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# 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 we can now generate a motivation for receiving the teachings based on the bodhicitta motivation.

## The four close contemplations

Earlier, we talked about the close contemplation on the body.

As explained in the *Uttaratantra* by Maitreya, the purpose of presenting the four close contemplations is to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the four noble truths, and thereby engage in the practice of adopting and discarding. As presented in the teachings, **suffering** is to be known, **origination** is to be abandoned, **cessation** is to be actualised and the **path** is to be meditated upon.

The first **close contemplation** is **on the body**, particularly on the suffering nature of the body. By contemplating the impurities and basic suffering nature of the body, one gains an understanding of the truth of suffering in relation to the body. Thus the understanding and knowledge of the truth of suffering is enhanced.

The **close contemplations of feelings** refers particularly to the feelings that bind us to cyclic existence. Feelings of happiness generate attachment, and feelings of suffering generate aversion. Thus, by contemplating how attachment and aversion are the main cause that binds us to cyclic existence, one gains a more enhanced understanding of the truth of origination, that which is to be abandoned.

With the third **close contemplation on the mind**, we understand that it is on the basis of our mind that we grasp at an inherently existent self. Further, by using the mind when one investigates and analyses how a person is impermanent, empty and selfless, that grasping at the self will be reversed. When one comes to understand that there is no such inherently existent self, then one realises that grasping at the self is false. At a certain point, when one gains the confidence to completely abandon grasping at the self, then one gains the fearlessness of actualising the cessation of all suffering. This enhances the understanding of the truth of cessation, thereby generating the wish to actualise or obtain the truth of cessation.

The **close contemplation on phenomena** is based on two specific categories of phenomena in relation to our existence: purified phenomena, and defiled phenomena. Cultivating the class of purified phenomena becomes the antidote to overcoming defiled phenomena, and thus adopting what is to be adopted, and discarding what is to be abandoned. Then one actualises the path, and that becomes the means to meditate on the path.

This is a very brief explanation of how to relate the four close contemplations to the four noble truths. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama presents this text, he always relates it to the two truths in the beginning, and then to the four noble truths at this point. I have explained this in detail in my previous teaching on the ninth chapter, so I'm just covering the main points here.

As I mentioned in our last session, if one gains a good understanding of what the lack of inherent existence actually connotes, then the rest will be easily understood. All of these refutations establish the lack of inherent existence upon different categories of phenomena.

### 2.3.2.1. EXPLAINING THE SELFLESSNESS OF PHENOMENA BY WAY OF THE FOUR CLOSE PLACEMENTS BY MINDFULNESS

2.3.2.1.1. *Meditating on the close placement by mindfulness on the body (cont.)*

#### 2.3.2.1.1.4. This also establishes the person as lacking inherent existence

The second two lines of an earlier verse relate to this heading:

*87cd. When the body does not exist in this way  
At that time who is the man, who is the  
woman?*

Then the commentary explains:

As a result, when the body of the person does not exist inherently, then at that time who is the inherently existing man, and who is the inherently existing woman? There is no inherently existing person.

In this school one does not realise the selflessness of person completely by merely realising the absence of a person that is a self-sufficient substantial existent. To this end, one needs to realise the absence of a person that is not posited in mere name.

There is no difference in the difficulty of realising the two selflessnesses, because on the basis of the person and the aggregates, one does not divide into the coarseness and subtleness of being an imputed existent, or being a substantial existent. In addition, one does not attribute a difference in coarseness or subtleness to the object to be negated.

In any case, the argument over whether or not hearer and self-liberator arhats realise the selflessness of phenomena while positing that they are unsuitable to realise the selflessness of person, should be understood as lacking comprehension.

What is being explained here should be quite clear when based on the understanding one has gained from earlier explanations. This heading establishes that the person also lacks inherent existence. When one has successfully established that the body lacks inherent existence, then without much further reasoning one is able to understand that the person also lacks inherent existence.

Note that this is not a specific sequence where one first needs to understand the lack of inherent existence of the body, before one is able to understand the lack of inherent existence of the person. This is not like the logical sequence of realising the selflessness of an individual person first before realising the selflessness of phenomena, because the earlier is easier to realise. The sequence under this heading is not because of logical necessity; rather, the commentary is simply saying that

when the body (on the basis of which the person is imputed) is established as lacking inherent existence, then that which is imputed, which is the person, can also be easily understood as lacking inherent existence.

The explanation in the commentary begins with, *as a result, when the body of the person does not exist inherently, then at that time who is the inherently existing man, and who is the inherently existing woman?*, meaning that there is no inherently existing man or woman that can be found.

When the body is established as lacking inherent existence then, if there's no inherent existence of the body to begin with, how could there possibly be an inherently existent woman or man?

Here, in the Tibetan terms for man and woman, there is an implicit connotation that shows an equality between women and men. That in itself shows that in Buddhist terminology, there is no discrimination between male and female. The terms merely connote a difference. As we have established, the basis of imputation of the body is dependent on other phenomena, and thus the body cannot exist inherently. Likewise, what is termed 'a man' cannot exist inherently, as it is dependent on other causes and conditions. The same reason applies to 'a woman', who also cannot exist inherently because she is dependent on other factors. So here we can also derive the understanding that the label 'man' is dependent on the label 'woman' and vice versa. If there's no woman, we can't label man and without man we cannot label woman. So the very labels 'woman' and 'man' are dependent on each other.

It's good to note here that there is no discrimination between men and women in relation to the realisations to be obtained on the path. That's completely clear in the teachings. Within the merit field, there is the whole assembly of the lama, the tutelary deities which are mostly the union of the mother and father deity, as well male and female buddhas, male and female bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis (heroes and heroines), and so forth. So the merit field includes both male and female aspects of the buddhas and so forth.

Also, the *Heart Sutra* mentions sons and daughters of the lineage as being suitable vehicles to gain the direct realisation of emptiness, and thus obtain the path of seeing. Once the path of seeing is obtained, one is surely on the path to definitely attain enlightenment. Just from this passage, we can see that both males and females equally gain the direct realisation of emptiness, and thus achieve the path of seeing; then there's no doubt about achieving the paths leading all the way to enlightenment.

These are important points to note. Sometimes people misinterpret the Buddha's teachings as discriminating against women. Accusing the Buddha of discrimination would be really heavy negative karma. How could we possibly state that the Buddha has that sort of biased mindset, given his unconditional love and compassion towards all living beings?

On the basis of establishing the body as lacking inherent existence, one can then establish the lack of inherent existence of the person. Similarly, when one establishes the lack of inherent existence of an object where the basis

is a man, then using the same logical reasons one can also establish a woman to be also empty of inherent existence.

Then the text explains that, *in this school one does not completely realise the selflessness of person by merely realising the absence of a self-sufficient and substantially existent person*. We covered this point earlier.

Then the commentary further explains, *to this end, one needs to realise the absence of a person that is not posited by mere name and label*. What needs to be understood is that the absence of a person that is not posited by name implies that what is called a person is merely labelled by the mind.

Next it explains that *there is no difference in the difficulty of realising the two selflessnesses*. There are slightly different interpretations of this in the different texts studied in the monasteries. According to the text studied in our monastery, the selflessness of the person is realised first, followed by realising the selflessness of phenomena. That is because, as explained in our texts, in relation to oneself it is easier to realise the selflessness of the person first followed by the selflessness of one's aggregates.

However following the presentation here, the commentary further explains the reasons why *there is no difference in the difficulty of realising the two selflessnesses*. *One does not divide the basis of the person and the aggregates into the coarseness of a substantial existent and subtleness of an imputed existent*. This refers to the **lower schools**, who posit the aggregate of the body as being substantially existent, and the person itself as being an imputed existent. They say that because the person is imputed upon the body, in order for the person to appear as an object of the mind one needs to first apprehend the body.

In **our school**, *one does not attribute a difference in coarseness or subtleness to the object to be negated*. As explained earlier, the only difference between the selflessness of person and the selflessness of phenomena is the basis of imputation. When the self is negated on the basis of a person then the selflessness of person is realised; when the self is negated upon the basis of the imputation of the aggregates, then the selflessness of phenomena is realised.

In conclusion, the commentary states that *in any case, the argument over whether or not hearer and self-liberator arhats realise the selflessness of phenomena*, while at the same time *positing that they are unsuitable to realise the selflessness of person, should be understood as lacking the correct understanding*.

Having investigated the body in detail previously, one comes to the conclusion that there is no inherently existent body, and that establishes the selflessness of the body. That concludes the close contemplation on the body.

### 2.3.2.1.2. *The close placement by mindfulness on feelings*

This is subdivided into four:

2.3.2.1.2.1. Refuting that the nature of feeling exists inherently

2.3.2.1.2.2. Refuting that the cause exists inherently

2.3.2.1.2.3. Refuting that the focal object exists inherently

2.3.2.1.2.4. Refuting that their object possessor exists inherently

### 2.3.2.1.2.1. Refuting that the nature of feeling exists inherently

This is subdivided into three:

2.3.2.1.2.1.1. The feeling of suffering does not exist inherently

2.3.2.1.2.1.2. The feeling of happiness does not exist inherently

2.3.2.1.2.1.3. Advice to abide in the yoga of meditating on the lack of inherent existence of feeling

*2.3.2.1.2.1.1. The feeling of suffering does not exist inherently*

Here again we need to apply the understanding that it is not feelings that are being negated; rather, it is inherently existent feelings that are being negated. As indicated earlier, one needs to gain a profound understanding of what it is that is being negated as existing inherently. Then one will have a really good understanding of the content of the *Heart Sutra*.

The explanation in the commentary begins with this statement: *Showing that like the body, feeling also does not exist inherently*. When the form aggregate, which is actually our coarse body, is established as lacking inherent existence, then the next aggregate, which is the feeling aggregate, can also be logically established as lacking inherent existence. When we can infer in this way, we can also apply that logic to other aspects of the teachings. That is how we gain an understanding of the presentation of the *Heart Sutra*, which says that form is empty, feelings are empty, and so forth.

It may seem that I am skipping from one topic to another, but what I'm attempting to do is give you a broader perspective of the teachings, going beyond the particular explanation given here, and relating it to other aspects of the teachings. When one is able to apply one's basic understanding to other aspects of the teachings, one becomes rich in that understanding.

Then the two lines of verse are presented:

*88ab. If suffering exists in suchness  
Then why does it not impede extreme joy?*

The commentary explains:

If that which is experienced, the suffering, and that experiencing, the feeling, exists in suchness, then for what reason does the feeling of suffering that exists on one mental consciousness, since it exists inherently and is unsuitable to change into something else, not harm the feeling of extreme joy and happiness? If it were to harm, and if that harm necessarily cancelled any occasion for the generation of happiness, then, because we can see happiness is generated, the former does not exist inherently.

As presented here, suffering is the experience and that which experiences it is feeling. So we talk about feeling as the experiencer, and what is being experienced, in this case, is suffering.

The term *exists in suchness* here means 'exists inherently'. If, as the **Realists** argue, the suffering and the feeling were to exist inherently, *then for what reason does the feeling of suffering that exists on one mental consciousness, since it exists inherently and is unsuitable to change into something else...* In other words, if the experience, which is suffering, and the experiencer, which is the feeling itself, were to exist inherently, they could not possibly change,

because they existed from their own side. In that case, because ...*it* [the feeling] *is unsuitable to change into something else*, how can that *not harm the feeling of extreme joy and happiness?*

The main point here is that, if the experience of suffering were inherently existent on the stream of consciousness, it would have to be a perpetual experience of suffering, and there would be no opportunity for happiness to be generated. Likewise, if happiness were to exist inherently, it would be the same – there would be no occasion for suffering to be experienced.

However, there are times when suffering is experienced by the consciousness, and other times when happiness is experienced. Therefore, the commentary concludes that, *if it were to harm, and if that harm necessarily cancelled any occasion for the generation of happiness, then, because we can see happiness is generated, the former does not exist inherently*. So if the one were to cancel the other, and since there would be an occasion for happiness to be experienced, the earlier assertion that suffering is inherently existent is not tenable.

*2.3.2.1.2.1.2. The feeling of happiness does not exist inherently*

The last two lines of the earlier verse and the next two lines of verse read:

*88cd. If happy, then why do deliciousness etc.,  
Not give joy when overcome with misery?*

*89. If due to being powerful it suppresses  
And there is no experience.*

As the commentary explains:

If happiness also existed inherently, then why does fine food and drink not provide joy in the mind at the time of being overwhelmed by misery because of a dead child? It follows it does make one happy - because fine food, drink and the like generate inherently existing happiness.

This is quite clearly explained. If happiness were to exist inherently then, if at a time of feeling great sorrow – for example, after losing a child – a person were given delicious, fine food, they would have to experience great joy and happiness in partaking of that food. But that is not the case.

As explained here *it follows it does* have to make someone in that circumstances happy *because fine food, drink and the like generate inherently existent happiness*, according to you **Realists**.

That is followed by this argument:

*Argument:* If you say, although happiness is generated at the time of being overwhelmed by misery, because the suffering is strong it suppresses the happiness, and that is why one does not experience happiness.

The **Realists** are responding here that there is some happiness when the person is having fine food and so forth, but because the suffering is so great, it overpowers the experience of happiness. So, they say there is some happiness there, but it is overpowered by the extreme experience of suffering.

The **Realists** are asserting here that there's a happiness here which is not experienced. How could one say there is a happiness which is not experienced, if happiness

itself is an experience? It is this absurdity which is being pointed out here.

*89cd. How can that not in the nature of  
Experience, be a feeling?*

*90. Merely subtle suffering exists,  
Isn't the coarse one cleared away?  
If, 'It is a mere joy apart from it',  
The subtle itself belongs to it as well*

In the first part of the commentary, the **Madhyamika** explain:

*Madhyamika:* How can that not in the nature of experience be the feeling of happiness? It follows it cannot - because it [happiness] is experienced. One can relate the answer likewise to the suppressing of inherently existing suffering by strong happiness.

Next is the argument:

*Argument:* Because at the time of strong happiness there is a subtle feeling of suffering it is not as if one does not experience any suffering.

This is quite clear. I will just read the next parts:

*Madhyamika:* If there are subtle feelings of suffering, then what harm did the powerful happiness give to the suffering, so that one posits the experience of powerful happiness? Did the powerful happiness not clear away the coarse suffering?

*Argument:* This I accept, but this subtle suffering is only a form of subtle joy apart, separate from that great happiness.

*Madhyamika:* Since this subtle happiness is not outside the definition of happiness, if it is subtle happiness, it needs to be happiness.

The main point being presented here by the **Madhyamika** is that whether the happiness is great or subtle, if it is a happiness, then it is an experience; and because it is an experience, it has to be happiness. That is the point.

If you have read the text carefully, then it shouldn't be too obscure. If you have not done any reading, then even if I attempt to explain it word by word, I don't think you'll get much out of it!

The next verse is:

*91. If, 'since the adverse condition is generated  
Sufferings are not generated.'  
'Feelings are conceptual fabrications'  
Is this saying not established?*

That is presented first with an argument, which is:

*Argument:* Wishing to repudiate the fault of, 'If it is happiness, then why does fine food and so forth': Because the contrary condition for suffering, i.e., happiness, is generated from things like fine food and drink, therefore no suffering is generated at this time.

*Madhyamika:* Isn't the saying, 'the feelings of happiness and suffering are mere conceptual fabrications and imputations' established? It follows it is - because one instance of food or drink is labelled as the cause for both happiness and suffering through the power of conceptual thought.

This is relating to the earlier verse where it says:

*88cd. If happy, then why do deliciousness etc.,  
Not give joy when overcome with misery?*

This is what is being contradicted by the argument: *Because the contrary condition for suffering, i.e., happiness, is generated from things like fine food and drink, therefore no*

*suffering is generated at this time.* Here, the **Realists** are saying that, because happiness is generated after having fine food and so forth, there cannot be suffering at that time.

The next point being made by the **Madhyamika** is: *Isn't the saying, 'the feelings of happiness and suffering are mere conceptual fabrications and imputations' established? It follows it is - because one instance of food or drink is labelled as the cause for both happiness and suffering through the power of conceptual thought.*

Thus the reason presented here is: ... *because one instance of food or drink is labelled as the cause for both happiness and suffering through the power of conceptual thought.* This can be quite clearly understood; what we perceive as happiness or suffering is basically dependent on the conceptual thought that interprets that.

*2.3.2.1.2.1.3. Advice to abide in the yoga of meditating on the lack of inherent existence of feeling*

I've gone through the explanations of this in quite some detail previously. The verse relating to this is:

*92. Because of this very fact this analysis  
Should be meditated upon as its antidote.  
The mental stabilisation derived from the field  
of  
Analysis is the food of a yogi.*

Then the commentary explains:

Because of the very fact that feelings do not exist inherently, one should meditate on this analysis, which realises feelings to be lacking inherent existence, as the antidote against the true-grasping at feeling. If one meditates on the mental stabilisation of superior insight in dependence on the superior insight focusing on suchness that arises from the field of pure analysis and investigation, and in dependence on calm abiding, then the body of the yogi will be further and further increased and boosted. Therefore it is called 'food', like the ordinary food that increases the body.

What being presented here is that the wrong conception of grasping at true existence, or inherent existence, perceives feeling as being inherently existent. Whereas when the wisdom realising selflessness perceives feelings, it perceives them as lacking inherent existence.

These two perceptions are focusing on the same object, which is feelings, but are completely opposite apprehensions; while focused on the same object, the apprehension of each is completely different.

In the earlier view held by the **Realists**, which is the mistaken conception of perceiving feelings as existing inherently, that perception has no truth to back it up. It is actually based on falsity. Therefore, on the basis of that false perception, feelings cannot be established. When feelings are perceived as being inherently existent, the actual feelings cannot be established properly, or ultimately.

Whereas the **Madhyamika** viewpoint of the wisdom realising selflessness perceiving feelings as lacking inherent existence is able to establish feelings just as they are. This is how we need to understand what is being presented here.

*If one meditates on the mental stabilisation of superior insight in dependence on the superior insight focusing on suchness that arises from the field of pure analysis and investigation, and in dependence on calm abiding ... So, having gained the profound understanding of the lack of inherent existence of feelings, one then uses one's mind to focus on that single-pointedly. Having obtained the calm abiding that focuses on the lack of inherent existence of feelings, if that is further developed, one will gain what we call superior or special insight into the lack of inherent existence of feelings – the emptiness of feelings.*

When the yogi reaches the point of being able to apply special insight based on calm abiding focusing on, for example, the lack of inherent existence of feelings, then through that meditation the yogi actually gains sustenance to make the body even more powerful. That is referred to as the sustenance of concentration, or the food of concentration.

When the yogi is engaged in that level of concentration, because it naturally sustains the body, it is referred to as a food. The example given here is *like the ordinary food that increases the body*. As with ordinary gross food, we talk about eating healthy food, because when we consume the food, it nourishes and increases the strength of the body. Similarly, it is said that for the yogi concentration is becomes sustenance for the body.

The commentary concludes:

Through this concentration the ordinary body is also increased. Hence, one should strive in single-pointed meditative placement upon realising emptiness.

The conclusion here is that one needs to first gain a good understanding of emptiness. Then, based on that clear, good understanding, one attempts to generate a single-pointed focus upon the understanding of emptiness – although initially it is only a conceptual understanding of emptiness. Based on that, one then gains the actual direct realisation of emptiness.

Let us conclude the teaching here with a recitation of the dedication chapter of the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*.

Last week we did some prayers and dedicated them for Susie and Julie's mother. Since then, they've both passed away. So now we will dedicate this practice for them.

If you recall, when we mentioned doing the practice for Susie last week, I indicated at that time that she was in quite a happy frame of mind, and that in the past, I had advised to her to focus on Tara, and she has particularly held White Tara as her main deity. I'd mentioned to her to keep that as her main deity, to really focus on that complete reliance on Tara, and that that would be good for her mind. Apparently Sandra went to visit Susie the next day, and Sandra was able to convey that to her, right? So, Sandra what was her response?

*Sandra: When I saw her, she was in the heavy breathing phase, and not talking at all. I passed on your message from last week, saying, "It's Sandra. I have an instruction for you from Geshe Doga. He said for you to totally rely on Tara and her mantra." She came out of her heavy breathing and opened her eyes. I then showed her a framed picture of Geshe Doga and one of White Tara. She was very clear and lucid and her face lit up. She gave a big smile and was happy. Moments later, she went back into*

*the heavy breathing. But she was definitely clear when I gave her the message.*

*Geshe-la: When I heard what you had relayed and her response, it made me very happy. Susie, as those of us here know, was a very kind lady, a very nice person, with a very nice personality. Thank you, Sandra, because you were there at the right moment to assist someone who was really in need of help. This is what I feel is the great service that we, as Dharma brothers and sisters, can do, being able to help each other at the time of need. So, I really thank you for that, Sandra. It is good.*

Now, as mentioned earlier, we will do the dedication chapter and dedicate the merit to late Susie and Julie's mum.

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

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