
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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As usual let us spend some time in our meditation practice. [*tong-len meditation*]

Now we can generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings

3. ADVICE THAT IT IS SUITABLE TO STRIVE TO REALISE EMPTINESS¹

3.1. The actual advice

3.1.1. Showing the meaning of the mode of abiding

The root text reads:

151. *How can functionalities thus empty
Be attained or lost?
How could one be praised?
How could one be criticised?*

The commentary begins by stating:

If one comprehends the actual nature of functionalities that are thus empty of inherent existence in the way explained earlier...

This refers back to the various reasons that refute or negate the inherent existence of functionalities, which were presented earlier.

The commentary continues:

...then which gain does one attain and become attached? Through the loss of what gain does one generate anger?

This refers to the first two of the eight worldly concerns: being glad when one has obtained gained something and upset and unhappy when one does not gain anything. If we are glad when we gain something, then that can induce attachment to what we have gained. Likewise anger can arise when we are unhappy about not gaining something.

So we need to equalise those states of mind by understanding how the gains that we obtain and the lack of gain both equally lack any inherent existence. Since they do not exist from their own side, there is no independently existent gain to be obtained or lost. By contemplating this fact then our whole attitude towards gain and loss can change to feeling happy when we do not gain anything and unhappy when we gain something.

The misapprehension that perceives things as being inherently or independently existent also explains how that initial grasping at gain, and aversion towards not obtaining gain is actually induced by a self-grasping mind. So there is this combination of a self-grasping mind that is strengthened by the perception of objects as being inherently existent. That is the main point.

Here we need to be careful to not misinterpret this as meaning that we should avoid all gains. The main point is that we should overcome attachment to gain. If we think that it is necessary to completely avoid all gains, then that would imply that bodhisattvas would completely shun all gains, and not have possessions and so forth. That of course is not the case. There are bodhisattvas who have vast riches and so forth, but because of their lack of attachment to those riches they utilise them to benefit many other beings. Great practitioners such as the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso, and the fifth Panchen Lama, Lobsang Yeshe, had great riches in their lifetimes. Yet it is said that they did not even cling to their robes as being 'mine'. They didn't have the slightest of thoughts that anything 'belongs to me'. This goes to show that it's not gain that we need to avoid, but the grasping and attachment to gains and so forth.

The commentary then asks:

- What is the benefit received by praise, and what is the harm received by criticism, and by whom?

This relates to the second set of the eight worldly concerns: liking praise and not liking any criticism. As they both equally lack any inherent existence from their own side, why be so glad about praise and why be so unhappy about criticism?

The relevant verse reads:

152. *Where do happiness and suffering come from?
What is there to like or dislike?
Having investigated suchness
Who craves, and for what?*

Here the commentary explains:

From what true cause does the suffering of happiness, for which one engages into effort to attain and abandon it, arise? What is the inherent object of aversion and desire that one dislikes and likes? If one investigates suchness with the reasoning investigating the nature of the mode of abiding, then which craving person generates craving for which object, in dependence on which basis is craving generated? The three circles of craving lack inherent existence.

Being glad when experiencing happiness and despondent and unhappy when experiencing suffering is said to be one of the worst worldly concerns, as it is the cause of so much agitation, distress and mental suffering. That is because the happiness we crave eludes us so often, while we keep on experiencing what we really want to avoid. The moment we experience some sort of pleasurable samsaric happiness, attachment immediately arises in our minds, and the moment we experience any kind of discomfort and suffering, aversion and anger arise in our minds. We know this from our own experience. The moment we feel any discomfort, our mind is likely to become upset, and we begin to feel agitated and angry.

The way to equalise and overcome this worldly concern is to contemplate how there is no truly and inherently existent happiness. Likewise, there is no truly and inherently existent suffering existing independently from its own side. With this understanding strong grasping at the experience of worldly happiness, and the desire to avoid suffering is overcome.

¹ The body of the text has three sections: the need to realise emptiness, the method to generate the wisdom realising suchness and this section, advice that it is suitable to strive to realise emptiness.

There is also the exchanging and equalising method that is mentioned in the mind-training teachings. This involves exchanging your attitude from one that likes happiness with an attitude of disliking happiness, and exchanging disliking suffering with the attitude of liking and welcoming suffering and problems. This is, of course, a very profound level of mind-training, but through regular practice it is possible to actually reach the stage of exchanging the mind that craves happiness to being wary about experiencing worldly happiness, and then replacing it with an attitude of looking forward to experiencing difficulties and suffering.

Adopting this technique of exchanging worldly concerns can definitely be assisted by contemplating karma. All of our experiences come from previously created causes and conditions – none of them comes about randomly without any cause. When we apply this to ourselves, then we realise that the happiness we experience is result of our virtuous behaviour and the good karma that we have created in the past. So if we get attached to that happiness, then we are actually using up the virtue that we created in the past. So there's nothing to be happy about in using up and wasting the good karma that we have created in the past. When we think in this way and really understand the implications, it is very reasonable to not feel too elated about experiencing happiness.

Likewise, suffering is the result of negative karma that we created in the past with negativities and non-virtuous behaviour. So whatever suffering we experience now is actually exhausting our previously created negative karma, which is quite a good thing. When we understand things on this level then we welcome problems, because they are exhausting our negative karma. Wouldn't it be great to use up all your negative karma so that there are no more negative karmas left to experience?

Shantideva himself mentions five qualities of suffering. One of these is that when we experience suffering, we can immediately contemplate shunning negativities and accumulating virtue, and in that way see suffering as a way of encouraging us to accumulate virtue. Whenever I drink tea or enjoy a good meal, I contemplate how this is the consequence of good karma. Contemplating in this way actually encourages us to accumulate more virtue. Rather than becoming a cause for attachment, it actually reminds us that we need to accumulate more good karma. Conversely, when we experience any kind of mishaps and difficulties, we can remember that the uncomfortable experience we are experiencing now is a result of past negativities. This reminds us to purify our negative karma so that we won't have to experience the consequences in the future.

Shantideva mentions that we should develop a mind of being cautious about creating negativities, and glad and happy about accumulating virtues.

This is an essential point that we need to really consider. Whenever we have a good experience then, rather than getting too excited and feeling elated, we should immediately remind ourselves, 'OK, this is a result of the virtue that I accumulated in the past. So I should not waste it by becoming attached'. This also reminds us to accumulate more virtue. As soon as we experience any kind of mishap, discomfort and suffering we should

immediately remind ourselves that this is result of the negative karma that we created in the past, and that we must not engage in negativities now. Contemplating in this way develops a very strong impetus to accumulate virtue and shun negativities, which is the essential practice of Dharma.

The next line in the commentary is:

What is the inherent object of aversion and desire that one dislikes and likes?

Again, this is referring to what is liked or disliked such as liking happiness and disliking suffering, and liking pleasant words while disliking unpleasant words. As the commentary suggests:

If one investigates suchness with the reasoning investigating the nature of the mode of abiding, then which craving person generates craving for which object, in dependence on which basis is craving generated?

The conclusion is that:

The three circles of craving lack inherent existence.

The three circles refer to the person who is craving, the object that is being craved and the actual action of craving. All three lack even an atom of inherent existence. When we really analyse the person who likes and dislikes, the object that is liked and disliked, as well as the actions of craving for what we like and craving to be free from what we dislike, we find that all of them lack inherent existence. When we contemplate in this way it definitely reduces strong attachment and aversion in relation to, respectively, beautiful and repulsive objects. What is being presented here is that without a proper understanding of emptiness then it is very difficult to overcome the mental afflictions. Conversely when there is a good understanding of emptiness, the lack of inherent existence of ourselves and other phenomena, then that helps to reduce and ultimately overcome the mental afflictions. This is what needs to be understood.

The next verse is:

153. *When analysed, this life's worldly being,
How can it pass away here?
What will arise, what arose?
Who is a relative or friend?*

Here the commentary explains:

If one analyses thus a result, if one analyses karma and the person accumulating karma, then, because death is empty of inherent existence, how can this worldly sentient being die here in existence? How can it arise in a later life, how could it have arisen in a previous life? As there is not even the slightest inherent existence, who is the benefiting relative, or the attractive friend? Therefore, having worked at gaining a complete understanding of the meaning of the mode of abiding, one should train in equanimity for the eight worldly dharmas.

If we investigate the *karma and the person* who is *accumulating the karma*, then we are investigating on the basis of a living person now, as well as the experience at the time of death, and the future lifetime. All three, the living person now, the person who will experience death, and the person in the future, equally lack inherent existence.

As there is not even the slightest inherent existence, how can this worldly sentient being die here? How can it arise in a later life? How could it have risen in a previous life? What is being pointed out is that the living being now, that which will experience death, that which is to be reborn in the future as well as that which has come from the past, all equally lack any inherent existence. The reference to the *relative* who *benefits and the attractive friend* relates to friends and relatives who we perceive as existing inherently and from their own side, and are thus an object of attachment and craving. Understanding the lack of inherent existence of all the various objects of our attachment and aversion will help to overcome strong attachment and aversion, as well as all other afflictions.

Then comes the exhortation, *Therefore, having worked at gaining a complete understanding of the mode of abiding, one should train in equanimity for the eight worldly dharmas.* Although we may not have a complete understanding of the mode of abiding, i.e. the lack of inherent existence of phenomena, we can strive towards overcoming the eight worldly concerns with whatever understanding of emptiness that we do have now. This is the main point.

3.1.2. It is suitable to strive in realising that

The following two lines of verse are:

154ab. *Everything is like space -
That is how the likes of me should hold
everything.*

The commentary explains:

Therefore, those like me, the author, should hold all phenomena to be like space, because it is the main path to cut the root of existence and progress to all-knowing transcendental wisdom. 'Those like me' is to reduce the pride of the author, and the main reason is as advice to those ordinary individuals that have not yet realised suchness.

The definition of space is the mere negation of obstruction. Emptiness is likened to space as it is a non-affirming negation; i.e. emptiness is the mere negation of inherent existence.

Because it is the main path to cut the root of existence and progress to all-knowing transcendental wisdom explains that the realisation of emptiness is the main path that cuts the root of cyclic existence, and *progress to all knowing transcendental wisdom.*

This is a specific explanation: the wisdom realising emptiness is both the root cause for obtaining liberation i.e. cutting the root of cyclic existence, and for obtaining the all-knowing transcendental wisdom that is enlightenment. So the realisation of emptiness is the unequivocal cause of both liberation and enlightenment.

The remainder of the commentary is quite clear. *'Those like me' is to reduce the pride of the author. The main reason or purpose, however is to entice ordinary individuals who have not yet realised suchness, to actually gain the realisation of emptiness.*

3.2. Showing the object of great compassion by showing the disadvantages of cyclic existence

The following passages are not difficult to understand if you read through them slowly. They contain essential advice how to engage in practice.

There are five subdivisions:

- 3.2.1. The disadvantages of this life
- 3.2.2. The disadvantages in the next life
- 3.2.3. Contemplating that despite taking rebirth in the happy realm there is no time to practise Dharma
- 3.2.4. Contemplating the difficulty of attaining a birth with leisure and endowment
- 3.2.5. That oneself and others are afflicted by the suffering of cyclic existence is suitable to be mourned

3.2.1. The disadvantages of this life

Contemplating the disadvantages of this life also helps to induce compassion for other beings as well. That is the main point presented in these lines of verse:

154cd. *Those who desire happiness for themselves,
Through the causes of fighting and liking,*

155. *Are agitated or joyful;
Are miserable, striving and arguing,
Cutting, stabbing, and creating negativity
With each other; it is a very difficult life!*

The explanation in the commentary reads:

Even in this life, those desiring happiness for themselves are not beyond the power of suffering. Out of the wish for happiness they fight with enemies and like their friends, and through these causes they are either very disturbed or joyful. They are miserable when not achieving their aim. It appears as if they have to lead a very difficult life with much exertion, and yet attain little fruit due to the effort exerted to achieve the aim of their desires, due to arguing with others, cutting and stabbing each other's bodies, and accumulating infinite negativities of speech, mind and so forth. Therefore, the wise ones should not crave for the perfections of this life.

As the commentary explains, *Even in this life, those desiring happiness for themselves are not beyond the power of suffering.* Although we wish to experience happiness, we constantly experience suffering.

This is the same point that was presented in an earlier verse in the text. Shantideva really hit the mark when he said:

Although not wishing any sufferings,
Beings constantly run towards suffering
And although wishing for happiness,
They destroy the very causes of happiness.

As the commentary explains very clearly, *Out of the wish for happiness they fight with enemies.* We have all seen those who try to overcome enemies with the intention of gaining some happiness. However, far from attaining happiness, their actions just incite more hostility, so the desired result of happiness has become the cause for more suffering. We can see this on a global level. All the current conflicts arose from an initial intention to defeat and vanquish enemies in the name of peace, yet these conflicts have just created more and more hatred, and more combat, and more fighting. It is the same with friends. We try to please our friends, but sometimes that just causes more misery, and we realise that we haven't found the friendship we were looking for.

As the commentary further explains, *through these causes they are either very disturbed or joyful but they are miserable because they do not achieve their aim. It appears as if they have to lead a very difficult life with much exertion.* We can see this in our own lives: we put so much time and energy into the pursuit of

success and so forth but happiness still eludes us. As the commentary clearly explains people *attain little fruit due to the effort exerted to achieve the aim of their desires*. These efforts include *arguing with others, cutting and stabbing each other's bodies, and accumulating infinite negativities of speech, mind and so forth*. This is all very clear. *Therefore, the wise ones should not crave for the perfections of this life*. Here we are being exhorted to be careful about being overly concerned with the pleasures of this life.

The main point is the need to be mindful of acquiring the right conditions and causes for happiness. If we follow mistaken causes, then instead of experiencing happiness we will experience suffering which, of course, is what we have experienced all too often. The reason why we end up experiencing problems and thus suffering is because we are not acquiring the right causes for our happiness, and we keep on creating the causes for more problems and suffering. That is what we have done in the past, and that is what we are doing now. When you really contemplate these points especially in relation to the next verse, it really instils a strong compassion for those who are completely ignorant of the cause and effect sequence of how to accumulate virtues to experience happiness, and how to avoid the causes of suffering. Because of this ignorance they constantly experience suffering.

3.2.2. The disadvantages in the next life

The next few lines express the plight of sentient beings very succinctly. It is quite difficult for them to free themselves from cyclic existence, because this circle of constantly craving more causes us to experience the sufferings of cyclic existence again and again.

156. *Taking a higher rebirth from time to time,
And having experienced plenty of happiness
there
One falls after death into the lower realms,
Experiencing long and terrifying sufferings.*

As the commentary explains:

Through the force of occasionally meeting with a virtuous teacher one takes a happy rebirth from time to time for the shortest of periods, like a flash of lightning in the sky. Having enjoyed much happiness there, one then has to experience the rough hot unpleasant sufferings of the lower realms and fall into the unceasing great hells where one remains for infinite eons experiencing terrifying suffering. Therefore, contemplate the sufferings of the lower realms.

Again this is essential advice, and it's not too hard to understand. It is a very strong reminder to actually practise the Dharma. As the commentary explains, *through the force of occasionally meeting with a virtuous teacher one takes a happy rebirth from time to time for the shortest of periods*. Right now we are enjoying the perfect conditions of a human life with its ten endowments and eight freedoms, because we met virtuous teachers in the past, and accumulated virtuous karma or merit in the past.

However, as explained here, although we have obtained a higher rebirth from time to time in the past, each of those lives were very short. The good conditions that we enjoy now will definitely not last much more than eighty years. As mentioned here, *like a flash of lightning in the sky, having enjoyed much happiness then one has to experience the rough*

hot unpleasant sufferings of the lower realms. When we have exhausted the merit to experience good conditions, then what remains is the negative karma that we created in the past, which then propels us to the lower realms once more.

Contemplating these points definitely brings a sense of urgency about securing a good future by accumulating virtues now. As the commentary explains, the alternative is to remain *for infinite eons experiencing terrifying suffering*. So we need to *contemplate the sufferings of the lower realms*.

In this life we are exhausting the merit that we have accumulated in the past, and unless we accumulate further virtues and merit to secure a good rebirth in the next life, we will have to experience the suffering of an unfortunate rebirth in the lower realms. So the main point here is that we need to develop a sense of urgency about accumulating virtues now. While that definitely inspires me to accumulate virtues and shun negativities, we all can benefit from thinking about this point.

While contemplating the sufferings of an unfortunate birth in the next life encourages us to engage in virtues and practise Dharma, it also induces a sense of compassion for other beings. They are experiencing so much suffering at this time, and they have no understanding of how to overcome the causes of that suffering. Their plight is really pitiful, and contemplating that can induce great compassion for them.

On a very basic level try to avoid negativities and accumulate virtues. While we may not yet have a vast understanding of the teachings, we can definitely practise at a simple and practical level. Understanding the ten virtuous and the ten non-virtuous actions gives us all that we really need to practise morality. There are the three non-virtuous physical actions of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct; the four non-virtuous actions of speech i.e. lying, divisive words, harsh words, and idle gossip; and three mental non-virtues of covetousness, harmful intention, and wrong views. By avoiding these ten non-virtues, and making a promise to practise the ten virtues, you are engaging in the practice of avoiding negativities and adopting virtues.

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

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Edited Version*

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