
Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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18 April 2017

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

Now let us generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings, thinking, 'for the benefit of all sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment, so for that purpose I will engage in listening to the teachings and put them into practice well'.

3.2.2. The disadvantages in the next life

Under this heading, we covered the first verse and its explanation in our last session. We are now onto the next verse.

What is being presented here are profound ways for encouraging ourselves to engage in Dharma practice. As explained earlier, although we may have obtained a rebirth in a fortunate realm, the period of time we have in this fortunate rebirth is very short. Therefore, having obtained this precious human rebirth at this time, and particularly having had the good fortune to meet with a qualified Mahayana teacher, we need to seize this opportunity and put the Dharma we have studied into practice well. This is the essence of what is being presented here.

In fact, we covered this yesterday in the last session of the Easter course on *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, when we went through the details of contemplating the sufferings of sentient beings as a way to generate bodhicitta. So we can easily relate to this point.

In yesterday's session, we reached the point in the verses about the purpose of realising emptiness. As we didn't have time to go further with that, this can be a continuation of the same topic - how to go about generating the realisation of emptiness.

The first three lines of the next verse read:

157abc. *There are a multitude of precipices in the world.
Suchness does not exist there
And they contradict each other.*

The commentary explains:

Contemplating the general sufferings of existence, in the existence of desire, form and the formless there are great multitude of precipices of harmful sufferings. The cause why one is not beyond this is that this world does not comprehend suchness, which is the method to be liberated from suffering. Situations such as being bound by the noose of existence is mutually exclusive with such an understanding.

Therefore, if one does not comprehend suchness, then one fabricates functionalities as truly existent, and as a result, one will be in contradiction to the cause of liberation. Then there is nothing left but to circle in cyclic existence ...

What is being explained here are the many pitfalls of suffering that exist in the desire, form and formless realms.

Just to explain further about the 'formless realm': we may recall that the definition of a person is 'that which is nominated upon one or more of the five aggregates'. So while beings in the formless realm don't have the form aggregate, by definition they are a person or a being, as they are nominated upon the aggregates of consciousness along with the compositional factors, feeling and discrimination.

Again, we can relate the commentary to what we were discussing in the verse of the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* at yesterday's session. The purpose of realising emptiness is as explained here: *the cause why one is not beyond this is that this world does not comprehend suchness or emptiness, which is the method to be liberated from suffering*. The commentary goes on: *situations such as being bound by the noose of existence are mutually exclusive with such an understanding*. As was also explained in yesterday's session on the purpose of realising emptiness, beings are bound to cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions. If we recall the analogy of a person bound to a tree, the binding factor - the rope - is analogous to karma and the delusions. As I have mentioned previously, gaining an understanding of one aspect of the teachings, and maintaining that understanding, can help us to relate to other similar explanations. When you have read and understood a particular aspect of the teaching, then whenever you find it presented in a text, that part of the text will be very clear to you.

So if we understand cyclic existence as being our own contaminated aggregates, the binding factor - or as mentioned here the noose - is karma and the delusions, and that which is being bound is the person, ourselves. We are bound to the contaminated aggregates by the noose or rope of the afflictions and karma. Thus, we will not be free of being bound to the contaminated aggregates unless and until we generate the understanding or realisation of suchness or emptiness. This is the essential point.

The commentary further explains:

Therefore, if one does not comprehend suchness, then one fabricates functionalities as truly existent, and as a result, one will be in contradiction to the cause of liberation.

When we have the false perception of grasping at phenomena as truly or inherently existent, this mistaken view will bind us to cyclic existence, which is *in contradiction to the cause of liberation*. If we view things as being empty of true or inherent existence, then that will not be in contradiction to the cause of liberation. In fact, it will be the very cause of our liberation.

Here, we need to understand that the fabricated perception we have that sees *functionalities*, or phenomena *as being truly existent* is the main cause that binds us to cyclic existence, a specific example of which would be our own contaminated aggregates. Until we thoroughly understand why we need to abandon our contaminated aggregates, there is no way we can develop the mind of wanting to be free from cyclic existence.

In relation to the three types of sufferings – from our own experience, we can all relate to the *suffering of suffering* as something we desperately want to overcome. Even animals want to be free from the suffering of suffering. Some translations refer to it as the ‘suffering of pain’ denoting the emotional and physical pain that is experienced. This is not an obscure point; because of the very experience of physical or mental suffering, all beings are naturally inclined to want to be free from that. The next type of suffering is the *suffering of change*, which is a little bit more obscure. It is not, however, unique to the Buddhist tenets, as there are some other traditions that view the suffering of change as something to be abandoned as well. The third level of suffering – *all-pervasive, compounded suffering* – is said to be the subtlest suffering to realise, and thus to be abandoned. But until we see the need to abandon our contaminated aggregates, then there is no way we can be free from cyclic existence. This is what specifically needs to be understood here, which is an uncommon and unique presentation in the Buddhist teachings. If, on the other hand, we are in contradiction to the cause of liberation, *then there is nothing left but to circle in cyclic existence*.

The last line of Verse 157 and the two lines from Verse 158 read:

157d. *Hence, nothing like it exists in the world.*

158ab. *Additionally, there is a terrifying infinite Ocean of suffering without example.*

The commentary explains:

Because in the world of circling there is no such thorough comprehension of suchness, and it is a unique existence in which one experiences an ocean of terrifying infinite suffering without example. Therefore it is suitable to strive in understanding emptiness.

This serves as a reason for the earlier point. The commentary starts by saying that because of the lack of the *thorough comprehension of suchness*, *it is a unique¹ existence in which one experiences an ocean of terrifying infinite suffering without example*. In other words, until we gain the thorough comprehension or understanding of suchness or emptiness, we will not be able to see the end of cyclic existence. In earlier teachings, there were questions about whether or not there is an end to cyclic existence. Here, we are shown that we will not be able to see the end of cyclic existence if we do not have the comprehension, or thorough understanding, of suchness. Such a person will experience a seemingly endless round of rebirth in cyclic existence. But a being who develops a thorough understanding of suchness will be able to see that there is an end to their cyclic existence.

Rather than getting caught in endless debates about whether in general there is an end to cyclic existence or not, it is much more worthwhile for us to understand that, on a personal level, for as long as we do not gain the thorough or complete, unmistakable understanding of the correct view of suchness, there will be no end to our personal cyclic existence. We will have to be continuously

reborn in cyclic existence. But when we gain a good understanding and realisation of emptiness, from then on, we will be able to clearly see that there is an end to our own personal cyclic existence. So, as the commentary concludes, *it is suitable to strive to understand emptiness*.

Here, we need to contemplate our own mistaken view, or the view of the transitory collections. With this view, one grasps at oneself (the individual ‘I’) and the ‘my’ and ‘mine’ which belong to the aggregates as being inherently existent. That core misconception – grasping at the self – is what binds us to cyclic existence. We must then see the possibility of overcoming this mistaken view, and that there’s an antidote to this mistaken view of the transitory collections. The antidote is to cultivate the understanding of the correct view, which is that the ‘I’ and the things that belong to the ‘I’ do not exist inherently. When we comprehend that and realise the view of selflessness, we overcome that mistaken view of the transitory collections.

As the teachings explain, when grasping at the self is overcome, then we release the noose that binds us to cyclic existence. We need to see that the object apprehended by self-grasping – an inherently or truly existent ‘I’ – does not exist. Once we see that there is no truly or inherently existent self, we will have negated the object perceived by self-grasping. That is how we understand the selflessness of the ‘I’.

3.2.3. **Contemplating that despite taking rebirth in the happy realm there is no time to practise Dharma**

The next verse exhorts us to overcome the thought, ‘although I didn’t get time to practise much in this life, I can certainly aim to practise further in the next life’. What may sound to us like a comforting thought is in fact just a form of laziness, specifically the laziness of procrastinating.

The following passages help us to overcome such laziness by reminding us that, although we may have a good rebirth at the moment, it is very short, and there is not much time to actually practise the Dharma.

So we can relate the following passages to our precious human life:

158cd. *There thus it is weak
And one’s life is short.*

159ab. *There are actions to live
And stay healthy; thirst and fatigue,*

The commentary explains:

There, in that existence, although one takes rebirth in a happy realm, as a consequence the power to create virtue is thus weak, and the basis for achieving virtue, the freedoms and endowments, is short-lived.

Even during the briefest times there, one is engaged in actions with which one hopes to stay with for a long time, such as washing and massaging the body and relying on medicine to stay free from sickness. There is thirst, fatigue on the road, ...

So *although one may take rebirth in a happy realm* such as a human rebirth with *freedoms and endowments*, *the power to create virtue is still very weak*. Even if one has obtained a human rebirth with *freedoms and endowments*, *it is also very short-lived*. It doesn’t last for a long time. We really need to reflect upon this in relation to our own circumstances.

¹ Translator’s note: the Tibetan word here means ‘an existence which has no comparison or has no example’. I think that’s why this translation uses the word ‘unique’ here.

Even during the briefest times there, one is engaged in actions with which one hopes to stay with for a long time... So, although the duration of our stay in the happy realms or in fortunate rebirths is only for a short time, we hope to stay for a long time. Thus, we engage in the means for staying healthy and prolonging our life, by engaging in activities such as washing and massaging the body and relying on medicine to stay free from sickness and so forth.

We know that the daily act of washing or taking a shower – and especially taking a bath – takes some time out of our day. The main point being made here is that if we engage in these activities frivolously or mindlessly, then we are using up our time without taking the opportunity to practise the Dharma. When I take a bath, I incorporate thoughts about the Dharma, such as, ‘By cleaning and taking care of my body, may it be sustained for the purpose of the teachings, for the purpose of benefiting others’. With that attitude, such actions can become meaningful. Otherwise, if we engage in activities like cleaning ourselves or eating simply with worldly concerns, then since most of the day is taken up with such activities, our time will have been used frivolously and we won’t have had the time to practise Dharma. Likewise, when we get sick, we are so absorbed in our aches and pains, it is hard to think about the Dharma at that time.

Most of our day is taken up with such worldly activities. So, if we seek to set a separate time for practising Dharma, there is not much time left. However, if we were to engage in all our daily activities in a virtuous frame of mind, they would become meaningful. That is why, as I regularly recommend, it is important to remember offering every meal we eat and every drink we have, and think that we are consuming food and drink as a way to sustain ourselves for the purpose of Dharma. That then becomes the means for accumulating merit and engaging in virtue. Otherwise, if we think Dharma practice is to be done only at a separate allocated time, and regard everything else outside of this as merely daily activities for our survival, we will carry them out mindlessly, in a worldly way. If that is the case, then definitely there will not be much time left for what we would consider ‘time for Dharma practice’.

The next lines of verse are:

*159cd. Sleep and harm. Likewise, due to
Meaningless association with the childish,*

*160ab. Life passes by quickly, and
The opportunity to investigate is extremely
rare.*

Then the commentary explains:

... sleep and [being harmed by] various inner and outer harms. Likewise, through meaningless association with the childish negative friends, life passes quickly without meaning and disintegrates without the time to practise Dharma.

Because it is extremely difficult to find an opportunity to investigate the meaning of suchness, which is the cause to go beyond existence, for that reason one should strive in the method to reverse cyclic existence.

We could say that up to half of our life is spent sleeping. In 24 hours, up to half the time may be taken up with

sleep. Sleep takes up a lot of time that otherwise could be used to practise Dharma.

The *inner harms* could relate to inner diseases, or psychologically feeling weighed down or depressed. The *outer harms* are harms from external sources that also cause mental agony. If we are not mindful when we are in pain and agony, this time could detract from our practice of Dharma, and become a condition for us to create non-virtue rather than a virtuous state of mind. That is why these harms are considered as times that keep us away from the practice of Dharma.

Likewise, through meaningless association with the childish, i.e. non-virtuous friends, life passes quickly without meaning... This means our life doesn’t wait for a moment. It is passing away continuously, subtracting from our lifespan, while most of our time is used up with these frivolous activities. So our life passes quickly without meaning, and disintegrates without finding the time to practise Dharma.

Because it is extremely difficult to find opportunities to investigate the meaning of suchness, which is the cause to go beyond existence, one should strive in the method to reverse cyclic existence

Returning to the topic of sleep, for those who are not familiar with the mental factors sleep is one of the four ‘changeable’ mental factors. This means that it can be virtuous, non-virtuous or neutral, depending on the motivation preceding the act of sleep. If, prior to falling asleep, one has a virtuous mind, it is said that when one falls asleep, one’s sleep will actually become virtuous, due to the last moment of mind before sleep being virtuous. If one has a negative mind just prior to falling asleep, the rest of the sleep actually becomes non-virtuous. Whereas if one has neither a virtuous nor a non-virtuous mind and just falls asleep within a natural state of mind, then that act of sleep will also be neutral - what we call neither virtuous nor non-virtuous. I mentioned ‘motivation’ earlier, but I think the meaning here is more like your state of mind prior to falling asleep.

In terms of making sleep virtuous by adopting a virtuous mind, I had some personal experience with this last month. I was in bed and reciting the prayer of the Four Immeasurables; I recited it a few times, then I fell asleep. Sometime later, when I woke up, I was actually still reciting it – I woke up reciting that prayer!

As I have shared a few times previously, when I put my head on the pillow to go to sleep, I normally visualise the Buddha just above my head. Then I imagine light rays coming from the Buddha’s heart and pervading my body, imagining that I am receiving the blessings of the Buddha. Then, when I fall asleep in that state, I feel like my sleep has been worthwhile. However, that is just something I have chosen to do. I’m not saying that you all have to do the same. I’m sharing this as an example of how to bring about a virtuous mind just before falling asleep.

It is specifically explained in some instructions that one can visualise the light rays coming from the Buddha, like a net or canopy of light. I guess we could think of the image of a mosquito net draped over a bed. The body is covered with the rays of light descending from the

Buddha: one sleeps within that canopy of light. It is said that one can feel very joyous and very protected under those rays of light. The instructions say that it is one of the best methods to protect one from external harms. It can also help one to ward off nightmares and uncomfortable dreams.

3.2.4. Contemplating the difficulty of attaining a birth with leisure and endowment

First, the argument or hypothetical doubt is presented:

Argument: It is acceptable because one can stop cyclic existence through meditating on emptiness when one takes rebirth in a happy realm and meditates on emptiness.

This is in relation to the earlier point that it is difficult to obtain a human rebirth in the next lifetime. Here, the argument is that, *it is acceptable because one can stop cyclic existence through meditating on emptiness when one takes rebirth in a happy realm and meditates on emptiness.* This is a doubt held by many people, 'Well even in this life if I don't achieve something significant, that's fine! I can relax, because in the next life, I will have the opportunity to practise the Dharma.'

There are those who often say 'I didn't get much time to practise Dharma in this life, but that's okay, because in the next life, I will obtain a human rebirth, and then I will be able to practise.' The text proceeds to remove such wishful thoughts, and encourages us to practise the Dharma now, when we have such good conditions.

160cd. *How can the method to overcome
Habituation with distraction possibly exist there?*
161ab. *Demons work there to throw one
Into the vast hells;*

Then the commentary explains the meaning of this verse, which serves as an answer to the earlier argument:

Answer: Cyclic existence is extremely difficult to stop due to having habituated oneself since beginningless samsaric lives to grasping at functionalities as truly existent, and to the distractions such as outer excitements and the like. How can there be the method to stop it, as conducive conditions are extremely rare and harmful obstructing conditions abound? Even during this limited time to practice, the dharma demons such as the 'Son of Gods' work for one to fall into the great hells. The conditions obstructing liberation from existence are many and difficult to stop.

What the commentary is explaining here is that *cyclic existence is extremely difficult to stop due to having become habituated since beginningless samsaric lives to grasping at functionalities as truly existent, and to the distractions such as outer excitements and the like.* We have a long habituation to grasping at truly or inherently existent functionalities, which include 'self' and other phenomena. This is due to the very deep-rooted seed of grasping at true existence, as well as our habituation to the distractions such as outer excitements, which means being distracted by, and engaging in frivolous activities. Due to this long habituation, we find it difficult to ignore these conditions.

As the commentary asks, *how can there be the method to stop it, as conducive conditions are extremely rare and harmful obstructing conditions abound?* We can relate to the examples or analogies given in the lam-rim teachings that

illustrate how our negativities are plentiful. One analogy compares our negativities to being like an expansive, deep-rooted tree, while our virtue is weak. There's another analogy: it is difficult to make a large quantity of a bitter substance palatable and sweet. Our virtue is like a few small drops of a sweet substance like honey that we put into a huge pot containing a bitter substance – one or two drops definitely cannot make it sweet. It would require a lot of the sweet substance to sweeten it. This analogy illustrates how, while our negativities abound, our virtue is very, very weak, as we have few opportunities to accumulate virtue.

There is a two-fold understanding for us here. On one hand, because our virtues have been weak, we cannot expect a radical, immediate change, expecting that by engaging in a few practices, we will suddenly experience a great transformation. That is too grand an expectation. On the other hand, despite our attempts at virtue being meagre, if we make every small effort to continuously engage in them, then eventually we can overcome our negativities – just like many drops of a sweet substance will eventually sweeten a big pot of a bitter substance.

Because of our habituation to perceiving things mistakenly with the view that grasps at inherent or true existence, and because of our many distractions, just practising a few lines of the Dharma could not possibly immediately change us. That is to be understood here. When the commentary further mentions that *even during this limited time to practice, the Dharma demons* – the Dharma demons mentioned here could refer to the negative influence of others, such as negative friends, but more specifically those who may show us a wrong or mistaken path that is not based on fact and reality, but on misconstrued, fabricated advice and teachings. Due to their influence and by following their advice, we could be misled and thus move further away from achieving the real Dharma, the truth. *The 'Son of Gods'* is the example mentioned here, which causes *one to fall into the great hells.*

Of course, when the Buddha teaches, he is able to subdue many sentient beings with his teachings. Because of the Buddha's majesty, he is able to attract many disciples. However, it is said that certain demons have a miraculous power to show an aspect of looking like the Buddha, just on the outside. When such demons give teachings, they mislead people into engaging in negativities.

It is said that evil-minded beings who do not like virtue and the Dharma, will be jealous when we do good virtuous deeds, and try to influence us to engage in negativities by telling us things that are untrue, leading us away from our Dharma practice and virtue. That is the main point being related here. We need to be mindful to protect ourselves from the negative influences that lead us away from the Dharma.

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

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