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# Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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Having just recited the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, it is important to remember that taking refuge is the means to protect oneself from following a wrong path, while generating bodhicitta is the means to protect oneself from the lower paths. Keeping these two essential motivational points in mind, we can now engage in our regular *tonglen* meditation practice.

[Meditation]

As we do regularly, we now generate our motivation for receiving the teachings, which is extremely important. This can be along the lines of: for the sake of all mother sentient beings, I need to achieve enlightenment, and so for that purpose I will engage in listening to the Mahayana teachings and put them into practice well.

As mentioned earlier, taking refuge is the optimum means to protect oneself from following a wrong path. In very simple terms this means that dedicating ourselves to following the Buddha's teachings, in particular developing faith in his advice, will naturally protect us from following a mistaken path.

The Buddha is an incomparably kind guide who is free from all mistaken concepts and endowed with all possible good qualities. Recalling the kindness and great qualities of this incomparably kind being will instil a strong aspiration to follow the Buddha's advice. Just thinking about this can bring great solace to the mind.

We also need to have a good understanding of how generating the bodhicitta motivation, the essence of the Mahayana path, protects one from following the lower path. Here, the greater path is where one completely dedicates oneself to the **goal** of achieving the ultimate state of enlightenment for the sole **purpose** of benefiting other sentient beings.

The paths of the hearers and solitary realisers are termed the Lower Path only in relation to the goals of the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. Their primary **purpose** for entering the path is to be free from suffering, which is for one's own benefit. Their **goal**, or aim, is to achieve liberation solely for oneself, which is a state of being free from cyclic existence. So, in comparison with the Great Vehicle's purpose and goal their path is called a lower path.

Of course one needs to be mindful that this does not mean in any way that the hearers' and solitary realisers' vehicle is inferior. In fact, achieving liberation is an incredible achievement. The realisations and the achievements gained on the hearer and solitary realiser paths are astonishing compared to any achievements of ordinary beings. However, when compared to the Great Vehicle, their achievements are less significant. Thus, it is

the bodhicitta motivation which protects one from aiming for these lesser goals.

Those who have entered the path of the Great Vehicle are referred to as bodhisattvas or noble beings. The mind of a bodhisattva is imbued with bodhicitta - the altruistic wish to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Their mind is spontaneously imbued with bodhicitta, and their conduct is to engage in the practice of the six perfections. We can see how amazing bodhisattvas are, just from the description of being endowed with these two qualities! Being engaged in the practices of the six perfections means that their practice is solely for the benefit of sentient beings.

The *tonglen* giving and taking practice that we have just done, is, as I have mentioned previously, a very profound practice and not to be taken lightly; when one actually takes it to heart it is really a very profound and deep practice. It is good to remember that this is the very core practice of bodhisattvas.

Thinking about these qualities of the bodhisattvas can really inspire us. As Buddhists, we naturally have strong faith in the Buddha seeing him as an enlightened being. It is important to reflect on the fact that a buddha is none other than the result of the practices done by a bodhisattva. As reflected in the teachings, the Buddha did not suddenly materialise out of nowhere. Rather, he is a supreme being who engaged in all the causes and conditions on the path, beginning with the very basic levels, going through the entire stages of the path and reaching that ultimate state of enlightenment. So the manner in which the Buddha became an enlightened being is a source of great encouragement for us all.

Of course at our level, we may have not yet developed the bodhicitta mind. However, since we are followers of the Mahayana path we need to aspire to follow the Great Vehicle path. So at the very least we must make every endeavour to generate even a similitude of the bodhicitta motivation. Even if it's a contrived bodhicitta motivation, we need to really develop this as strongly as possible. In its simplest form, we should dedicate our practice and teaching - indeed whatever virtue one engages in - towards the benefit of all sentient beings, and then aspire to achieve enlightenment for that purpose. If we generate this mind again and again whenever we do our practice, then through familiarity with this thought, our mind naturally becomes more and more imbued with this motivation and aspiration. It is through familiarity that one actually develops all the realisations on the path. That is what we need to do at our level.

There are other points about going for refuge and generating bodhicitta that we need to reflect upon and understand clearly. Refuge is a practice that is common to all three vehicles - the hearer vehicle, the solitary realiser vehicle, as well as the greater vehicle. Whereas generating bodhicitta is the uncommon practice of the Great Vehicle, the Mahayana Vehicle. There is a form of refuge that is called the Mahayana Refuge that involves a particular formula. However, in general, refuge is common to all three vehicles, while generating bodhicitta is an uncommon practice for those who aspire to follow the Great Vehicle.

Indeed, we can say that taking refuge is common to all religions; all religions have a form of refuge that they practise prior to engaging in any of their practices. Christians go for refuge to Jesus and God whenever they engage in some ceremony or practice. As a spiritual seeker or a follower of religion it's good to understand that taking refuge is common to all spiritual traditions. These are important points to understand, otherwise people might think: "Oh, going for refuge must be unique to Buddhists? Is it only because I'm a Buddhist that I have to take refuge?" In fact it is good to know that all religions have a form of refuge. However, since we aspire to follow the path of the Great Vehicle, it is good to know that as followers of the Mahayana path we have the additional task of generating bodhicitta.

While taking refuge is common to all religious practitioners, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is unique to Buddhism. Having a clear understanding of what the Three Jewels - the Buddha, the Dharma and Sangha - are, a conviction in the protection the Three Jewels provide, and a heartfelt reliance on the Three Jewels is a unique Buddhist practice. On the basis of taking refuge in the Three Jewels, the principle of non-violence is implemented, which is to refrain from harming any living being. So the practice common to all Buddhists is taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and refraining from harming other sentient beings.

Generating the bodhicitta motivation on the basis of taking refuge and refraining from harming others is what makes Mahayana practice unique. So as followers of the Mahayana tradition, our refuge and other practices become a Mahayana practice, when they are held with - at the very least - a contrived bodhicitta attitude. That is something that we really need to work on as seekers of the Mahayana practice. I have given detailed explanations of this in the past. Because taking refuge and generating bodhicitta are done before every practice, it is really good to have a clear understanding of what they mean.

The most practical and simple way for us, as ordinary beings, to implement the bodhicitta attitude in our daily lives is to follow the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (which I also emphasise again and again), which is to generate the thought: "I will not intentionally harm any living being and I will do my utmost to only benefit sentient beings". Generating this noble thought on a daily basis is, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, a substitute of the bodhicitta motivation for us ordinary beings. So we really need to pay attention to these two lines. I'm not boasting, but I really do pay attention to generating this thought. You can also go a little bit further by spending a few more moments thinking: "I will do everything possible to only benefit sentient beings and I will completely shun and avoid harming sentient beings". Just spending a few moments cultivating this thought can bring great solace to the mind, leading to a genuine sense of calmness and ease. So it's very beneficial.

These points are not all that complicated and they are very easy to contemplate, yet they are very, very profound; they can also help to bring about a great transformation in one's mind. When we think about it, these attitudes are very reasonable. There is no sentient

being who wishes to experience any harm, and there is no sentient being who does not wish for benefit. In other words, all living beings naturally want to experience benefit and happiness and do not wish to experience any kind of harm or suffering.

When we commit ourselves to benefitting others and not harming them, which is what they wish for, then we are actually engaging in the very core practices that the great Mahayana practitioners of the past implemented in their lives. If we can follow their example and generate this thought, then, as mentioned earlier, as we become more familiar with these sentiments and thoughts (which will of course take some effort initially) and we will begin to notice a real transformation taking place in our mind. Because our mind becomes gentler and genuinely kinder, we will naturally become less prone to harming sentient beings and more readily inclined to help other beings. This is the transformation that will naturally take place over time. So this is really a very profound level of practice to adopt.

When the Buddha mentioned these profound words: "If you harm sentient beings, you are harming me; when you benefit sentient beings, you are benefitting me", he was saying that "if you respect me and have faith in me, then benefit sentient beings, and don't harm them". It was through the practice of only benefitting sentient beings and not harming any sentient being that the Buddha reached the state of enlightenment. So the incomparable and kind Buddha has given us some very practical advice. When we generate these thoughts and really commit ourselves to engaging in these practices, then our life becomes much more meaningful, and our practices become much more profound, and much more complete. We might be inclined to engage in Dharma practice, but in order to engage in practice we need to know how to practice. These are the instructions on how to conduct ourselves on a daily basis through our thoughts and actions.

It is good to acknowledge the great fortune that we have at this time. We are engaging in none other than the unmistakable Mahayana teachings of the Buddha, so being part of this gathering is incredibly fortunate. We have met with unmistakable Mahayana teachers and we have these incredible conditions to engage in practice. So it is important for us to really utilise them to the best of our ability, because having all of them at the same time is a rare opportunity.

More specifically, as a human being, we have the eight freedoms, which free us from the eight adverse conditions, and the ten endowments. Possessing these is unique to human beings. As Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned, they are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel. This is a very significant point, when we think about what we can achieve with our present conditions. No amount of money, even hundreds of millions of dollars can buy us our ultimate purpose. But with these eight freedoms and ten endowments of a precious human rebirth, we can achieve our ultimate purpose.

As Lama Tsongkhapa said, we waste our life with meaningless worldly activities if we do not pay attention to the great meaning of our life, which is another very significant point. When we don't think about the

preciousness of a human life, then we naturally fall into a normal pattern of using this life for worldly pleasures, which is how we tend to spend our lives.

Furthermore, the conditions that we have with our precious human rebirth are also rare and very difficult to find. If we didn't think about the rarity and difficulty of acquiring these conditions, then we might relax and think: "Oh, there's no rush to engage in Dharma practices". But as Lama Tsongkhapa mentions, a precious human rebirth is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel, and we have only found these precious conditions at this time. This indicates that if we were to lose this opportunity, it will be very, very difficult to obtain it again. So these are essential points to contemplate.

The teachings give many examples that explain the rarity of a precious human rebirth. We can think about the rarity of finding a precious human rebirth in terms of the cause. This is another essential point that we need to reflect upon. The cause for obtaining a precious human rebirth is said to be the threefold causes of observing morality as a basis, making aspirational prayers, and finally complementing them with the practices of generosity and so forth. These three factors are the causes for a precious human rebirth.

Another teaching mentions that there is no other cause for obtaining a higher status than morality. This teaching specifically emphasises that morality, or ethics, is the basic cause for obtaining a high status. So we need to really think about the importance of following an ethical life.

We can rejoice in the fact that because of our practice of morality in the past, we have now obtained a precious human rebirth. So we can congratulate ourselves and feel joy in what we have achieved. We made aspirational prayers in the past to engage in good deeds, and dedicated them to obtaining a precious human rebirth such as we have now. The fact that we engaged in practices of generosity and so forth in the past can be seen from our current conditions - we are not lacking for food, shelter and other basic needs such as medicine and so forth. As a result of having engaged in these practices in the past we have obtained these incredibly good conditions now.

However, if we want to secure a precious human rebirth in our future lives, then there is no other way than engaging in the very practices that were the cause for our current precious human rebirth i.e. practising morality, making aspirational prayers, and complementing them with the practices of generosity and so forth. So if we can create these causes now, then we should be in no doubt that we will obtain a precious human rebirth in the next life. It will naturally follow! We have obtained a precious human rebirth now, as a result of previous causes, so if we practise in the same way, we will definitely obtain the good conditions again in the future.

But if we don't practise and engage in the causes now, then that is where it becomes difficult. We need to understand that the great advantage of obtaining a precious human rebirth again in the future is that we will be able to continue with the practices that we have engaged in over this current life. If we continue to do this

from life to life then our conditions will just get better and better, and we will progress to higher and higher levels of achievements and realisations and so forth.

Contemplating the preciousness and the rarity of our precious human rebirth should not be taken lightly. It is a point that is emphasised in many teachings as being an impetus to practice. We should not think of it lightly by saying "oh, this is just a beginners practice". Rather, we need to really contemplate these points again and again, and take them to heart. As Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned, when you think of the rarity of a precious human rebirth, there is no way that you will lie around in a leisurely manner. This is another significant point. If we are lying around leisurely, this means that we are not really contemplating the rarity of our precious human rebirth.

Furthermore, as the teachings emphasise, having thought about the preciousness of the human rebirth, followed by its rarity, we must also contemplate how easily this precious rebirth can end. This means thinking about the fragility of our life. These are all very meticulous and very profound ways of encouraging us to engage in Dharma practice.

If we don't think about the preciousness of a human rebirth, we won't be inspired to use it for a meaningful purpose. If we don't think about its rarity, then we might think: "Oh well, I have a precious human rebirth now, but I can obtain another one at any time. So I don't have to worry about it now". In order to overcome such a misconception, we need to contemplate how easily this precious human rebirth can end. If we don't contemplate that, then again we will fall victim to laziness, thinking, "Yes, I need to use my precious human rebirth in a meaningful way to practice Dharma, but I can do that tomorrow or the day after, or some time in the future". So contemplating death and impermanence is crucial, as it inspires us to not waste our time and opportunity, and to put our good conditions to use.

Lama Tsongkhapa mentions in his work, *Lines of Experience*:

This human existence with its (eight) liberties is much more precious than a wish-granting jewel. Obtained just this once, difficult to acquire and easily lost, (it passes in a flash) like lightning in the sky. Considering how (easily this can happen at any time) and realizing that all worldly activities are as (immaterial as) chaff, you must try to extract its essence at all times, day and night. I, the yogi, have practised just that. You who also seek liberation, please cultivate yourself in the same way.

As Lama Tsongkhapa mentioned, by contemplating the precious human rebirth one develops a sense of seeing the affairs of this life as being meaningless, and lacking essence. They are no more than chaff which, like worldly affairs, has no essence.

These are points to reflect upon. If our worldly life had some essence, then because we are so engrossed and busy with these worldly affairs, we should have gained some sort of real satisfaction and happiness by now. But the fact that we have not gained true satisfaction and happiness, shows that whatever we have engaged in so far has lacked any essence, and we have not really achieved anything meaningful so far. So Lama

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Tsongkhapa encourages us to really contemplate these points as a way to lessen our engagement with meaningless worldly affairs, and engage our mind in virtue and the Dharma.

I apologise that I have seemingly gone off on a tangent in mentioning these points again. As I consider you all to be really good Dharma friends, I'm just sharing my thoughts as a way to encourage all of us to make our life more meaningful and to practise a bit of Dharma.

When I think about these points made by Lama Tsong Khapa, I feel that being completely immersed in this life's affairs primarily involves engaging in many negativities to please and protect your dear ones, and engaging in many negative deeds to combat your enemies. That's what this life's affairs are mostly involved with, as a result of which they lack any essence. In the end, engaging in such affairs only brings about more frustration and suffering. Perhaps I'm wrong, but that's what I feel. If I am wrong then I apologise.

As Lama Tsongkhapa said, in a very simple way, when there is attachment to one's own side, then instinctively there will be aversion towards anyone who opposes one's own side. Isn't holding on to such sentiments just a cause for more agony?

Again, I want to say how wonderful it is to have this opportunity to gather together again after a gap of a few weeks. You all seem very well and I'm definitely well, and my trip to India was very beneficial and successful.

The one thing that was a bit difficult and challenging was that Indian food somehow doesn't agree with me these days. I don't know what it is, but when I tried the food, it initially seemed quite tasty but then after a while, it didn't really taste nice at all. Then, although I didn't really get sick from it, I just lost my appetite, so I couldn't eat much. Then I resorted to having a clear soup, which seemed to be quite tasty! But after a while I started thinking "I wonder if this taste is because they've used MSG".

We can see here how you can use logic even in these situations. I was being served a clear broth, but because it was very tasty I was thinking, "How could something very clear and bland have so much taste?" So then I asked, and sure enough I found they had used MSG in the soup!

On a more positive note I can definitely assure you that I enjoyed the teachings very much. The teachings were so clear for me and I didn't even have to use my hearing aids at all. It must be the result of some sort of good, virtuous actions that I created in the past that I was able to hear the teachings so clearly, without the hearing aids. Of course His Holiness' speech has the incredible quality of being very clear and very precise. But I was able to really listen to them very easily. I didn't have any difficulty, and I didn't get tired.

However, when the teachings finished, getting back to my accommodation was a bit of a struggle, as there were big crowds to get through. I was very tired, and I had two young monks helping me back to my accommodation. When I had the younger monks helping me, they were just eager to get back home. Later when I had some of the older monks from house number 15 helping me, they said "Oh, Geshe-la, maybe we will stop and have some tea

here". So we stopped on the way, and didn't head straight back.

While I can assure you that my time receiving the teachings was very meaningful and very good, I also would like to acknowledge those who attended the sessions that were streamed here. I was very happy to hear about that, and I want to thank you for coming along.

My intention in implementing this idea was not just to receive the teachings but to gather together, have tea together, bring some biscuits and share the food together. I felt that would be a good way to build a communal feeling. I was told that people really felt good about that and indicated that in the future, it would be good to have more sessions like these.

We can finish our session today on an auspicious note, and return to Shantideva's profound words in our next session.

Maybe I just babble on about certain things, but I do feel there will be some benefit from the points I have shared with you.

Tara said that she found it very easy to follow His Holiness' teachings in Bodhgaya due to having come to the teaching sessions here regularly. That is one indication that our gathering here has definitely had some purpose. His Holiness actually elaborated quite a bit on the close placement of mindfulness, which we have partly covered in our sessions here.

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

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