

# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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

Now, based on a good and clear bodhicitta motivation we can set our motivation for receiving the teachings.

## 2.3.1.1. REFUTING THE DETERMINED OBJECT OF INNATE SELF-GRASPING

Last session we went through the preliminary explanation in the commentary, which meticulously presented important points that we really need to become acquainted with so that we develop a good understanding of them.

Now we come to the actual verses in the root text that present points showing us how to identify innate self-grasping.

It is important that those who are new to these explanations do not misinterpret what 'selflessness' means. What is being negated is not the self, because the person does exist; what is being negated is an inherently existent self of a person.

The terms 'self', 'person', and 'I' are synonymous. While the Tibetan term *ki wu* refers particularly to a human being, the term *gang sak* – translated here as person – is a more generic term that refers to all beings. So a person, the self and 'I' definitely do exist.

When the teachings present the lack of self of a person, one needs to understand this in the context of the basic Buddhist view that is held by all Buddhist schools, known as the **four seals** of Buddhism. When one has a good understanding of these four seals then one gains an understanding of selflessness.

The four seals of Buddhism are:

- All compounded phenomena are impermanent
- All contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering
- All phenomena are empty and selfless
- Nirvana is peace

**All compounded phenomena are impermanent:** Most of you are already aware of this point. 'Compounded phenomena' refers to functional and produced things, which by their very nature are changing moment by moment. Thus, because they are momentary, all compounded phenomena are impermanent.

**All contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering:** This is very true, as the samsaric environment and the beings abiding within it are a constant source of suffering and dissatisfaction.

**All phenomena are empty and selfless:** The selflessness in the context of the view of the four seals is the selflessness of a person that is empty of being permanent, single or partless and independent, and this is accepted by all Buddhist schools of tenets. This is the gross selflessness of a person. This view is contrary to the self that is asserted by the non-Buddhist schools. As the text will present, the non-Buddhist schools posit a self that is **permanent**, because they say that the self does not change from moment to moment. It is **singular** as it does not depend on different parts for its

existence, and it is **independent**, because it does not depend on causes and conditions.

For all Buddhist schools a self that is permanent, singular or partless and independent, as posited by the non-Buddhist schools, does not actually exist. Therefore such as self is an object of negation. The lack of a permanent, singular and independent person is the 'selflessness of person' – albeit a gross selflessness of person. So understanding the four seals is essential if we are to understand the selflessness that is accepted by all Buddhist schools of tenets.

From the higher school perspective this selflessness is considered to be 'coarse selflessness'. However, at our level it is important to begin with gaining a good understanding of the selflessness as presented in the four seals. Without a good understanding of the selflessness of a person at this basic level then there is no possibility of gaining an understanding of the more profound 'subtle selflessness' of person and other phenomena.

We need to incorporate our understanding of selflessness in relation to ourselves. It is quite clear that **we are not a permanent entity** as we can all see the obvious physical and mental changes we go through. Therefore we cannot possibly be a permanent entity.

Furthermore **we are not a singular entity**, because we know that we are dependent on the many parts that make up who we are. We are dependent on our physical aggregates or our body, as well as our mind, for without our body and mind we could not possibly be called a person. Therefore we are clearly not **singular** or **partless**.

Finally **we could not possibly be independent of causes and conditions** because we clearly depend on many causes and conditions for our existence, in particular the influence of karma. More specifically, our experience of happiness and suffering is dependent on causes and conditions: virtue is the cause of happy experiences and non-virtue is the cause of suffering.

This covers many profound aspects of the teachings. Having a good understanding of this encompasses a good understanding of the cause and effect of karma, as well as the existence of our past and future lives. Because our happiness is dependent on causes and conditions, we also come to understand the need to accumulate merit. We all want to experience happiness and joy, so we need to accumulate the appropriate causes, which are virtue and merit.

So we can see that when we relate this view of selflessness to our own experience, it becomes really tenable. Just saying, 'Oh, I do not accept the non-Buddhist view of a permanent, singular and independent self, because as a Buddhist I am not supposed to believe in that', would be a very superficial way of relating to this presentation. Rather, when we relate it to our own experiences, then we will gain a deeper understanding of what selflessness really means.

If we can begin to really pay attention to what seems simple and practical, then we can derive more profound understanding that will help our practice. We claim to be Buddhists, so it is important to understand what being a Buddhist really means, which basically falls into two main aspects – **right conduct** and **right view**. As presented in the teachings, a Buddhist's conduct is one that **abstains from violence**, and the Buddhist view is accepting the **view of selflessness**, as presented earlier. This explanation of the view is presented in the tenets. Of course, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama presents the Buddhist view he

relates it to **interdependent origination**, which is a higher level of understanding the view. However, on the basic general level, the tenets present the view of selflessness.

The proper understanding of selflessness is derived from the presentation of the four seals of Buddhism, as it is the basic level of selflessness that is asserted by all Buddhist schools. There are other interpretations that posit as the view presented in the four seals as a higher level of selflessness such as a person being devoid of self-sufficient and substantial existence, however this is not tenable. Another example of selflessness is that posited by the Prasangika, which is a person being empty of an inherently existent self.

However, one needs to understand that the higher and more profound levels of selflessness are based on the earlier understanding of selflessness. As explained in the teachings, the presentations of selflessness range from the coarse - asserted by the lower schools and presented in the four seals - up to the subtlest level of selflessness, as asserted by the **Prasangika**. Each depends on an understanding of the previous presentation.

The **Vaibhashika** point of view is that a person is empty or devoid of being a permanent, singular and independent self, although one of the Vaibhashika sub-schools called the *nes-ma bu-pa* or Vasiputriya do not accept that as being selflessness.

Having a good understanding of that level of selflessness helps to develop a better understanding of selflessness as presented by the **Sautrantika**, which is that a person is empty of being self-sufficient and substantially existent. This brings us closer to the understanding of selflessness as presented by the **Mind Only** school, which is that the person is empty of an external existence.

For the **Svatantrika-Madhyamika** school, the view of selflessness of person is that the person is empty of true existence. That in turn leads up to the view of the **Prasangika-Madhyamika** school, which is that the person is empty of inherent existence. So one needs to understand how these views are presented in a consecutive way leading up to the higher levels of understanding.

There are some who say that the view of selflessness presented in the four seals has to be the selflessness asserted by the higher schools. But that couldn't be the case, because the question would then arise as to whether the lower Buddhist schools, which don't have understanding of the higher and more subtle views of selflessness, are Buddhists or not? Or perhaps they are Buddhist only by conduct but not by view, as they lack the correct view of selflessness. That would be an absurdity because the specific demarcation that distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist is based on whether one accepts the view of selflessness or not. In fact we need to be careful ourselves, as we might easily fall into the category of being a Buddhist by conduct but not in view if we still hold onto views that are not in accordance with the view of selflessness. So we need to be very mindful of these points.

It is safe to assume that all of you have a basic understanding of selflessness, so there might not be much danger of holding on to a wrong view here. However, it is really important that you further enhance the correct understanding of selflessness and emptiness, especially if you assume yourself to be a practitioner of tantra. Every tantric sadhana begins with the passage 'all phenomena become empty; from within the sphere of emptiness ...' So without an understanding of emptiness one cannot possibly

assume that one is practising tantra accurately. The understanding of emptiness in tantra is as presented in the perfection vehicle.

It is possible for a tantric practitioner to have an understanding of emptiness as presented by the Mind Only, or the view of emptiness as presented by the Svatantrika-Middle Way, not to mention the highest Buddhist school of Prasangika. However, in tantra the understanding of emptiness cannot be based on any of the lower schools' views of selflessness. That is definite.

The main point for those who have received tantric initiation is that you will breach one of your four root vows if you do not remember emptiness. So we need to pay attention to developing a correct understanding of emptiness, as remembering it on a regular basis is part of our commitment. Without a correct understanding of emptiness then there is no possible way to really remember emptiness, but with a proper understanding it is a matter of bringing that understanding to mind. We are working towards developing a more profound understanding of emptiness. That is what it means to remember emptiness at our level.

You will recall His Holiness' recent teachings where, prior to giving the initiation, he referred to the importance of generating bodhicitta with the practice of tantra. He used passages from the *Commentary on Bodhicitta* and went into quite a lot of detail in explaining the importance of generating bodhicitta based on the teachings. So both bodhicitta and emptiness are essential for understanding the practice of tantra.

What is being presented in the following verses of the root text and the commentary is, in summary, the lack of an inherently existent self.

If an inherently existent self were to exist, then it has be findable upon the aggregates that make up a person. Therefore, the first section of this part of the text negates the view of a self or a person as existing within the aggregates of the body.

First the text negates the view of those who assert the physical aggregates as an example of a person. Then it negates the view of those who posit the consciousness as the example of a person.

The Prasangika present the person as a mere label imputed upon the psychophysical aggregates. Thus the example of person is a mere label imputed upon the aggregates, and say that if you search within the psychophysical aggregates you will never find a person there. Thus a person is a mere label imputed upon the aggregates.

Again, it is good to reflect on this at a personal level. When we relate to ourselves, we automatically identify ourselves as 'I' or 'me', but we need to investigate further: Where is this 'I' or 'me' that I hold onto so strongly? Is it upon my aggregates? If it is upon my aggregates, then in which part of my aggregates is that 'I'? Am I able to find the 'I' upon any of my aggregates or anywhere else? When we investigate each and every part of our own body in this way, we will come to the conclusion that there is no 'I' to be found anywhere. We can't find the 'I'. This goes to show that none of our physical parts in themselves could possibly be 'I'.

The lower schools come to their conclusion about the 'I' based on this kind of investigation. The Prasangika, on the other hand, posit the 'I' as a mere imputation upon the aggregates. Thus, in order to posit the 'I' there is no need for investigation. That will be presented later on. This is really the distinguishing point: when the lower schools posit the

'I', they do so by investigating where the 'I' might be found, whereas the Prasangika posit the 'I' without having to do any investigation.

With that basic explanation the verses and the explanations of them should be quite clear.

57. *The teeth, hair and nails are not the self;  
The self is not the bones or blood,  
Not the nasal mucus or phlegm,  
And also not lymph or pus.*
58. *The self is not the fat or sweat,  
And neither the lungs nor liver are the self.  
The other inner organs are also not the self,  
The self is not faeces or urine.*
59. *The flesh and skin are not the self,  
The heat and air are not the self,  
The holes are not the self, and certainly the  
Six primary consciousnesses are not the self.*

The commentary explains:

Refuting parts of the aggregates as examples for the 'I': The teeth and nails are not the self, the bones or blood are not the self, and neither is the nasal mucus or phlegm because the self is established as merely labelled on these. Also, because of the earlier reason, lymph or pus are not examples of the 'I', and neither are the sweat or fat examples of the self. And neither the lungs nor the liver are examples of the self, and also the other inner organs such as the intestines and so forth are not examples of the self. The self is neither faeces nor urine and also the flesh or skin are not the self, as the self is established as merely labelled on them. The heat and air are not the self, and understand that also the holes of the body and so forth are not the self.

This is quite clear. Then the commentary further explains:

If the meaning of this is summarised: The Realists belonging to our side grasp at the aggregates as an example for the person, and non-Buddhists accept a self that is of different entity from the aggregates; the self being like the master and the aggregates like the servant.

What is shown here is synonymous with the refutation of the six spheres as the person in the *Garland of the Middle Way*. 'The holes are not the self' refutes the sphere of space as the person.

Thus it is also unsuitable to hold any of the collection of the aggregates, or its continuum, its parts or divisions, or something that is of a different entity from the aggregates, to be an example for the person even nominally, and also, anything of different entity from them cannot be posited as the person because the person is established as being merely labelled in dependence on these.

I don't need to spend too much time on this explanation, as I presented it in the teachings on the Middle Way. This verse is a presentation of refuting aggregates and so forth as being the self.

When the commentary states, *If the meaning of this is summarised: The Realists belonging to our side* refers to the Vaibhashika who hold the aggregates as an example of the person. When the Vaibhashika search for an example of a person, they conclude that a person cannot be found anywhere else but within the five aggregates; i.e. the physical aggregate, the aggregate of feeling, the aggregate of discrimination, the aggregate of compositional factor and the aggregate of consciousness. The Vaibhashika posit the

person within this collection of the five aggregates. So according to the Vaibhashika, the five aggregates are an example of a person.

The *non-Buddhists accept a self that is of different entity from the aggregates; the self being like the master and the aggregates like the servant*. Another way of explaining this is with the example of a load and the carrier, in which the load and the person carrying the load are of different entities: the self is like the load, and the aggregates are like the person carrying the load, so with this example they posit the self as a different entity to the aggregates. Thus the self is posited as being completely separate from the aggregates.

*What is shown here is synonymous with the refutation of the six spheres as the person in Garland of the Middle Way*. We covered this in the teachings on *Precious Garland*, which says that because a person is a combination of the six spheres it cannot be truly or inherently existent.<sup>1</sup> The presentation can be summarised with the following syllogisms. Take the subject 'a person': it lacks inherent or true existence – because it is posited upon the six spheres; and the six spheres lack inherent existence – because the six spheres individually are dependent on many other causes and conditions for their existence.

As posited by the higher Prasangika school, the person is a nominal existent rather than substantial existent. Here, nominal existent means that it is merely nominated, or labelled upon the six spheres, and that there is no substantial existence from its own side. Thus nominal existence means that it is merely labelled by the mind.

Thus *it is also unsuitable to hold any of the collection of the aggregates, or its continuum, its parts or divisions, or something that is of a different entity from the aggregates, to be an example for the person even nominally*. This means that even conventionally the example of a person cannot be posited upon any of its parts.

Then, lest one comes to the wrong conclusion that since the aggregates and the continuity of these aggregates and parts and divisions of aggregates are not the self, they must be a separate entity, the words *anything of different entity from them cannot be posited as the person* are added. This is *because the person is established as being merely labelled in dependence on the aggregates*.

This is the point. The person is asserted to be a nominally existent because it is not any of the aggregates. Neither is the person a different entity from the aggregates, because it is imputed or labelled upon the aggregates.

Having refuted what a person is not, the following argument from a lower Buddhist school is presented.

*Argument*: But then there is nothing that can be posited as the person.

So, what they are saying is, 'if what we posit as a person is not a person, then what is there left to be posited as a person'? The commentary provides this answer.

*Answer*: Are you not satisfied in positing Devadatta or Yajjadatta [as persons] without analysis?

For if you posit an inherently existent person as the object labelled when saying 'person', then you will fall into the extremes of nihilism or eternalism. Understand that not even one atom of such a self exists.

<sup>1</sup> See teaching of 31 August 2010.

Although Devadatta and Yajjadatta are cited, any modern name can be used. In response to the argument, 'Is it not suitable just to posit an individual as a person without the analysis?' indicates that the Prasangika system presents the nominal person without analysis. It is said that the Prasangika presentation is very much in accordance with the worldly convention. When we call out someone's name or want to point out someone, we don't go through a whole analysis of where they are, and which part of them is them. We just point them out, saying, 'There is the person you want'.

What is being presented here is how *a person is posited without analysis*. Thus, an example of a person is that which is labelled upon that combination of the aggregates. As the commentary states, *if you posit an inherently existent person as the object labelled when saying 'person' then you will fall into the extremes of nihilism or eternalism*.

An example of a person is that which is suitable to posit as a person because of their function. For example, when we ask 'Where is Damien?' people point to his body and say, 'There is Damien'. If we were to go through a thorough analysis to look for Damien, then there is the danger of coming to the wrong conclusion, 'Oh, I cannot find Damien, so Damien must not exist'. That would be falling into the extreme of nihilism!

That which is suitable to function as Damien is who Damien is. Based on what we see of Damien; i.e. his bodily movements, mannerisms and functionality is what we posit as Damien. We don't go through a thorough analysis of determining where Damien is when we posit Damien, do we? If we were actually to do an analysis of where Damien is then we might say, OK, is Damien's head Damien? No. Is Damien's body Damien? His hands and arms? No. We might easily then come to the wrong conclusion that Damien cannot be found anywhere, therefore Damien does not really exist. If Damien can't be found anywhere, then Margie might get really worried!

In preparation for our following sessions it will be good to read some of the commentary texts. You all have access to the transcripts of the teachings that I have presented, as well as your notes. It is best if you have taken good notes and kept them in your memory. But we have all the transcripts of the teachings on the *Precious Garland*, the teachings on the *Madhyamakavatara*, and the teachings on the *Four Hundred Verses*, which all cover this topic.

So it is good to refer to these texts as a way to get a more comprehensive understanding of this presentation. It is my regular practice to have quite a few books around me. I pick up different books at different times and read different passages from them. It is good to refresh one's memory and gain a deeper understanding of these topics.

Merely reading a text will help to settle down a very hyperactive and unruly mind. It is good to understand that one has access to these methods to help calm down and subdue the mind.

For the manifestation of different negative states of mind such as strong anger, refer to the teachings on the antidotes for overcoming anger, such as developing patience and so forth. Through reading those passages one will be reminded of the way to apply the antidotes for overcoming anger. Then the mind will settle down and you will be calmer. Likewise, when strong attachment arises, refer to the passages on how to apply the antidote for overcoming attachment. There are many different sources - you can refer to passages from the *Abhidharma* as well. These are useful

ways to overcome strong attachment, jealousy or pride and other negative states of mind. When one refers to these methods and techniques and reflects on them, it will help to settle the mind down.

We cannot blame those who do not have any understanding of or access to any explanations on how to apply the antidote for delusions, such as intense anger. They have nothing to help them to appease their mind. They are completely enslaved to that mind of rage and anger, carrying weapons and running towards what they perceive as their enemy in order to kill them, because they have no understanding of the ways to overcome the delusions in their mind. So we just have to feel compassion for such people, and not blame them for resorting to such strategies.

But if we, who do have an understanding and access to resources explaining the antidotes for overcoming such negative state of mind, don't do anything about applying the antidotes and just give in to our negative emotions and states of mind, then that would be more than a pity. What could be more disgraceful than knowing there are methods to overcome delusions, but then not apply them?

As I have explained previously, we need to understand the subtle differences between the different delusions and their derivatives. When anger is prolonged for a long time then it turns into belligerence, to the point where one could pick up any weapon as a way to intentionally harm what one perceives as being the cause of one's distress. As I have explained previously, belligerence is only directed at an animate object. While anger is listed as one of the six root divisions, belligerence is listed as a secondary delusion, but being a secondary delusion doesn't necessarily mean that it is less significant.

We see those who, out of frustration and anger, kick their own car. I really pity them. How can kicking the car help them? They just feel so angry, and out of their rage they either hit the car, or hurt themselves further, and some even intentionally engage in self-harm. This is a really pitiful situation.

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

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