

Study Group - "Liberation *in the Palm of Your Hand*"

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Try to generate the bodhicitta motivation for studying the lam rim.

422.331 How to Acquire the Bodhicitta Vows (cont)

In the last teaching three different versions of conducting the ritual ceremony to generate bodhicitta were described.

This teaching further elaborates on the very long version, which is done over two separate days. The preparatory or preliminary sections are done on the first day, and the actual ceremony is done on the second day.

The preliminary stage should include a full explanation of the entire stages of the path. However here it is not necessary to present an explanation of all the stages of the path, because the ritual ceremony is being given as part of the teachings on the lam rim, which we have already covered in great detail.

On other occasions it is necessary to hear the teachings on the entire stages of the path on the preliminary days. These include where the ceremony of taking bodhicitta vows is conducted as part of or after the conferring of an initiation, or as part of a special explanatory transmission of the teachings, or an oral transmission of the teaching.

Obviously knowledge of the rules of conducting this ceremony is mainly necessary for those who lead this ceremony, but it is also important to try to understand the systematic traditional procedure for conducting this ceremony. It is not good to assume that you will never have the opportunity to conduct this bodhicitta ceremony, because in the future that may change.

Cleaning

On the preliminary day the setting of the altar needs to be prepared, and the place cleaned and so forth. All the gurus, buddhas, bodhisattvas who you have invited, will witness this ritual ceremony of generating bodhicitta and taking the bodhisattva vows. So you make offerings and do prostrations and so on prior to the actual ceremony.

The lam rim commentary uses the example how it is inappropriate to invite the universal king to a filthy place, which is full of dust, and the residence of beggars and scavengers. So as part of this ceremony, it is necessary to make the place as clean as possible. Of course here in Australia most places are basically very clean and very tidy. So you sweep and dust, and if possible sprinkle some perfumed water about, and arrange offerings of flowers. Likewise try to make the throne on which the guru sits as beautiful as possible, with lots of flowers and other precious ornaments.

Offerings

Of course it is also important to set out all the offerings properly. As this is done try to think that this ceremony is of great personal importance and that it is a very significant occasion.

The commentary text refers to not offering the six types of objects. Those six types of objects specifically concern the Sangha. They are not allowed to give away their three robes, their begging bowl, their vinaya sitting mat, and their strainer.

There is mention of the three categories of possessions of the Sangha. These concern their livelihood, their necessities and their extra belongings. Perhaps what is meant is that Sangha are not allowed to make an offering of anything belonging to the category of livelihood. Of course some of these rules were made at a time and place where the Sangha lived a very simple, basic life with few belongings. In these modern times, as a Sangha you may even own more than one set of robes and many other possessions. So what is said here may not be completely applicable to these Sangha.

Accumulating Merit

On the preliminary day all the people participating in the ceremony engage in the practice of accumulating merit and purifying negativities, and safeguarding that from any interference. Traditionally on the preliminary day (when the ceremony is done over two days) all the participants meet early in the morning, and as part of this practice of accumulating merit and purifying negativities they recite some sutras. The number of sutras depends upon the number of people, and how fast they can read.

The recommended sutras are the whole collection of the Buddha's sutras, called the *Kangyur* in Tibetan language, which consists of 108 volumes or, according to some scholars, 102 volumes. A lesser amount of reading would be the sutra called *Do Palmo che* in Tibetan, which consists of six volumes of texts. This sutra reviews the deeds of the bodhisattvas in great detail, including the very subtle deeds of bodhisattvas. Because of its contents this sutra is considered to be very profound. Geshe Doga recalls that his teacher, the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, read this sutra at least two or three times.

A shorter form of reading is *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in 8000 Lines*, the main theme of which is emptiness. Or you can read the sutra which is called *The Fortunate Aeon*, which is about the 1000 buddhas of this aeon. This sutra gives the names of each of these buddhas, when they shall appear, who will be there, the name of their parents, the nature of the dharma that they reveal, and how long this dharma lasts and so on.

Here on our altar we have two copies of this sutra, *The Fortunate Aeon*. Geshe-la brought one from India, carrying it as part of his luggage. Of course the other one came when we bought the whole collection of *Kangyur*. Geshe-la remembers that when he first came to Tara House the one sutra we had was *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines* which was donated by Sera Je Monastery, and was brought here by the late ex Abbot Khensur Legden when he came to Australia.

Ritual offerings

On the preliminary day make an offering of *tormas* to the interfering spirits in order to ward off any obstacles. One of the ritual offerings to ward off such interfering non-human spirits is called *chag sum* which is a very brief ritual offering of three *tormas*.

Geshe-la wants to tell you this story about ritual offerings that he never forgets. When he was in Shilong, *which* is the area

where the incarnation of the late Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey was born, he had a Tibetan friend, who is a Buddhist. This friend is married to a local woman from the Nagaland tribe, and she is a Christian. At one time she had a very severe toothache, and tried various medicines but could not stop the pain. Her husband suggested that he organise this ritual *chag sum*, three-torma offering, and she agreed. After the ritual was done the pain stopped, and from that moment onward she became very positive about Buddhist beliefs. Geshe-la says that in later years her husband was very pleased that this had happened to her.

We should also try to get some advice as to the practice we should do particularly in order to remove obstacles to our spiritual practice. One thing that is clearly stated in the text is reciting sutras. Therefore we have to try to understand the benefit of reciting any sutras even the short ones like *The Heart Sutra*, and their effectiveness in removing obstacles in our practice.

Personal Preparations

The reason why we have to take this ceremony as a very significant event and seriously is because in this ritual ceremony we are joining ourselves with other bodhisattvas, by generating the bodhisattvas' heart of bodhicitta. Even if in this ceremony we are not in a position to actually produce this bodhicitta mind, and to actually become a bodhisattva, at least we have a genuine motivation, and a genuine wish to do so. Therefore even in this fabricated way we generate bodhicitta and we become a bodhisattva, and are called a child of a buddha.

Therefore we should mark this ceremony as a very special occasion, trying to do our best with our preparations, to celebrate this occasion. Consider how much effort we put into worldly festivals such as wedding ceremonies, or New Year celebrations. We put a lot of effort into preparing our body, and choosing and wearing new clothes, as well as preparing other decorations.

In Tibet, New Year is a very big event where people traditionally wear new clothes. On the night before children have a difficulty falling asleep because of their excitement about wearing their new clothes. The nearest equivalent in the West is Christmas.

The point is that we do a lot of preparation for such worldly celebrations. So try, as said here in the teachings, to understand the importance and the significance of this ceremony. Wear your new or best clothes. Sangha members should also wear their best or newest robes, and if they have Dharma robes carry them to the ceremony. Attend the ceremony with a very clean body.

On the actual day we also need to carry what they call the substance for generating bodhicitta. This is to symbolise the life story of the Buddha who, when he first generated the bodhicitta mind, made offerings. In ancient times the symbolic offering was a clay vase or flowers. So we also carry some object of offering to follow this example of the Lord Buddha.

As mentioned in the lam rim commentary, the place where this ceremony is conducted should be imagined as being a celestial mansion, square in shape with four doors. At each door are the four gods of Indra surrounded by all their retinues of gods. Circling the mansion are all the other gods, who we call the white godly beings, because they support the flourishing of the dharma. On the interior four walls of the mansion are pictures depicting the life story of the Buddha, at the time when he was a bodhisattva on the path of learning, engaging in various bodhisattva deeds. Try to imagine that all these pictures are so very vivid that they are like the real thing.

The first day can be divided into two sessions. What has just been described is the first session. For the next session you invite the guru, the master.

The Second Session of Preparation

You should visualise the guru masters who you rely upon for this ceremony of generating the bodhicitta mind as being in the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha. In fact it is always recommended that whenever you conduct this ceremony to generate bodhicitta mind, or to take the bodhisattva's vow, then the preceptor or the guru should be imagined as being in the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha. Whereas when you engage in a ceremony to receive tantric vows then the guru is in the aspect of Guru Vajradhara, surrounded by the assemblies of the tantric deities. It is always good to remember these details.

After the guru has taken his seat then you engage in the practice of the six preparatory dharmas in a very extensive way. The guru will give a detailed, thorough explanation of the actual ceremony on the next day, when you will generate bodhicitta mind, or take the vows.

You need to remember that there are two types of bodhicitta mind - the aspiring or wishing bodhicitta mind, and the engaging bodhicitta mind. Wishing bodhicitta is the bodhicitta that simply wishes to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings. With this you do not promise that you will actually engage to undertake the bodhisattvas' deeds. Whereas the engaging bodhicitta is not only a wish to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all beings, but also a vow to undertake the bodhisattvas' deeds.

To clarify this difference, the text uses the analogy of a journey to India. Before beginning your journey, your intention to go there is like wishing bodhicitta, whereas the thought at the time of actually moving towards your destination is like engaging bodhicitta.

There are two different sources for the ritual formula that is used in this ceremony. According to Asanga's text, *The Bodhisattva's Ground*, there are separate formulas to generate the two types of bodhicitta, the wishing and the engaging bodhicitta. Whereas Shantideva's text *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* gives only one formula with which to generate both types of bodhicitta at the same time.

The two ritual formulas of *The Bodhisattva's Ground* are based on the separate needs of the practitioners. This text provides a separate formula of merely generating wishing bodhicitta for those who are not capable of generating engaging bodhicitta. *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* is mainly for those who are ready to generate both types of bodhicitta mind. That is a clarification made in the text. So, when participating in the ceremony, if you are unsure about taking Bodhisattva vows or vowing to engage in Bodhisattva deeds, then think that you are just generating wishing bodhicitta.

Following this there is the thanksgiving mandala offered to the Guru Buddha and then everyone in prayer recites the lam rim dedication. Finally the guru concludes the first day by further reciting three more verses of dedication prayers. The first one is the prayer, which says,

"May this precious mind of bodhicitta be generated and the one which is generated not decline, but further increase."

The second prayer says,

"May all the motherly and fatherly sentient beings possess happiness, may the lower rebirth be all empty, and may the prayers of all the bodhisattvas wherever they are dwelling be fulfilled."

The last verse prays for the long life of the glorious Guru, and for peace and happiness in the world. It prays that whatever virtues you have accumulated will be a cause for all beings, including yourself to quickly achieve Buddhahood.

Next week will be discussion night. The compulsory topic will be identify the three principal aspects of the path, and then to give an explanation of each one according to your own level of understanding. Of course the following week will be the test night.

