

Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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While maintaining the motivation we generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our regular meditation practice. [*tong-len meditation*]

In the same way that we have briefly engaged in the *ton-glen* meditation just now, we should try to make it part of our daily practice. As I've mentioned previously, when the *tong-len* visualisation is combined with the breath, it is good for the breathing to be a bit more laboured: when visualising taking in others' sufferings you breathe in heavily, and when visualising giving away your happiness, along with your body, possessions and virtues, you breathe out heavily.

So the measure of the breathing for this practice is different to when we do the practice of single-pointedly focusing on the breath. It would be hard to combine the technique used in our normal breathing meditation practice, where we attempt to just focus on the breath, with the *ton-glen* practice as the two techniques are not quite the same. With the *tong-len* practice, we need to imagine that we are intentionally and willingly taking in the sufferings of others, and intentionally and willingly giving away our happiness, so more vigour is needed.

As in our previous sessions, let us first recite the dedication chapter together, based on the bodhicitta motivation that we generated earlier. Indeed, the very first verse of chapter 10 relates to bodhicitta, so it is an essential reminder to first generate the bodhicitta motivation, and then recite the aspirational verses of dedication while holding that motivation. When we generate the bodhicitta motivation, the practice of giving and dedicating becomes the perfection of generosity. It is good to know how that practice becomes a perfection.

The first verse of the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* reads:

*By any virtues of my writing the
Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Actions
May all migrators
Enter the bodhisattva's actions.*

While this dedication specifically relates to the composition of the text, it encompasses all bodhisattva actions, which should be dedicated in a similar manner. It is good to really try to contemplate the meaning of the verses and incorporate that understanding into one's recitation. This chapter presents a very good example of how to dedicate whatever virtues we accumulate. [*Recitation*]

The motivation we generated earlier will suffice as the motivation for receiving the teachings as well.

2.1.1.3.2.1.1. *Attaining perfect excellence (cont.)*

2.1.1.3.2.1.1.2. *Dedication for being free from harm and attaining perfect splendour*

Here, Shantideva relates to the various forms of suffering. It shows he's aware of the many different levels and types of suffering; he includes every type of suffering to be eliminated. He is also dedicating for sentient beings to be free from harm and to attain splendour. This dedication and those following are done out of great compassion – not being

able to bear seeing others suffering in numerous ways, then dedicating any accumulated virtues for the wellbeing of other sentient beings.

The verse reads:

*28cd. May they live together without quarrels and arguments.
May they, without harmfulness, attain independence.*

*29ab. May sentient beings with little splendour
Achieve great splendour.*

The commentary explains:

May they live together harmoniously, without quarrels, and may they live independently, without experiencing harm. May those of little splendour who are the object of ridicule, achieve great splendour.

We can also take this dedication as a personal instruction on how to live harmoniously with others: *may they live together harmoniously, without quarrels, and may they live independently.* This is the way to live with others without having conflict.

The second sentence reads: *may those of little splendour who are the object of ridicule, achieve great splendour.* I find this to be a significant point. It is a pitiful situation when others are ridiculed by those stronger than them, either in strength or in status. When I see the weak being bullied or taken advantage of, I immediately feel very uncomfortable. I've always felt like this. As I've shared in the past, when I was young, I had a few fights. Usually, the fights were because I was taking sides when I saw stronger kids bullying the younger ones. I would always take the side of the weaker ones, and try to fight back against the bullies.

We need to also be mindful to live harmoniously with others in our own lives. Although we consider ourselves to be Dharma practitioners, often, if we are not careful, we can start to quarrel with other practitioners out of jealousy, or find fault with, or criticise, them. It happens in every religious tradition; rivalry occurs, even in a religious context. Therefore, we need to be mindful.

These states of mind – jealousy, ridiculing others, or criticising them – come from not really paying attention to the purpose of our Dharma practice. Thus, if we practise Dharma and dedicate that practice in the ways mentioned here, it will prevent those unruly states of mind from arising. So, we really need to be mindful and take this as a personal instruction.

2.1.1.3.2.1.1.2..3. *Dedication for attaining a perfect form and progressing from inferiority to greatness*

*29cd. May those with wretched bodies such as ascetics
Have beautiful completely perfect and whole bodies.*

*30. May all women existing in the worlds
Become solely men.
May the low achieve high status
And abandon pride as well.*

The commentary reads:

May all those, who with wretched bodies, such as ascetics whose bodies are tormented by heat and cold, have beautiful, completely perfect and whole bodies. May all women in the worlds become men. May all those of low caste achieve a higher status, and abandon pride despite this attainment.

The first part is quite clear: *May all those, who with wretched bodies, those who are downtrodden or their bodies are weak, such as ascetics whose bodies are tormented by heat and cold, have beautiful, completely perfect and whole bodies.*

The next part requires some explanation; otherwise, there is a lot of room for misinterpretation. *May all women in the worlds become men.* If one has a proper understanding, this point will not affect one's mind. Otherwise some may use this one line as a reason to criticise the whole work of Shantideva. Those who don't have a good, broad, deep understanding of the Dharma would find reason to create a negative mind and start being critical.

Even if one were to take this literally, I would add another line, which is 'And may all men become like women'. The Buddha mentioned in another teaching that there are no men who would not desire women, and no women who would not desire men. From this perspective, desire refers to desiring the qualities of the other. In that sense, it is the same thing: all men would desire the unique qualities in women, and all women would desire the unique qualities in men.

In relation to the actual implication here, 'women' would not refer to all women in general, but to women suffering from adverse conditions, such as those who are mistreated, or have no power, or have no real independence, but are dominated by others. Even to this day, we can see this situation occurring in many parts of the world. I've heard that in some countries, women are completely dominated by men, and have no opportunity for individual independence, or even studying or pursuing a personal career, and so forth. These are really unfortunate circumstances.

Furthermore, some women are particularly affected by symptoms associated with the menstrual cycle, which may prevent that person from being able to pursue or to engage in normal activities. I don't think all women have such symptoms, but in these circumstances such women are really disadvantaged.

The aspiration here is 'may such women not have to experience such sufferings, and obtain bodies that are strong with vigour, and may they have ability and independence'. Of course, not all males would have the latter qualities, but this relates to those who do have a supreme male body with these qualities of strength, ability and independence. So the aspiration here is 'may women who are limited by certain physical hardships obtain such bodies of splendour, and be free from these particular sufferings'. When we relate to it in this way, we can see that these are aspirations are for human beings to be free of the particular disadvantages and sufferings experienced by some women.

Apparently, there are many ailments that are unique to the female body. Maybe Alan as a doctor might know more about it? Generally speaking, each individual has his or her own particular ailments. On a broader level, men, because of their different physiology and anatomy, would certainly have some ailments that women don't experience; whereas, women would have certain ailments that men don't experience.

The text here is particularly relating to those ailments that are obstacles in life. Thus the dedication here is for those who are disadvantaged, that they may obtain bodies which have strength, stamina and splendour, in order to be able to optimally practise the Dharma, without any interferences. That is the main point. In verse 10, the text referred to *enjoying themselves with goddesses.* Here again, these are the qualities of those who have perfect bodies.

Next the text reads, *may all those of lower caste achieve a higher status, and abandon pride despite this attainment.* Here, the dedication of one's virtues is made to alleviate the particular sufferings that come from belonging to a socially confined low-caste. In Australia and the rest of the developed world, there is no distinction based on caste, but in India – particularly in the past – the caste system was prevalent, and those of lower caste were underprivileged and disadvantaged. Therefore, the dedication here is for them to achieve high status, and after achieving high status to abandon pride despite that attainment.

In Buddhist communities in India, there has never been any distinction between castes.

2.1.1.3.2.1.1.4. Dedication for perfect virtue

The verse reads:

31. *By my merits,
May all sentient beings without exception,
Having abandoned all negativity,
Continuously practise virtue.*

The commentary explains:

By my merits from meditating on bodhicitta and so forth, may all sentient beings without exception, who are the purpose, abandon all obstructive conditions of negativities such as killing and the like, and continuously practise virtue.

By my merits from meditating on bodhicitta and so forth includes the virtues accumulated through the practices of generosity, morality, patience, joyous effort, and cultivating wisdom. So, through the virtues accumulated from these practices, *may all sentient beings without exception, who are the purpose* – that is, who are the purpose of one's dedications – *abandon all obstructive conditions of negativities such as killing and the like*, and thus be free from negativities such as the ten non-virtues, and *continuously practise virtue.* This again can be taken as a reminder to refrain from such non-virtuous actions oneself.

2.1.1.3.2.1.2. Dedication for entering a correct path

This dedication is specifically made for others to be protected from entering a wrong path which would otherwise lead to destructive behaviours and activities.

This is subdivided into two:

2.1.1.3.2.1.2.1. Dedicating to be endowed with correct motivation and practice of the path to liberation

2.1.1.3.2.1.2.2. Dedicating for complete conducive conditions and no obstructing conditions

2.1.1.3.2.1.2.1. Dedicating to be endowed with correct motivation and practice of the path to liberation

- 32ab. *May they be inseparable from bodhicitta,
And engage in the bodhisattva practices.*

The commentary explains:

May all sentient beings never be separated from bodhicitta and always engage in the bodhisattva practices, such as generosity.

This is a profound dedication: dedicating towards sentient beings to be *never be separated from bodhicitta and always engage in the bodhisattva practices such as generosity, morality, and so forth.*

2.1.1.3.2.1.2.2. Dedicating for complete conducive conditions and no obstructing conditions

These are particularly in relation to the accumulation of virtue, since there are conducive conditions we need to

acquire and obstructing conditions we need to avoid. That is the dedication here.

*32cd. May they be looked after by the buddhas;
May they abandon actions induced by demons.*

The commentary explains:

May they be looked after by the virtuous teachers, the buddhas, and may they abandon the actions induced by demons, who obstruct the creation of virtue.

Here, the virtuous teachers, the buddhas, are seen as the conducive conditions for practising virtue, whereas the influence of demons or negative friends, is the obstruction.

This as a profound dedication. It is good to reflect upon this when doing our normal dedications, and make the strong aspiration: 'May I never be separated from the buddhas and virtuous teachers in this life and in all future lifetimes. In all future lifetimes, may I always be guided by the buddhas in the forms of virtuous teachers'.

2.1.1.3.2.1.3. Dedicating for having temporary endowments and happiness

This is again subdivided into three:

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.1. Dedicating for long life and pure environment

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.2. Dedicating for being made happy by benevolent beings

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.3. Dedicating for complete necessities and pacification of harm

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.1. Dedicating for long life and pure environment

Here, we can recall the aspirations we make to be reborn in the pure environment of the blissful lands. The first verse here is:

*33. May all those sentient beings
Have a limitless life span.
May they always enjoy a happy life, and
May the very sound of death never ring.*

The commentary explains:

May all sentient beings take rebirth in a happy migration and be able to have a long limitless life span. May these long lives always be happy, and even the sound of death never ring.

Again, the explanation in the commentary is quite clear. The next two verses under this heading are:

*34. May all directions be filled with
Groves of wish-fulfilling trees,
Full of buddhas and bodhisattvas
Proclaiming the melodious sound of Dharma.*

*35. May the grounds everywhere be pure,
Without pebbles and the like,
Smooth like the nature of lapis lazuli,
Similar to the palm of one's hand.*

The commentary explains:

May all directions be filled with groves of wish-fulfilling trees, filled with buddhas and bodhisattvas proclaiming the melodious sound of Dharma. May the ground everywhere be lush, pure and smooth, without stones, thorns or pebbles, smooth like the nature of lapis lazuli, similar to the palm of one's hand.

The description of 'wish-fulfilling trees' was presented earlier in verse 6.

May the ground everywhere be lush, pure and smooth, without stones, thorns or pebbles, smooth like the nature of lapis lazuli, which is similar to the palm of one's hand. The description

given here indicates that the ground of the pure lands is very smooth and without any sharp objects. The ground itself is said to be like walking on a soft cushion that slightly sinks in when you walk on it, (but of course doesn't sink in completely). When you put your foot down, you feel an expansion, so it's very pleasant to walk. These are the descriptions given of the pure lands, where there's no cause for any discomfort or any kind of suffering.

So we make the aspiration 'may beings be reborn in such blissful lands, and have the opportunity to practise Dharma'. This is a very meaningful object of meditation: while dedicating for others, we can also make the aspiration 'may I be reborn in such pure lands, that are always surrounded by buddhas and bodhisattvas'.

If we can meditate on these points now, it will definitely have a positive effect at the time of death, because one will be more likely to have visions of such pure lands at that time. One would have a strong premonition of being reborn in the pure lands, where buddhas and bodhisattvas are residing everywhere, where everything is easy, without any stress, and so forth. How wondrous that would be, to have such visions at the time of death! The buddhas and bodhisattvas are not just residing there, but are spontaneously teaching, so wherever one goes, one continuously hears the sound of the Dharma. That's the main point - it's not just a pure blissful land where you relax and do nothing, but you also have access to the Dharma, and you are continuously able to engage in Dharma practice. If one were in such a land, there would be no suffering at all, because of the ever-present, positive influence of the Dharma.

While the descriptions here relate to pure lands, even today on this planet we can see places that don't have any of the conditions for hearing the Dharma, and where the land itself is uncomfortable, rough, and so forth. So we can see that similar descriptions fit certain environments on this Earth today.

In terms of abodes similar to pure lands, I've seen on TV certain places - I'm not sure if they are in America or elsewhere - that are really beautiful and seem to fit the description of the pure lands. On Channel 7, there are two presenters in the morning on the Sunrise program, I think, who recently went to America. The TV program showed some really lush and beautiful places, estates and so forth. I thought at the time that the people who live there would have definitely created the good causes and merit to be in such beautiful places. Whether they actually enjoyed their homes, I'm not really sure! But visually, they were really beautiful abodes.

When I see individuals living in these beautiful places and big, luxurious homes, I immediately think how wonderful it would be if they were happy as well. That would be nice. If they could actually enjoy their homes, that would be really great for them. But after that I think, 'Of course, what would be best is that they didn't have to die'. That thought stops my mind from craving to live in such places, because no matter how beautiful and luxurious, in the end, you have to leave it all behind.

If one thinks about death, grasping at such a nice abode will not occur. But if one does not think about death and impermanence, a craving for such nice places might develop. Indeed, meditating on death and impermanence is really helpful for spiritual practitioners. If one considers oneself a spiritual practitioner but does not recall death and impermanence occasionally, one's practice becomes difficult.

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.2. *Dedicating for being made happy by benevolent beings*

The first verse under this heading reads:

36. *May, wherever mandalas of retinues are,
A multitude of bodhisattvas reside,
Adorning the ground
With their goodness.*

The commentary reads:

May wherever mandalas of retinues of dharma students are, a multitude of bodhisattvas reside, adorning the ground with the goodness of their excellent qualities.

May wherever mandalas of retinues... means that wherever beings engage in practising and listening to Dharma, may a multitude of bodhisattvas reside, adorning the ground with the goodness of their excellent qualities in that abode. One is dedicating one's merits by saying, 'whatever virtues one has accumulated, may these become a cause for places where people are engaged in Dharma practice, to always have bodhisattvas residing there'. Here the aspiration is for the bodhisattvas to remain for a long time to assist and benefit the beings in such places.

These are really meaningful dedications. For me, personally, whenever I see someone – whether they're men or women, from a religious tradition or not – doing any good for others and benefiting them, it really brings joy to my mind. I immediately think, 'May they have a long life, may they remain for a long time to continually be able to help and benefit others'.

37. *May all embodied beings
Hear uninterruptedly the sound of Dharma
From all birds, trees, and sunlight,
And even from space.*

The commentary explains:

May all embodied beings hear uninterruptedly the sound of Dharma from all trees, light rays, and even from space, like bodhisattvas who have attained power.

The dedication relates to those bodhisattvas who have obtained certain high powers. Due to their attainments, they're able to hear the Dharma everywhere. Every sound becomes the sound of Dharma – from trees, birds, even light rays and space. The dedication here is that may all beings be born with such conditions.

38. *May they always meet buddhas
And the children of the buddhas.
May they offer infinite offering clouds
To the highest of migrators.*

The commentary explains:

May these sentient beings always meet buddhas and the children of the buddhas. May they offer infinite oceans of offering clouds to the highest of migrators, the buddhas.

May they offer infinite oceans of offering clouds to the highest of migrators... This could be easily misinterpreted; *highest of migrators* refers to those amongst migrators who are held in the highest esteem – that is, the buddhas. So it refers to making offerings to the buddhas.

A practical way to relate to this is to offer our meagre virtuous acts and deeds now, that they will also become a cause for one, in the future, to be able to make abundant material offerings. While we may not have much in the way of material means to make extensive offerings now, we can

offer our virtues, which then become a cause for us to be able to make abundant offerings in the future.

2.1.1.3.2.1.3.3. *Dedicating for complete necessities and pacification of harm*

The first verse reads:

39. *May the gods bestow timely rain,
And may a perfect crop ripen.
May kings act in accordance with the Dharma
And may the worldly realms increase.*

The commentary reads:

As conducive conditions for Dharma practice, may the gods bestow timely rain, and may the crops be perfect and complete. May the powerful among human beings, such as kings and princes, act in accordance with the dharma and may the worldly realms be increased through being adorned with happiness and joy.

Here, timely rain would refer to rain that falls at the right time to ensure *perfect and complete* crops. As farmers would know, soon after seed is sown, if there's rain, that is said to be the best condition for the seed to germinate and sprout. Then, as it sprouts, it needs further rain to grow into a bigger, mature crop. At a certain time, when the crop is about to ripen, it requires little or no rainfall, because that could destroy the crop. So, following the general pattern of the seasons, a crop would be sown when the rains are just right for the crop to grow, and this dedication is for the rains to fall in a timely way.

May the powerful among human beings, such as kings and princes, act in accordance with the Dharma. This is again a significant point. If rulers, such as the kings and princes of ancient times, were to be imbued with the Dharma, their rule would be a righteous one. The interests of their rule constituency would naturally be at the front of their minds, rather than their personal interests. Thus they would be able to rule justly and bring benefit to everyone.

Furthermore, *may the worldly realms be increased through being adorned with happiness and joy.* This is again a very meaningful dedication for the benefit of others.

Of course, the opposite would be true if kings and rulers were unjust and took advantage of their subjects. That would create much difficulty for the people living in that country.

40. *May medicines be effective and
May the recitations of secret mantra be
successful.
May sky dwellers, yakshas, and so forth
Be endowed with the mind of compassion.*

The commentary reads:

May medicines be effective in curing disease, and may the purposes of the recitations of secret mantras accomplishing pacifying, increasing and other activities be accomplished the way they were intended. May sky dwellers, yakshas, carnivorous beasts and the like become endowed with the mind of love.

The dedication being made here is, may whatever medicines that are administered be effective in curing diseases. *And may the purposes of the recitations of secret mantras accomplishing pacifying* includes the four types of actions associated with the different purposes of reciting mantras – peaceful or pacifying; increasing; controlling or influencing; and wrathful activity.

When one recites mantras, it could be for any of these four purposes. Pacifying would be to pacify ailments, or to have good conditions, and so forth. When a mantra recitation is done for these ends, it would be for peaceful purposes. Increasing is for the purposes of increasing one's life force, or merit, for example. When mantras are recited for that purpose, the recitation is said to be done for the purpose of increasing.

Controlling refers to the purpose of controlling others. Also, when one recites the mantra for a particular deity, it is said that we are aiming to have control of the deity. That may seem a little presumptuous, but basically one is getting closer to the deity so that one can ask the deity to remove obstacles for oneself and make one's practice virtuous, and so forth.

Then there are recitations for wrathful purposes. Wrathful here implies, for example, subduing those who harm other sentient beings or harm the teachings. In order to subjugate such beings, certain mantras are recited for that purpose.

So for whatever purpose the recitation is done, may all of that *be accomplished* according to one's wishes. Of course, this would imply a Dharma purpose with the proper motivations, so may *increasing and other activities be accomplished the way they were intended*.

Then, the text mentions *sky dwellers*. I think this relates particularly to malicious beings. *Yakshas* are like demons. So may such beings *and carnivorous beasts and the like become endowed with the mind of love*. The aspiration here is in relation to those beings that may feel malice or harmful intent towards others: 'May their harmful intentions and malicious thoughts be supplemented with a mind of love, so that they do not harm other sentient beings'.

Although I've presented this in the past, in terms of knowing how rituals are practised, if one is doing mantras for the purpose of pacifying, the mala is held between one's thumb and first (index) finger. That's generally how it's explained. The second (middle) finger and thumb are used for mantra recitations done for the purpose of increasing. For the purposes of controlling, one uses the thumb and fourth (ring) finger. During what is called an approximation retreat, the mantra recitation is usually done using the thumb and fourth finger. You hold the mala between the thumb and fifth (little) finger for the recitation of wrathful mantras.

While this is the traditional practice, there are different presentations for reciting mantras. For example, if you recite mantras other than the pacifying ones, it would not be wrong to use the mala between the thumb and first finger, because the first finger is above all the other fingers, so it's not a mistake.

If one doesn't know these distinctions, and why things are done in certain ways, one could become very fixed and rigid about certain ways of doing things, and one may even turn around and tell others, 'You're doing it wrong, you've done it incorrectly!'. This brings up all sorts of doubts in people's minds. If you say things that create doubt in the mind of someone who's inclined to engage in virtue, they may lose the opportunity to create virtue. That would be a great disadvantage for them. So those who understand the implications of what they say to others will not say such things.

There is an additional subheading here which is:

Dedication to be separated from that which is unwished for

The verse is presented under this:

41. *May sentient beings not experience the slightest suffering,
Be free from dangers and criticism,
And not have the slightest mental unhappiness.*

The commentary explains:

May sentient beings be utterly free from physical suffering. May their minds be free from fears, may they not be humiliated by others and may they be utterly free from mental unhappiness.

Because there are no sentient beings who like any kind of physical suffering, the dedication here is that they may *be utterly free from physical suffering*. And there is no sentient being who wishes to feel any kind of fear in their mind, so the next dedication is that may they be free from all fears. Similarly, there's no one who likes to be humiliated, so may all beings be free from humiliation *by others and may they be utterly free from mental unhappiness*.

So, it's good for us to recite these verses and contemplate the meaning. This, in itself, can be a really inspiring and helpful practice for our mind.

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

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