (CONT.)

Summary of the meaning

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

It is good to relate this to the eighteen root downfalls of the bodhisattva vows, which were covered during the *Six Session Guru Yoga* teaching. One of the root downfalls is to teach emptiness to an unsuitable vessel. The significant point here is that there have been cases where, when emptiness is presented, even bodhisattvas who are proponents of the Mind Only school, generate fear, lose faith and fall into the Hinayana path because of their very strong grasping at the notion of inherent existence and a truly existent self. When the lack of an inherently existent self is presented to them, this causes a great shock to their mind, to the point where they lose faith in the Mahayana teachings. In this way they can give up the Mahayana path and enter a Lower Vehicle path such as the hearer's path. If this is true even for those who have already become a bodhisattva, then we need to understand that it is even more crucial to be very careful when presenting these teachings to ordinary beings, who have not yet gained much understanding of the Dharma.

For example, hearers who are proponents of the Sautrantika and Vaibhashika lower Buddhist schools have very strong grasping at a truly and inherently existent self. Thus, presenting them with the correct view of emptiness – that there is no truly and inherently existent self – can cause great fear to arise in their mind. This is why their objection is presented here: *one should not meditate on emptiness as one is afraid of emptiness*. On this note, we need to understand that we need to be mindful not to present emptiness, and indeed even other aspects of the teachings, to those who are not really ready to hear certain points. That is because this can generate more doubts in their mind and possibly lead them to lose faith in the Buddha's teachings. We need to be very mindful of this because, rather than helping, it can turn them off the Dharma.

I have personal experience of people not being really ready to accept certain aspects of the teachings, even certain points from the lower scopes. So we need to be really mindful when presenting Dharma, making sure that it does not cause people's minds to become more disturbed. When there is very strong grasping at something it is very hard for them to give it up right away.

I have witnessed occasions where individuals are not willing to reconcile after having some conflict with one another. This

can occur even amongst close relatives, such as siblings, where they have reached a point of seeing each other as enemies. At that stage even with a good intention, when I try to give them suggestions to make amends and think about the other's wellbeing, I notice that it immediately instils a strong negative reaction. It seems that they have made up their mind that they cannot possibly get along with the other person.

So in this example, even with a suggestion to try to see things from a different perspective and make amends with someone, you can see that when their mind is not ready they totally reject the idea, and they cannot accept it. And it seems to aggravate them even more. This is why one needs to be mindful. In last Wednesday night's teaching I also addressed this point saying that it is good to take initiative to look at oneself and try to analyse one's mind. One needs to try and come to the point where one can accept that anger is a problem for oneself. Then there is a chance to make a transformation. Saying 'you are an angry person' will not help and can be the wrong approach.

Someone had asked the question 'how can I help someone see their afflictions as being harmful to themselves?' My approach is that you have to be very careful and take a skilful approach as you can aggravate them even further. For example, in a family situation with siblings or relatives one does not get along with, I have suggested that even if you want to make a connection with the other, if that other is still very strongly holding onto something against you, then trying to communicate with them may not work right away, and it might just aggravate them further. So what I have suggested is on some occasions, such as Christmas or birthdays, to make a nice gesture of sending a small gift through someone else. You do not have to say much, just send a gift. Next time send another gift again, then gradually they may be able to change their attitude towards you. Then later when you express your interest in having some communication with them, they may feel quite ready and think, 'OK, it would be good to reconnect again.'

The main point is that one needs to be mindful when dealing with others who have difficult, strong grasping at certain feelings or emotions, as it can be very hard to let go. For some individuals we need to be very mindful that even when presenting our suggestions with good intentions, it can aggravate them further, and be more destructive for the mind. Many of you are now in a position of presenting the Dharma to others. So you need to be mindful that just because you have the understanding and knowledge of the Dharma, it does not mean that this validates you to present it to others regardless of whether they are ready to accept it or not. So we have to be very mindful of these points.

The argument as presented in the commentary is *One should not meditate on emptiness as one is afraid of emptiness*.

Then the verse reads:

55 *If one generates fear
Of the phenomena generating suffering
Then why generate fear of emptiness,
Which pacifies suffering?*

The commentary explains the verse as follows:

Answer: If it is suitable to be afraid and to generate fear of the functionality of true-grasping, which acts as the main cause for the sufferings of cyclic existence, then how can one be afraid of the wisdom realising emptiness, which pacifies the sufferings of cyclic existence? It is inappropriate to be afraid of it, as it is that which eliminates all fears.

The commentary explains the nature of the opponents' fear of emptiness: *If it is suitable to be afraid and to generate fear of the functionality of true-grasping, which acts as the main cause for the sufferings of cyclic existence.* Here, while the proponents of the lower schools do not accept true grasping as a cause of suffering, their acceptance of self-grasping as the root cause of cyclic existence is being further extended here. As presented by the Prasangikas, grasping at true existence is the root ignorance that is the cause of cyclic existence. It states here that both agree that one needs to be free from the suffering of cyclic existence, and both agree that to overcome this suffering one needs to overcome the root cause. So based on this mutual agreement the verse presents a way to consider that if grasping at true existence is the main cause of suffering, and since you and I both want to be free from the suffering of cyclic existence, *then how can one be afraid of the wisdom realising emptiness which pacifies the suffering of cyclic existence?*

So the Prasangika put forth this argument: since you want to overcome the suffering of cyclic existence, and since the wisdom realising emptiness is the ultimate antidote for overcoming the root cause of suffering in cyclic existence – which is the ignorance of grasping at true existence – it is inappropriate to be afraid of it as it is that which eliminates all fears of suffering. This is quite straightforward so you should be able to understand it.

In summary, the main point is that one need to rightly be afraid of that which causes all the suffering of cyclic existence, which is grasping at true existence. So that is what one should be afraid of. One should not be afraid of the cause for eliminating that root cause of cyclic existence, which is the wisdom realising emptiness. So basically what is being presented with the next verse is if one has grasping at true existence, that is what generates fear, but if one does not have grasping at true existence then there is no reason to have any fear. That is the point.

The next verse presents this as follows:

**56. If some self existed
And one becomes afraid of any object,
Since there is no self at all
Who is the one afraid?**

The commentary explains the meaning:

If some inherently existent self were to exist then it is suitable to generate fear from any suitable object due to the grasping at that self, but as there is no inherently existing self in the slightest, who is the person that is afraid? If you were to reverse the awareness thinking of inherent existence within and contemplate, then by fully comprehending selflessness you will become liberated from all fears.

As the commentary explains, *if any inherent self were to exist then it would be suitable to generate fear.* As also presented in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, in order to identify the false grasping at the self, one can reflect on it at a time when this self-grasping is most apparent, such as when one has very strong fear in one's mind. On an occasion where one thinks that something terrible is about to happen to oneself and one generates strong fear, there is a very strong sense of an 'I' or 'me', which does not depend on anything else. If one investigates and looks at how that 'I' appears to the mind, at that point one would notice that the 'I' appears as an independently and self-sufficiently existent self. It appears as a very solid entity, existing in and of itself, from its own side and is not dependent on anything else. Grasping at such an appearance of 'I' is what is known as grasping at a self.

When one analyses whether this 'I' exists as it appears, one comes to realise that such an 'I', which seems to truly exist in and of itself and not depending on anything else, in fact does not exist at all. When one has a strong fear, this is when the self - that in fact does not exist - becomes apparent to one's mind. I have presented other examples previously such as when one has a strong opinionated mind e.g. when one says, 'I cannot accept this'; when someone suggests something and you have a very strong opinion in your mind you will say, 'No, I cannot accept this'.

At that moment, when one says one cannot accept this, that referent 'I' that one says cannot accept this is actually the 'I' that appears to one's mind as a truly existent 'I'. Grasping at this 'I' is grasping at a false self – an 'I' that does not actually exist – and further enhances that strong sense of an independent 'I', and thus self-grasping.

When one understands that such an 'I', which does not even exist to begin with, is the object of negation, then the fear associated with that 'I' being in danger will not be present, because one will know that this 'I' does not exist.

What is being presented here is a counter argument to the opponents' argument that meditating on emptiness generates fear: 'Where is that self that is fearful of meditating on emptiness? You say that you generate fear when you meditate on emptiness, but where is that 'I' that you say is afraid?'

This is a counter argument to the point 'I am afraid of emptiness'. It says 'Where is this self that you say is afraid?' The self you propose is an inherently existent self, so if this self were to exist then it might be feasible to generate fear in any situation due to grasping by the self. But since that self that you posit is an inherently existent self that does not actually exist, then there is no self (as you posit) that can possibly experience fear.

The lower schools posit an inherently existent self, which is actually the object of negation according to the Prasangika. If, rather than generating fear in relation to the self, one realises that such an inherently existent self does not exist, then that understanding becomes the optimum means to overcome all fears. That is why the commentary mentions that *as there is no inherently existing self in the slightest, who is the person that is afraid?* This implies that there is no need to be afraid when one comes to that understanding. It further emphasises that if one were to reverse the thought of grasping at an inherently existent self and look within, then one can contemplate whether such a self exists or not. Through this investigation, by looking within, one will be fully able to comprehend selflessness and become liberated from all fears. This is the optimum means to overcome all fears.

In simple terms, the self that the proponents of the two lower schools assert is an inherently existent self, and according to the Prasangika, such an inherently existent self does not exist. What is being pointed out to proponents of the lower schools is that the only reason they generate fear is precisely because they are grasping at a self that does not even exist to begin with. So when you realise that the very self that you grasp at – the one you are claiming you are afraid of – does not even exist, then having negated the object of negation (i.e. the inherently existent self) you will gain the profound understanding of selflessness, which is the optimum means to overcome all fears and all suffering. That is the point.

The following points are profound, so it is important to read through them slowly and carefully.

2.3. Explaining extensively the reasoning that established emptiness¹

This consists of two subtopics:

2.3.1. Explaining extensively the reasoning that establishes the selflessness of person

2.3.2. Explaining extensively the reasoning that establishes the selflessness of phenomena

2.3.1 Explaining extensively the reasoning that establishes the selflessness of person

This has three sub-divisions:

2.3.1.1. Refuting the determined object of innate self-grasping

2.3.1.2 Refuting the intellectually acquired self

2.3.1.3 Refuting objections to the refutation

As explained, the selflessness of person is when the lack of inherent existence is understood on the basis of an individual person. When one understands the lack of inherent existence based on other phenomena, meaning all other phenomena that are not the individual self, then this is referred to as the selflessness of phenomena. As presented earlier, in terms of grossness and subtlety, there is no difference between selflessness of person and phenomena. So the distinction of the two is made on the basis of imputation.

A debating point is: isn't a person also a phenomena, and hence the selflessness of person is actually the selflessness of phenomena? The answer is that within the two categories of persons and phenomena, the reference 'selflessness of person' is made in relation to persons. But in general, of course, all persons are also phenomena.

2.3.2.1 REFUTING THE DETERMINED OBJECT OF THE INNATE SELF-GRASPING

This passage in the commentary quite meticulously presents the explanation of innate self-grasping.

Regarding the difference between the innate true-grasping and the intellectually acquired true-grasping; innate true-grasping is the true-grasping that everybody has, irrespective of whether the mind has been influenced by tenets or not. It is generated through its own power with regards to the person or the aggregates. It grasps at natural existence and at inherent existence independently of an analysis with reasoning.

The term 'innate true grasping' refers to grasping regardless of whether one adheres to a certain tenet or not, or whether one has gained some intellectual understanding or not. All beings, naturally and spontaneously, have innate true grasping.

The commentary highlights:

It is generated through its own power with regard to the person or the aggregates.

This means that whether focusing on individual persons or any other phenomena, the grasping that arises spontaneously and naturally is what is called innate true grasping.

For intellectually acquired true grasping the commentary explains:

Intellectually acquired true-grasping is true-grasping that, in dependence on an analysis with reasons, thinks it is valid that objects exist truly and that 'that objects exist truly'.

Intellectually acquired true grasping comes about as a consequence of analysis using reasoning, when one comes to a wrong conclusion that self and other phenomena exist truly.

The key point about innate true grasping is that it spontaneously and naturally arises in all ordinary beings, regardless of whether they've analysed phenomena or not. However intellectually acquired true grasping is that which arises in those who are proponents of certain tenets. This is why the root cause of samsara or cyclic existence is said to be innate true grasping. If it was intellectually acquired true grasping then only the proponents of certain tenets would have the root cause of samsara, and the rest would not have the root cause of samsara. That would be absurd, as only those who have intellectually-acquired true grasping would be creating the karma to be born in cyclic existence.

These are actually significant points to understand.

The commentary further explains:

In the category of self-grasping at person, there is also an innate grasping at a self-sufficient substantial existent,

This is the lower school proponents' explanation of self-grasping.

... and the grasping at the person as the lord and at the aggregates as the servant, which can only be intellectually acquired.

The grasping at the person as the lord and the aggregates as the servant can only be grasping in the category of intellectually acquired grasping. In the earlier presentation of an innate grasping at a self-sufficient substantial existent, one needs to understand that this is coarse self-grasping, not the subtle or actual self-grasping according to the Prasangika.

The commentary continues:

Likewise, also the grasping at partless particles and partless moments of time can only be intellectually acquired grasping at the self of phenomena.

Again this is coarse grasping at phenomena, not subtle grasping.

Next the commentary presents a summary of the main points Gyaltsab Je has mentioned:

In short, the two types of innate true-grasping are generated through their natural power, independently of analysis. Any other types of true-grasping are intellectually acquired.

The determined object of the earlier is the main object of negation, and the negation of the latter should be understood as part of the negation of the earlier.

The point here is that the determined object of innate self-grasping is the main object of negation, and that, as mentioned earlier, is because the determined object of innate self-grasping is the root cause of samsara. That becomes the main object of negation, whereas *the negation of the latter* i.e. intellectually-acquired self-grasping, *should be understood as part of the negation of the earlier.* In attempting to refute innate self-grasping one would then be able to negate intellectually-acquired self-grasping. The opponent presents this argument:

Argument: If one asserts that a refutation of the teeth, nails and so forth as being the self is for the purpose

¹ This heading was introduced on 12 July 2016.

of liberation from cyclic existence, then that would be unsuitable, as sentient beings, while grasping at them as mine, do not grasp at them as 'I'.

A significant argument being presented here is that the root cause of samsara is grasping at the self, not at the parts of the self, such as teeth, other organs etc. These are not the self, so there is no point in overcoming grasping at the parts of oneself, as these don't serve as the root cause of samsara. So, they are saying that while one needs to overcome the grasping at self, the parts are not the self.

The commentary explains the answer to this with the following explanation:

Answer: Since this is synonymous with the teachings that form and so forth are not the self, ...

This is from another teaching where it says that form and so forth are not the self. It comes down to the same meaning.

The commentary continues:

... out of [the two] focus and aspect, of the innate transitory view, it is the focus that is the mere self-isolates of the mere 'I' and 'mine' that are the basis of karmic cause and effect. The innate transitory view grasps at them as inherent 'I' and 'mine'...

What is being presented here is the view of the transitory collections, which grasps at one's own 'I' and 'mine' as being inherently existent. ***The definition of the view of the transitory collection is an afflicted wisdom that focuses on the 'I' and 'mine' in the continuum of an individual person and grasps at them as inherently existent 'I'.*** So with the transitory view it is the general isolate of 'I' and 'mine' that is being focused on, not the specific aspects of 'mine'. Here we need to understand the distinction between the innate self-grasping that is the transitory view, and general grasping at a person. The transitory view relates to an individual who focuses on their own individual 'I' and 'mine' as holding them as being inherently existent. Holding onto another individual's self and grasping that as being inherently existent is not the transitory view. It is self-grasping but it is not the transitory view.

I will explain more specifically the focus that is the mere isolates of 'I' and 'mine'. When we refer to the parts which make up oneself e.g. 'head', we don't say randomly 'head' or 'nose' in relation to oneself, we refer to them as 'mine'. We say 'my head', 'my eyes', 'my ears,' 'my nose' in relation to the five sense faculties. We attribute the term 'mine' although it is part of oneself. So what is being specifically presented here is that when presenting innate self-grasping in relation to the transitory view, it is presented as an isolate. Grasping at that strong sense of one's own 'I' and 'mine' as being inherently existent is known as the view of transitory collections.

To emphasise the point, the innate transitory view grasps at one's own 'I' and 'mine' as inherently existent. While there is seemingly a distinction here, what we need to understand is that the grasping at 'mine' is actually part of grasping at 'I', it is not distinct. The grasping at 'mine' – my head, nose, and so forth – is actually grasping at the 'I'. The view of the innate transitory collection is grasping at the inherently existing 'I', so even when we say 'mine', that is part of the 'I'. Therefore it has to be posited as grasping at the 'I'. The significant point presented next in the commentary says:

If the 'I' existed inherently, then amongst the examples for the 'I', such as the collection of the aggregates or its continuum, its parts or division, or

something of a different entity from the aggregates, should be established as the example of the 'I'. The point here is that this is not the case.

This means that if there were an inherently existent 'I' then it would have to be found amongst the parts that make up the 'I', as mentioned here; either the collection of the aggregates or its continuum, its parts or its divisions. If it is not found there, or in some different entity from the aggregates, then there is no other way to establish an inherently existent 'I'; either in relation to the aggregates, the whole of it, or the continuum of it, or the parts or the division of it, or something separate from the aggregates. If an inherently-existent 'I' did exist, then it could only be found in these ways.

As a way to get an understanding of the differentiation between innate self-grasping and intellectually acquired self-grasping it would be good to go over the text again, and also try to read other sources to complement it. With innate self-grasping there is the view of the transitory collection. What is that? Within that there are two aspects: grasping at an inherently existent 'I' based on an individual person and there is grasping at an inherently existent 'mine'. Grasping at either of these two becomes the view of the transitory collection. These are points that are good to understand.

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

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