

Shantideva's Bodhisattvacharyavatara

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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While maintaining the motivation we generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our meditation practice. [meditation]

Now we can generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines: For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I'll listen to the teachings and put them into practice well.

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

Last week we discussed the first two lines of verse relating to this heading. Next comes this argument:

It is not difficult to find opportunity to liberate oneself from existence because when one takes rebirth in the happy realms, then one can achieve liberation through such practices such as meditating on the truth, and faith in the Three Jewels and the like.

Then these two lines are presented:

161cd. *There are many wrong paths,
And it is difficult to contradict doubt.*

The answer to the argument is:

While taking rebirth in the happy realms there are many wrong paths that have fallen into the extremes of eternalism or nihilism, which are opposing conditions to generating the right view. There are false teachers that lead one on these paths, and it is difficult to contradict doubt with regards to the correct view because it is difficult to find the inner and outer conditions to cut that doubt.

We can relate *taking rebirth in the happy realms* to ourselves because we have been reborn with all the conditions of a perfect human rebirth. Yet even though we have this happy or fortunate rebirth now, we still find it hard to utilise these good conditions, because *there are many wrong paths that have fallen into the extremes of eternalism or nihilism, which are opposing conditions for the generation of the right view.*

The first argument is that *it is not difficult to find the opportunity to liberate oneself from existence, because when one takes rebirth in the happy realms, one can achieve liberation through practices such as meditating on the truth, and faith in the Three Jewels and the like.* If the thought, 'Even though I may not be able to practise Dharma fully in this life, I'll achieve all the good conditions in future lives, and then I can meditate on truth and having faith in the Three Jewels and be liberated' arises, then we need to immediately recognise this as the laziness of procrastination.

Although we have obtained a happy rebirth now, *there are many wrong paths of eternalism or nihilism, which are opposing conditions for the generation of the right view.* Then *there are false teachers that lead one onto these wrong paths.* So not

only are there wrong paths, but there are also those who propound the tenets of the wrong paths. Hence *it is difficult to contradict doubt with regard to the correct view because it is difficult to find the inner and outer conditions to cut that doubt.*

As explained in the teachings, it is hard to generate even a doubt about whether emptiness is valid.¹ However eliminating that doubt and moving towards an understanding of emptiness is difficult, because it is difficult to find the necessary inner and outer conditions.

This is followed by a further argument:

Although one may not find these conditions in this life, because one will find the virtuous teacher in the next life, and then practise.

The argument here is that *although one may not find these conditions in this life, it is acceptable because one will find a virtuous teacher in the next life, and then be able to practise.* This argument points out a false sense of certainty that we will definitely obtain a fortunate rebirth in the next lifetime, and be able to continue to practise the Dharma. The assumption is that, although one may not have all the conditions for practice in this life, one will obtain a good rebirth again in the next lifetime and be able to practise then.

The answer is that there is no certainty one will obtain a good rebirth in the next lifetime, as the causes are so difficult to obtain. So on a personal level this is an instruction to overcome the laziness of procrastination. We need to specifically relate this to the difficulty of obtaining a precious human rebirth with its eight freedoms and ten endowments, as presented in the next verse. It is also extensively explained in the lam-rim teachings.

The next verse reads:

162. *Finding freedom again is difficult
And the coming of a buddha is extremely rare to find.
It is difficult to abandon the river of afflictions
And, alas, weighed down by these one continually suffers.*

As the commentary explains:

Answer: If one does not strive well in this life, when one has found a virtuous teacher, then it will be difficult to find freedom again in the future, and since it is extremely rare for a buddha to come to the world, it is very hard to meet with a virtuous teacher.

Although one has met a virtuous teacher and already attained a wholesome basis with freedoms and endowments, if one does not strive well in conscientiousness, then it is hard to counter the river of afflictions. They will continue to pour down until one has attained liberation. 'Alas' contains the meaning of sadness and despondency because one continually experiences one suffering after the next, as well as experiencing extreme suffering. Although one may be free from one suffering, one falls into another suffering. Therefore, one should strive in contemplating the sufferings of cyclic existence while having attained freedom and endowments.

¹ Ed: As mentioned previously, this doubt is the positive doubt that maybe it really is the case that things do lack inherent existence.

This is an explicit explanation of the difficulty of obtaining a precious human rebirth, which is necessary to gain an understanding of the right view that realises emptiness. Of course, this applies in a broader sense as well; let alone realising emptiness, finding the conditions to practise Dharma is very difficult.

As specifically mentioned, it is even more difficult to find a teacher who presents the correct view of emptiness properly, because they are very rare. The significant point here is to *strive well in this life, when one has found a virtuous teacher*.

When the commentary says, *it will be difficult to find freedom again in the future*, it is referring to the conditions necessary for a precious human rebirth with its eight freedoms and ten endowments. Moreover *it is extremely rare for a buddha to come to the world*, which why it will be *very hard to meet with a virtuous teacher*. As explained in the lam-rim teachings, we are said to be living now in what is called a 'light eon', which is a fortunate eon where the Buddha has come and taught the Dharma. The 'light eon' is followed by a 'dark eon' when the Buddhist teachings have declined. If one were to be born in a dark eon, there would be no possibility of meeting with virtuous teachers, because the teachings of the Buddha would not be present.

So we have both the internal conditions of a precious human rebirth and the external conditions of the eon in which we are now living, where Buddha has come and taught in this world. Without these external conditions, *it is very difficult to meet with a virtuous teacher* who is able to present the unmistakable correct view.

When the commentary states that *although one has met a virtuous teacher and already attained a wholesome basis with freedoms and endowments*, it is referring to the argument which says that one will have all the necessary conditions to be able to practise in a future life. In simple terms it is saying, 'What makes you think that you'll be able to practise in a future life with all the necessary conditions, when you are not utilising the good conditions that you actually have right now?'

That is followed with *if one does not strive well in conscientiousness, then it is hard to counter the river of afflictions which will continue to pour down until one has attained liberation*. If we don't utilise all the perfect conditions that we have now by applying conscientiousness, then the afflictions will run rampant, and *pour down like rain*, meaning that we will be completely consumed by them, and have to endure suffering until we *have attained liberation*.

As the commentary further mentions, '*Alas*' contains the meaning of sadness and despondency because one continually experiences one suffering after the next, as well as experiencing extreme suffering. *Although one may be free from one suffering, one falls into another suffering. Therefore, one should strive in contemplating the sufferings of cyclic existence while having attained freedom and endowments*. The conclusion is that we need to reflect upon the fact that having obtained these good conditions now, we need to take the essence of this life and make it most meaningful by contemplating the correct understanding of emptiness, and engaging in the practice of Dharma.

Shantideva is really encouraging us here. Reflecting on these points is an impetus to practise Dharma and make our precious human life with its eight freedoms and ten endowments most meaningful.

There is nothing obscure about this. We can all relate to the comment that *although one may be free from one suffering, one falls into another suffering*. With our contaminated aggregates, we find that we might have a headache, but once we've cured the headache, we might start having aches and pains in our back, or our knees might start to give way, and then we have stomach aches. We find that we experience these sufferings one after another, again and again, in one form or another, which will be the case until we obtain liberation.

The main point that we need to understand here is that we will have to experience these sufferings again and again until we obtain liberation. And until and unless we gain an understanding of the correct view, the realisation of emptiness, we cannot possibly obtain liberation.

As explained previously, grasping at an inherently existent self is the very root cause of samsara. So until and unless grasping at an inherent existent self is completely reversed by applying the antidote of the wisdom realising emptiness or selflessness, there's no way we will be able to reverse the condition of being in cyclic existence.

Gaining the wisdom realising emptiness also depends on having a proper understanding of interdependent origination. Therefore, as presented in Lama Tsongkhapa's *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*, which we covered in our Easter course, we need to strive to gain an understanding of interdependent origination. This is the crucial point.

It is important for us to incorporate whatever understanding we gain from other teachings into whatever subjects we are currently studying, as that will form a concise basis for our practice. There are so many different texts and different practices, and if we view each individual text or practice in isolation, it can be confusing. Rather, we need to try to combine whatever understanding we have from the different texts we study, and whatever practices we are doing, and then we will gain a comprehensive understanding.

3.2.5. That oneself and others are afflicted by the suffering of cyclic existence is suitable to be mourned

This refers to the ways and means of instilling feelings of love and compassion for sentient beings.

The first verse under this heading reads:

163. *Those who do not see their suffering
Despite suffering to the extreme,
They, submerged in the river of suffering,
'Oh dear', they are appropriate to be mourned.*

The commentary explains:

Sentient beings suffer to the extreme, they do not see that they are sinking in suffering by mistaking suffering for happiness, and they are submerged in a river of suffering. Having generated love for these sentient beings that sink in the mud of suffering, they

are suitable to be mourned with the thoughts of, 'Oh dear, how wonderful would it be if sentient beings were free from suffering' and the like. Therefore, one needs to strive in meditating on great compassion.

When the commentary states, *sentient beings suffer to the extreme*, we need to relate this to ourselves as well, as the heading indicates. We need to remember that these explanations apply to ourselves as well as other sentient beings, as we are all in the same lamentable and pitiful situation.

Sentient beings, including ourselves, endure extreme suffering. *By mistaking suffering for happiness they do not see that they are sinking*. This again is very true. A lot of suffering is mistaken for happiness and as a result sentient beings purposely engage in suffering. As I've mentioned previously, we need to be very cautious about creating negativities. We gladly and wilfully engage in some negativities rather than being hesitant about creating them; indeed, there are times where we become upset if we don't get an opportunity to engage in some negativities.

How can we call ourselves true Dharma practitioners if we behave like this? If we willingly engage in negativities and get upset when we don't get an opportunity to create negativities then we are indeed *submerged in a river of suffering*.

Understanding karma means recognising that if we engage in the causes of suffering, we are bound to experience the consequence, which is suffering. If we do not wish for suffering, we need to avoid creating the causes of suffering, which are negativities. Conversely, if we want to experience happiness, we need to engage in the appropriate causes for happiness, which is engaging in virtuous actions.

The commentary continues, *having generated love for these sentient beings that sink in the mud of suffering, they are suitable to be mourned with the thoughts of...* When we relate these sufferings to ourselves, they become a condition to generate renunciation. When we relate them to other sentient beings, then they become a condition for us to generate compassion. We need to understand that the difference comes down to the focus. If the sufferings relate to ourselves, they become a condition for us to generate renunciation. But when focused upon other sentient beings, then contemplating these sufferings and their pitiful situation becomes an impetus for us to generate compassion for them.

Therefore one generates the thought, 'Oh dear, how wonderful it would be if sentient beings were free from suffering' and so forth. This can be further elaborated into these three aspirations: *how wonderful would it be if sentient beings were free from suffering*; may they be free from these sufferings; and I will personally ensure that they are free from suffering. These thoughts are a very powerful way of generating compassion.

Then the commentary concludes with, *therefore, one needs to strive in meditating on great compassion*.

The next verse presents an example of mistakenly taking suffering as happiness.

164. For example, some, after having washed repeatedly,

*Go into fire again and again.
Thus, even though abiding in extreme suffering,
They project that they are happy.*

The commentary explains:

For example, some followers of outside tenets, that were deceived by misleading teachers, repeatedly wash themselves and enter the fire again and again. Although they abide with strong suffering due to the physical austerity, they project happiness onto it by holding it to be a method for attaining liberation.

The commentary explains that *some followers of outside tenets*, i.e. followers of non-Buddhist schools, who *were deceived by misleading teachers, repeatedly wash themselves* seeing it as a means to gain liberation. Just washing themselves again and again doesn't seem so severe, but then the next austerity the commentary mentions is entering a *fire again and again*. To this day, there are those who walk on fire, sleep on nails or thorns, and so forth, holding these severe and austere practices to be a means to gain liberation.

Bathing in the Ganges, however, is believed to have some benefit because the water is actually blessed by bodhisattvas, so it has some positive effect. But if we could gain liberation just by washing, then I guess we wouldn't be too far away from liberation, because we bath ourselves quite often!

It is quite misleading to say that these austere practices, in and of themselves, are a means to gain liberation. Actions such as enduring the pain of putting one's fingertips on fire, or enduring extreme heat and cold, or sleeping on thorns or nails, in and of themselves, cannot be a cause to achieve liberation, and so they are quite meaningless.

Nevertheless, *although they abide with strong suffering due to physical austerity, they project happiness onto it by holding it to be a method for attaining liberation*. In their minds, these followers think they're creating the causes for liberation, when in fact they have been misled.

As a personal instruction, it is not sufficient for us to point the finger at others and say they're meaninglessly enduring such sufferings by following strange practices, while we ourselves create more suffering for ourselves by willingly engaging in negativity. In both cases, the suffering is self-inflicted.

The understanding we need to derive here is that we need to avoid engaging in negativities as a way to stop the causes of our own suffering.

The advice in the next verse is again very pertinent advice for us:

165. Thus those continually acting
As if without old age and death
Are first killed,
And then comes the terrifying downfall into the
lower realms.

As the commentary explains:

In this manner, those that abide acting like arhats without death or sickness, are first killed by the lord of death without any means to stop or abandon him, and then come the terrifying sufferings of having fallen into the three lower realms.

In reference to *those that abide acting like arhats without death or sickness*, real arhats are of course free from

sickness, aging, and death, because they have abandoned the very root of the afflictions. When we, who are still in cyclic existence, fail to utilise our freedoms and endowments to engage in the practice of Dharma, then we are acting as if we are arhats.

We cannot afford to lie around lazily as if we are arhats with no need to free ourselves from cyclic existence, because our life is bound to end. If we fail to put time into practising the Dharma, there's no way to stop the lord of death, and then the terrifying sufferings of having fallen into the three lower realms will be upon us. Here the metaphor of being killed by the lord of death is being used as an exhortation to not lie around in a leisurely manner and waste our opportunity to engage in the practice of Dharma.

3.3. Showing the mode of apprehension of the aspect of great compassion

Basically, this is presenting an aspect of great compassion. The first verse reads:

166. *Thus may I become someone from whose
Clouds of merits rain of a well borne
Accumulation of happiness that pacifies those
Tortured by the sufferings of fire.*

The commentary explains:

Having contemplated the way they who experience terrifying suffering in their continuum in the way explained earlier, are afflicted by suffering, one should meditate on great compassion in the following manner, keeping in mind the sentient beings that are tortured by the fires of suffering:

'When will I become someone that pacifies the sufferings of the lower realms with medicine, food and the like? That which are parts of my collection of happiness, built up from clouds of merits built up by generosity and so forth. How wonderful would it be if sentient beings were free from suffering? May they be free from suffering. May I bring about that freedom.'

Meditate in the following way on great compassion:

Having contemplated the suffering of sentient beings, which have just been explained, *one meditates on great compassion in the following manner.* What are presented in the commentary as questions, are actually aspirational prayers.

Keeping in mind that sentient beings are tortured by the fires of suffering, one asks oneself, *'When will I become someone who pacifies the sufferings of the lower realms with medicine, food and the like?'* This rhetorical question is basically saying, *'May I be the one who pacifies the sufferings of the lower realms with medicine, food and the like?'* *That which are parts of my collection of happiness, built up from clouds of merits built up by generosity and so forth* refers to the accumulation of merit from practising the six perfections of generosity, morality, patience, joyous effort, concentration and wisdom.

With the merit gained from these practices one thinks, *'How wonderful it would be if sentient beings were free from suffering.'* From this arises the compassion that thinks, *'May they be free from suffering, and may I bring about that freedom.'* In other words, by reflecting on the suffering of sentient beings, the mind of compassion thinking, *'May I free them from all the sufferings'* will arise.

So, as the commentary says, *meditate in the following way on great compassion.*

This part of the text is specifically dedicating the accumulation of one's merit towards the alleviation of the suffering of sentient beings, and wishing them to be free from that suffering. Here, compassion is presented as an outcome of having generated merit.

The next verse relates this back to the need for wisdom:

167. *May I, by respectfully building up the
accumulation of merits
In the way that lacks focus,
Be able to show emptiness to those
Who are destitute because of having focus.*

The commentary explains:

'Dedicating as the cause for liberation from the sufferings of cyclic existence: When will I realise that all phenomena lack inherent existence, and respectfully build up the infinite accumulations of merit of generosity and so forth with the method of the objectless wisdom²?

When will I show emptiness to the sentient beings that are destitute in cyclic existence due to the object of true-grasping, to pacify their samsaric suffering? How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free from the suffering of cyclic existence. May I free them from that suffering.'

It further mentions:

To fulfil the definition of great love and compassion that are contained in the Mahayana path one needs to wish to place sentient beings in the state of complete enlightenment that is endowed with all happiness, and which is free from all suffering.

Meditate in the following way on great compassion:

'Dedicating as the cause for liberation from the sufferings of cyclic existence: When will I realise that all phenomena lack inherent existence, and respectfully build up the infinite accumulations of merit of generosity and so forth with the method of the objectless wisdom? When will I show emptiness to the sentient beings that are destitute in cyclic existence due to the object of true-grasping, to pacify their samsaric suffering? How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free from the suffering of cyclic existence. May I free them from that suffering.'

This is a dedication that serves as the cause for liberation from the suffering of cyclic existence. As related here, one dedicates the combination of one's extensive accumulation of merit and one's understanding of emptiness, referred to here as *objectless wisdom*, to liberating all beings from suffering. We need to develop the aspiration by asking ourselves, *'When will I realise that all phenomena lack inherent existence, and respectfully build up the infinite accumulations of merit of generosity and so forth?'* Here *and so forth* refers to the other perfections. So the aspiration is, *'May I actually use these merits combined with the objectless wisdom - the wisdom realising emptiness - to be able to liberate sentient beings'*.

The following aspiration in the commentary has essentially the same meaning: *when will I show emptiness to the sentient beings.*

² Some translations use also 'the wisdom which lacks apprehension'

The next point is the main point:

To fulfil the definition of great love and compassion that are contained in the Mahayana path one needs to wish to place sentient beings in the state of complete enlightenment that is endowed with all happiness, and which is free from all suffering.

One realises that having generated strong love and compassion for sentient beings by contemplating all of the suffering they are experiencing, and instilling a strong sense of urgently wishing for them to be free from suffering and endowed with happiness is not sufficient in itself as a means of actually benefiting sentient beings. What needs to be added is what is called superior intention.

The superior intention that is indicated here is taking personal responsibility for implementing the wish to place them in the *state of complete enlightenment, that is endowed with all happiness, and which is free from all suffering.*

As I've also emphasised many times previously, we need to develop the strong impetus to generate love and compassion, and then engage in practices such as the tong-len meditation. This giving and taking practice is a powerful practice that incorporates the actual deeds of a bodhisattva – taking the sufferings of others on oneself, and giving them happiness.

As I mentioned earlier, these are really essential points that allow one to generate that strong mind of bodhicitta.

I place great emphasis on love and compassion and how practices like tong-len and so forth are a very strong means of generating that mind of superior intention as a way to generate bodhicitta. I have mentioned this again and again, and it is being backed up here by these teachings. This goes to show that I'm not just being a loud mouth, and that it is actually a significant practice!

As the commentary continues:

In short, one should meditate on the mode of abiding in dependence on calm abiding.

So, what is the point being made here by saying *one should meditate on the mode of abiding in dependence on calm abiding?*

Student: You need to have established calm abiding before you can meditate on emptiness.

This point was mentioned in the Mahamudra teachings. There are two specific systems: finding the right view through meditation, and finding meditation through the right view.³ What is being presented here is finding the right view through meditation, which specifically means developing calm abiding first, in order to achieve the realisation of emptiness.

Then the commentary explains:

Further, because the 'I' in reference to thinking of 'me' is established as merely labelled in dependence on the aggregates and does not exist inherently, it does not exist intrinsically, ...

As further explained, this 'I' does not exist intrinsically because:

... it is not established in the slightest in an independent mode. Therefore, the existent person is merely posited in name, it exists only as labelled and in a dependent mode.

So, as the commentary says:

Hence, take to heart, 'It does not exist inherently'.

What is being specifically emphasised here is that *the existent person is merely posited in name.* It exists only as a label that is imputed by the mind, and exists only *in a dependent mode*, meaning that it exists only interdependently. The conclusion that we need to keep in mind is that, for these reasons, the 'I' does not exist inherently.

Finally, the commentary says:

Meditate in the same way on all phenomena such as the aggregates and so forth.

Essentially, this is just a summary of how to meditate on emptiness.

Then the author of the commentary, Gyaltsab Rinpoche, adds these verses as a summary of the chapter:

I say this as summary:

For as long as one does not find a holy master
One will not even realise partially
The Middle Way of dependent arising that is free
from extremes
That can cut the root of existence.
Whatever well-spoken advice I receive
Is due to the kindness of the lama.
May this virtue become the cause
That my mothers meet a Mahayana guru.
Without realising the suchness of the Middle Way,
free from extremes
One cannot touch the state of a superior.
Hence, by deciding that dependent arising is the
meaning of emptiness
Strive accordingly in achievement.
That difficult to find even in a billion eons;
Because the pure school of Nagarjuna pronouncing
the two truths
Because they will disappear before long in this
realm
Those with intelligence will quickly generate joyous
effort.

The meaning of these words is quite clear. They cover many of the points that were presented in the chapter itself, so as we read these verses we can relate them to those points.

II. EXPLANATION OF THE TITLE

This is the ninth chapter called *The Perfection of Wisdom from the Introduction to the Actions of Bodhisattvas.*

This is the commentary on the ninth chapter called the Perfection of Wisdom, from the commentary on *The Introduction to the Actions of Bodhisattvas.*

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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³ See the teaching of 11 November 2008.
Chapter 9