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# Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

བྱང་ལྷན་སེམས་དཔའི་སྨྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As is the usual practice for the study group, we will do the *tong len* (giving and taking) meditation. The motivation for that is encompassed by the refuge and bodhicitta prayer that we have just recited. [meditation]

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for this opportunity to be able to gather together again, as we are old friends like brothers and sisters. Having such a gathering of like-minded people, is an incredibly fortunate opportunity.

You would, no doubt, have had a good break and a good time over Christmas and New Year. However when we think about it, there is nothing remaining from the festivities but the memory of them. Regardless of whether you had a good time or an uncomfortable time, by now it has gone, there is nothing left, and it makes no difference to the here and now.

Thus, it is far more appropriate for us to look forward to what is yet to come. Then we find that our objectives will fall into two main categories. Just as in the practice of giving and taking that we did earlier, where we take unwanted suffering from others and we imagine giving them our happiness; similarly for our own well-being, there are certain things that we need to acquire and certain things that we need to discard.

The *tong len* meditation has two essential elements, love and compassion. Taking upon the suffering of others encompasses compassion, whereas giving our happiness to others encompasses love. Thus the meditation is a training to increase love and compassion in our hearts. When we see others who are deprived of happiness, and we generate a genuine wish for them to be happy, we are expressing our love for them; and when we see others experiencing suffering, and we generate the wish to eliminate their suffering, we are expressing our compassion for them.

Aside from our attempts to engage in and meditate on the practice of giving and taking, even just feeling some sort of inclination to develop more love and compassion towards other beings is already a great start. The *tong len* practice of giving and taking is a higher form of practice, and not an easy one to perform.

Someone who is genuinely determined to practise this technique would be happy when they experience personal suffering, and very wary when they experience happiness or a pleasant situation. In order to willingly take upon the suffering of others, one should not be daunted or overwhelmed by suffering, and thus be willing to endure hardships and difficulties, and then use that as a practice. Conversely, the reason why such a practitioner would wary and uneasy with happiness is because when one experiences something pleasant, there

is a great danger that attachment to those good conditions and pleasant sensations will arise. Therefore a true practitioner would be wary about good conditions and pleasant sensations.

We really need to try to understand what this practice entails, and why it is such a necessary practice. From a conventional or worldly perspective, it sounds very strange that someone would be willing and happy to experience hardships and suffering while being wary and unhappy when pleasant things occur. However when we understand why a practitioner adopts such an outlook, then we begin to see that this is not all weird or strange, but in fact a great point of practice.

If we carefully consider our normal situation, we will come to see that it is our obsession with wanting to experience pleasantness and to avoid suffering that actually causes us the most trouble in our life. If we think about it we will see that this is really true.

Maintaining a normal, worldly view means being constantly obsessed with wanting to experience pleasant sensations and conditions, and constantly trying to avoid any unpleasant conditions and situations, and it is this worldly view that causes us so much turmoil and difficulty when our expectation are not met. When we understood this, we see how it is this worldly attitude that gives rise to delusions such as strong attachment and anger. To go into further detail, when we experience a pleasant sensation and become obsessed with it, then strong attachment to that sensation or pleasant condition arises.

We come so fixated on not wanting to experience any unpleasantness, that the moment the slightest unpleasantness arises, we immediately become upset and angry about that. So we can see how maintaining such a worldly view or outlook causes attachment and anger to repeatedly arise in one's mind. Conversely, one can adopt an attitude where, by willingly accepting and enduring all hardships, one does not become daunted when unpleasantness and difficulties arise. One of the categories of patience is to willingly endure any suffering and hardship. So applying this patience means we will not be daunted by hardships and difficulties, and so our mind will not be disturbed.

The very definition of patience entails not allowing the mind to become disturbed or upset in the face of difficulties or any unwanted experiences. Thus, patience protects the mind from anger. Conversely, if we allow our mind to be completely obsessed with external situations, believing that external good conditions and so forth bring us happiness, then, for as long as we have those external conditions, while we may experience temporary fleeting pleasures, but the moment those conditions cease, we will be left with a feeling of being empty of any sense of happiness. So working on our internal conditions, will help us not to be overly attached to external conditions and situations and solely dependent on them for our happiness.

When we engage in the *tong len* practice, we recite the verses as a reminder of how to practise giving and taking. Even if we are not able to develop the strong determination to apply their real meaning in our heart,

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just familiarising our mind with those words and trying to adopt that sort of attitude is still worthwhile for us beginners.

The technique of giving and taking works toward developing a genuine sense of love and compassion within oneself, thereby becoming a means to oppose such strong delusions as attachment and anger. When we understand that, we can gain an overall appreciation of the meditation technique as being the means to acquire a true sense of well-being and happiness.

Our ultimate goal is to experience a true sense of well-being and happiness and to discard any unwanted suffering. In order to reach that goal, we need to apply the proper method and techniques. When we apply this meditation technique in the appropriate way, it will help us to genuinely begin to develop that sense of well-being. In particular, it will help us to increase a genuine, sound wisdom that will help us to clearly identify the conducive factors, and discard the opposing factors to our well-being. When we develop such sound wisdom, then we will begin to really establish a true sense of a relaxed, calm and clear mind, which becomes the basis for our endeavours to progress in our spiritual lives.

It is really worthwhile to contemplate what we are setting out to achieve. When we look around, we can see that everyone is busy trying to achieve something. So when we actually stop and genuinely think about what it is we are trying to achieve, it really comes down to a sense of well-being and happiness, and the lack any factors and conditions that bring about unpleasantness and suffering. Regardless of whether people consciously think about it or not, that is really what it comes down to — whatever we do arises from wanting to achieve some sort of pleasantness, and to discard any unpleasant situations.

The point then is to really consider whether the attempts we are making in our very busy lives are working for us or not? Are they bringing about those good results? That is something that we need to contemplate.

Now of course we have definitely achieved quite a lot. When we were born, we came naked without any possessions. We weren't born with a sum of money in our hands! We can readily appreciate the comparison with what we have now. When we were first born we couldn't walk or even crawl. At that time we were completely at the mercy of our caretakers, particularly our parents. We were completely dependent on their love and kindness our parents and caretakers to feed and cloth us. Then, at a certain point we became educated and were able to think for ourselves. It was our parents or caretakers who nourished and cared for us up to the point where we considered ourselves to be independent, when we could work and earn for ourselves. But up until then, we were loved, cared for and nourished by others.

At this point we are able expend a lot of energy in acquiring the means to eliminate a lot of external adverse conditions. But even though we have achieved sufficient external conditions for our well-being, when we look within ourselves, we can all acknowledge that there is a constant nagging wish for something more, which is really uncomfortable. Somehow we are not fully satisfied; there is something that is not quite right, something that

is missing. So internally, within our own minds, we still haven't really achieved that satisfactory sense of contentment and happiness.

We have spent quite a lot of time and energy in achieving a significant number of favourable worldly circumstances, and we have also endured a lot of difficulties and hardships along the way. If we expend the same amount of energy and time and willingly undergoing difficulties and hardships to acquire favourable internal conditions, we will also be able to achieve adequate internal conditions for our well-being and happiness. That is something that we can definitely achieve. Then we will definitely be able to overcome and eradicate the troublesome attitudes that compromise our well-being and happiness.

Another question that can be posed is, 'How do I actually overcome these problems that trouble my mind? What are the methods that can I use?' These are significant questions. Of course, many may feel that their internal problems are related to external causes and conditions. We are all too familiar with that way of thinking! This attitude stems from a deeper notion that we are not at fault, 'I'm OK, I'm completely innocent'; 'There is nothing wrong with me'; 'The problem was caused by someone else'.

Whilst we may be well acquainted with the notion that our problems are caused by external sources, if we look within ourselves and honestly scrutinise and analyse our internal conditions, we will slowly come to realise that our mind is influenced by delusions such as strong desire and anger. And as long as one is under the control of the mind, which in turn is dominated by the delusions, then to that extent one's mind will always be prone to problems. If we genuinely look within, we will find that the real causes for our unhappiness are our own delusions.

Once we begin to detect where the problem really lies, we will be willing to adopt a technique that does not allow our minds to be influenced by the delusions. For example, we can focus on a particular type of object that does not cause any delusions to arise. If we are able to focus on that object for some time, whether it is one, two, or three minutes, then for that period of time we will not experience a troubled mind. That is because during that time our mind is protected from the delusions, and so we experience a genuine sense of calmness and well-being.

Having been presented with a technique that allows our mind to become focussed and not influenced by the delusions, the next question we might ask ourselves is, 'Will it be possible for me to train in such a technique? Would it be suitable for me?' The answer to these questions is a definite yes! Even though, at present we may be influenced by the delusions and have certain negative tendencies within ourselves, we all possess a positive state of mind. So what we need to do is develop more familiarity with that positive state of mind. If we sincerely adopt this technique there is no question that it will work.

It is natural that when the mind is familiarising itself with an object, then that is the predominant thought. In this way our familiarity and acquaintance with that object,

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whether it be an attitude or a particular way of thinking, that becomes the predominant thought. So when we familiarise ourselves with a positive object that does not cause any delusions to arise within the mind, then the more we acquaint ourselves with that object, the more natural it becomes for us to experience a state of mind that is not influenced by the delusions, not being completely dominated by them. As we become more and familiar with this technique and the object of meditation, then gradually the mind becomes clearer and brighter and our intelligence or wisdom will naturally increase. As a consequence of all of that, our mind will naturally become calmer, less troubled and less chaotic. That is definitely the positive result we can experience, but that, of course, requires constant familiarity and acquaintance with the practice.

As explained earlier, we call this technique meditation. The Tibetan term for 'meditation' is *gom*, which literally translates 'to familiarise'. The connotation is that we are familiarising our mind with something that is positive, rather than on negativity.

In order to see the great value and advantage of the practice of meditation, we need to see the faults of negativities such as anger. For as long as we don't see the faults of anger, we won't take the initiative to overcome anger. Thus we need to begin by contemplating again and again the faults of anger.

We need to see how when anger arises, it is followed by an intention of wanting to harm the object of our anger by whatever means. Driven by anger we think, 'I will wait until just the right moment, and then I will say or do something to hurt them'. That is how anger begins to lead us to engage in unwholesome deeds.

The very feeling of anger is accompanied by an intention of wishing to harm the object, and the moment anger arises it makes us feel uncomfortable. So even though anger comes with an intention to hurt others, it is we who experience a more immediate hurt. Thus, anger has no redeeming value — it hurts oneself as well as others. When we contemplate and think about the great disadvantage and faults of anger in this way we begin to develop a strong intention to overcome anger.

This is where the technique of focussing on an object that does not cause any delusions (such as anger and attachment) to arise is important. For the duration of our focus on an object, which by its very nature does not cause delusions to arise, we will not experience anger. If we begin to engage in this practice when we feel anger arising then, then for whatever time (one, two or three minutes) we adequately focus on this object, the anger will subside and we will experience a real sense of relief within our mind. The effect will be soothing and calming.

Another disadvantage of anger, is that when we become upset and angry, the person we are angry with and who we intend to hurt, is usually someone close to us. We won't go out of our way to find a stranger to become angry with! The very person that we either live with or associate with, the one we consider as a loved or dear one is normally the object with whom we become angry! So we can see here the futility of anger in that it influences us to hurt or do hurtful things to the very person we

consider to be closest to us. This is how we need to reflect upon the disadvantages of anger.

We can use these reflections on the disadvantages of anger to inspire us to engage in the practice of meditation; to apply it in our daily life; and to contemplate these disadvantages again and again. There are two reasons to meditate: there are the qualities that one needs to further develop and there are the faults one needs to discard. Meditation is precisely what will help us to accomplish that. When we adequately apply the meditation technique, it becomes the optimum protection for our own mind — our sense of peace and well-being will be enhanced and protected. A calm and a peaceful state of mind (which we all naturally have at some level) is something that we really need to try and protect at every cost. If we make the time to apply the meditation technique, it will help us to develop a clear, happy and a genuinely relaxed mind. Anyone who actually establishes such qualities will be a happy person, wherever they go and in whatever situation they may find themselves. No external conditions will be too daunting for them. They feel relaxed and calm wherever they may be and in whatever company they find themselves. The result is that others also experience that calmness, so it is something of mutual benefit.

Maintaining a happy mind should be a priority for our own well-being. That means actively engaging in analysing one's own state of mind, checking up on what's occurring in one's thoughts and attitudes. Asking oneself, 'what kind of state of mind am I in right now? Is it a happy and calm state of mind or on the verge of declining? Am I imbued with thoughts that promote and increase a sense of happiness and well-being within myself, or am I obsessed with thoughts that obstruct my happiness and calmness?' Undertaking such an analysis on a regular basis will contribute to our overall well-being.

Rather than spending all our time and energy focussing on external conditions, we need to develop a much more internal focus. Although being completely immersed in external conditions brings some sort of temporary benefit to a certain degree, it leaves no time to acquire sufficient conditions for our inner well-being. So if we can adopt an attitude where, at every cost, we attempt to protect our own well-being and inner happiness then, regardless of the external conditions we will be able to maintain a sense of dignity, which encompasses that sense of calmness. When things are going well externally, everything may seem just fine. But when eventually things don't go so well, for example, when there's a difficult situation, or one's living conditions are temporarily reduced, if one has maintained an inner well-being, then one will not be daunted and will be able to adapt to whatever external conditions prevail. That is the most suitable way for us to conduct our lives.

We need to start paying attention to, and analysing our mind and our thoughts, looking for the thoughts that have greatest influence. If we find a negative state of mind, we ask ourselves, 'How do I overcome this?' 'What are the best ways to try and overcome this negative state of mind?' If, on the other hand we find that we have a positive state of mind, then be joyful and happy about

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that and think of ways to further increase and nourish that positive state of mind. Such analyses and ways of thinking are really worthwhile and helpful for our own well-being.

The essential point is that the most precious possession one can ever have is a genuine sense of love and compassion. Any person endowed with a true sense of love and compassion is liked by everyone, and they will be welcomed wherever they go. When you can see that in others, then it must also be true for yourself. If you wish to be liked by others, then genuinely love them and be compassionate and help them when you can.

If you are unable to render help, you can at least make a commitment not to harm others, which is also appreciated. The person who does not intentionally harm others is generally appreciated and trusted. So we can see the great value of adopting these attitudes and, at best, exhibiting a true sense of love and compassion. We are the greatest beneficiaries of such an attitude.

One of the things people often talk about is trust. Some people complain that they are not trusted by others, or that their partner doesn't trust them, or that their friends don't trust them. If one wishes to be viewed as being trustworthy, then one needs to really look into what makes one trustworthy. Trust has to be earned! The optimum way to gain the trust of others is by exhibiting true love and compassion for them, and a true sense of concern. That is the best way. If one is not trusted, then one needs to look at the reason why that is the case. Has one's love and compassion, or true sense of concern for others perhaps declined? If that is so, then it follows that others will not render any trust.

Someone once asked me, 'Are there perhaps some mantras to recite to make others like me?' My response was, 'Well, there could be mantras, but that's not really necessary. If you really want others to like and appreciate you, and to draw others towards you, the best way is by developing a true sense of love and compassion. That is the best way'. But that didn't seem to go down too well!! [laughter] There is a story that Lama Zopa once related to me. One of the first FPMT centres in America was Vajrapani Institute, and its first geshe, Geshe Lobsang Gyatso, was one of the first geshes to go to the west from Sera. Apparently the translator had a bit of a hard time with him and was not able to translate everything, and Geshe Lobsang Gyatso seemed to be a little annoyed with him. The translator tried to please him, but to no avail. Then the translator apparently asked Lama Yeshe, 'Is there some mantra I can recite for the Geshe to like me?' [laughter] It seems that many people suspect that Buddhists to have some sort of mantra that can be recited as part of their tantric rituals to overcome or to acquire certain things.

Love and compassion is essential in all relationships, such the relationship between parents and children. It seems that in Western countries the relationship between parents and children causes a lot of suffering. The children might have faults and do things that are inappropriate, but I suspect that even from the parents' side, there are times when they lose the genuine sense of caring, love and concern for their children. It is when there is a mutual waning of that sense of genuine concern

for each other, when love and compassion have declined, that relationships are strained. Consequently, suffering is experienced by both the children and the parents, which is uncomfortable for both sides.

This is something we need to really think about: Since we are living in a world in which we have to rely upon others, it is worthwhile that we have a good relationship with them. So, we need to consider what are the main elements needed to have a good relationship between parents and children and so forth? In order to maintain our sense of love and compassion, we also need to develop patience. While we may extend our love and compassion, which in very simple terms is having a genuine concern for others, there may be times when the other lacks appreciation and so forth. When that happens, one may lose the sense of concern for the other which is a result of the love and compassion for the other beginning to decline. That is the time when it is very important to apply patience. Regardless of their attitude or any inappropriate remarks that they may make, we need to think, 'I should not be daunted by that; I must maintain a genuine sense of concern for them'. With that element of patience, we will be able to endure any temporary difficulties that we may experience in caring for others.

Having extensively explained the importance and the great advantages of love and compassion, we now turn to the techniques of how to develop the genuine wish to benefit others based on love and compassion. This is precisely explained in the text we have chosen to study, which is *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* or *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Actions*, composed by Shantideva. This text is renowned among the great Indian and Tibetan masters. All of them agree that this text is the optimum source for advice on how to develop the mind of enlightenment or in simple terms the optimum way to benefit others based on love and compassion. Shantideva explains in great depth and detail the methods of how to develop this unique altruistic mind of enlightenment.

The benefit of developing love and compassion is unequalled. Developing love and compassion is the optimum way to achieve a true sense of well-being, so it is definitely a valuable practice that we need to engage in. Now, in saying that this is really a valuable practice, I am not implying in any way that I have mastered love and compassion myself. I am not saying that at all. But what I can say is that I do acquaint my mind with love and compassion regularly, contemplating the benefits and methods of developing love and compassion again and again. In fact I am mostly pre-occupied with thinking about the best ways to develop love and compassion within myself. My attempts to practise developing love and compassion give me a true sense of well-being and great solace. So, based on my limited experience of acquainting my own mind with love and compassion, I encourage you take up this practice as well. It definitely is a great tool for benefiting others while at the same time being a great source of solace and well-being for oneself. Thus it is something to which we can assign great value.

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## THE BODHISATTVA'S WAY OF LIFE

The great master Gyaltsab Je wrote a commentary on this text called *The Entrance for the Children of the Conquerors*. He presents his commentary in four main sections.

1. Meaning of the Title
2. Translator's Prostration
3. Meaning of the Text
4. Meaning of the conclusion

### 1. MEANING OF THE TITLE

The actual Sanskrit title of the text is *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*.

*Bodhi* in Tibetan is *jang chub*, which relates to the enlightened mind, or enlightenment;

The meaning of *sattva*, or *sempa* in Tibetan, is courageous or brave one;

*Charya* relates to the Tibetan word *jopa* which relates to actions or deeds;

*Avatara* or *jugpa* in Tibetan means to enter, or as in the translation 'an introduction'.

Thus the meaning of the title is, 'Introduction to the actions of bodhisattvas'.

There are different styles and systems of presenting the title of a text. It can relate to the person for whom the text was intended, for example there are sutras such as *Advice to a King*. A title can also relate to a place where the teaching was given, so the name of that place will be used in the title, such as *Gawa-gore Sutra* which is the sutra that was given on a particular mountain. Then there are titles based the time of the teaching. For example, there is a sutra the Buddha gave just before he passed into samadhi or nirvana, which is called *The Nirvana Sutra*. Finally there are titles such as this one, which present the content of the text in the title itself.

The meaning of the title is presented in a very meticulous way. The very name of the text can instil a great understanding in those who can relate to it. By merely seeing the title, a disciple who is of superior intelligence will be able to immediately understand the contents of the text. Those of medium intellect can derive a certain amount of understanding from the title alone, and even those with lower intellect would have some idea of what the contents would be. It is similar to labelling a medicine container. For those who are familiar with the name will know what type of medicine is in the container, just by reading the label.

In English the only translation we have of *bodhi* is *enlightenment*. With the Tibetan term *jang chub*, each word has a connotation of what that state actually indicates. The Tibetan word *jang* has the connotation of completely eradicating. This relates to having completely eradicated or abandoned the two obscurations — the deluded obscurations and the obscurations to omniscience. The Tibetan word *chub* has the connotation of acquiring all positive qualities and the ultimate quality to be accomplished is omniscience. So the state to be achieved, *jang chub* is a state in which all negativities are completely eradicated, and all positive qualities have been completely accomplished.

The Tibetan word *sempa*, which is a translation of the word *sattva* meaning a brave or courageous person refers to an individual who, with a courageous mind, is inspired and determined to achieve the state of enlightenment. They are not daunted by the task involved in achieving that state, which includes the practice of the six perfections. Thus, the person who willingly commits to engage in these actions to achieve that final state of enlightenment, is considered to be a courageous one.

So within the word bodhisattva, *bodhi* refers to the ultimate state that is to be achieved, and *sattva* to the courageous one who has dedicated themselves to achieve that ultimate state of enlightenment.

The definition of *charya* is the action or deeds, which most texts relate to the six perfections. However as His Holiness the Dalai Lama explained in his recent teachings on this text, the action itself can be divided into three stages:

1. The initial action, which is the development of bodhicitta — the altruistic mind wishing to achieve enlightenment.
2. The actual actions, which are engaging in practices of the six perfections.
3. The accomplished action, which is to obtain the ultimate state of enlightenment.

The last word of the title, *avatara*, which is translated in the commentary as the 'introduction', relates to introducing the complete methodology to engage in the actions of a bodhisattva, in other words the contents of this text.

In summary, *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* is a clear and unmistakable presentation of the unmistakable methods for engaging in the deeds or actions of a bodhisattva encompassing the six perfections, which lead one to the ultimate state of enlightenment.

This explanation of the title of the text can, in itself, provide us with something really significant to contemplate. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently said, 'Traditionally we don't hear about meditations on the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, but when we recite this text, we can contemplate the meaning of every single word in it. That would be a significant meditation based on the meaning of this text'. So it is good to really reflect on the meaning of each word in the title.

What does *bodhi* relate to? When we refer to Buddha, we may think that it just relates to a statue, but that is not correct. It actually refers to the state of enlightenment, which has been obtained by individual beings. When you use the Tibetan words and contemplate the connotations of each word, it gives an in-depth meaning. What does *sattva* mean? What does *charya* relate to? What are the actions that bodhisattvas engage in? What does *avatara* mean?' Contemplating each of these points becomes an adequate form of meditation.

The text itself is divided into ten chapters. As His Holiness recently explained, it is good to use the dedication prayer that we recite regularly, 'May the supreme jewel bodhicitta that has not arisen, arise and grow, and may that which has arisen never diminish but

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increase more and more', as the basis for our contemplation of this text.

As His Holiness explained, this aspirational prayer presents the structure of this text.

- The first three chapters introduce bodhicitta, and then clearly define the distinction between aspirational bodhicitta and engaging bodhicitta, and what is entailed in developing that. In other words they relate to the bodhicitta that has not yet arisen to arise and grow.
- The next three chapters, chapter four which is on conscientiousness, five on introspection and six on patience, explain how not to ensure that the bodhicitta which has already arisen does not degenerate or diminish.
- Chapters seven which is on joyous effort, eight on meditation and nine about wisdom, show us how to increase bodhicitta even more. While chapter eight explains the method for increasing conventional bodhicitta, chapter nine specifically explains in detail how to increase ultimate bodhicitta.
- The tenth chapter is a chapter on dedication which seals all the positive virtues that one has accumulated from having developed bodhicitta, by dedicating those virtues and aspirations.

The text explains all this in meticulous detail.

I had great fortune to receive a teaching on this text recently from His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Sarnath. It was a wonderful opportunity to receive it just before I was about to present it here in our study group. So, now I can be bold in presenting it to you!!

*Geshe-la then mentioned a few others who had been present with him at the teaching.*

The way His Holiness presented this very precious teaching was really incredible. He was so skilful in the way he presented it, that you didn't necessarily have to be a Buddhist to relate to it; he presented it so that it could be used by anyone who listened to the teachings regardless of what tradition they may come from or even if they didn't follow a particular religion.

That will be sufficient for this evening. Those of you who have the material can start to familiarise themselves with it as preparation for class. That will be a good way to conduct the teachings.

I mentioned that it would be good to compile the teachings I give on this so that it can later be published in book form, and Ross has very kindly and courageously accepted that task. But it would be good for everyone to render support and help with that.

Although I have conducted numerous teachings over the years, we have not been able to produce that many books. I am not about to boast, but such detailed teachings and explanations on a certain text are not found all that readily. That is why compiling a book will be useful.

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

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# Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

19 February 2013

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As usual we can spend some time in meditation. The *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited will suffice for our motivation. We need to bear in mind that the purpose of taking refuge is to protect us from following a wrong path, while generating bodhicitta protects us from following the lesser path. That will ensure that our practice is a Great Vehicle, or Mahayana practice. [meditation]

As we have just attempted to do in our short session, it would be really beneficial to adopt a regular meditation practice in everyday life. The positive result of that would be that our love and compassion for others will be established and further increased.

In order to further increase a genuine sense of happiness within ourselves we need to work on establishing and further developing our love and compassion, which naturally brings about a genuine sense of peace. The *tong len* meditation practice will ensure that we establish a peaceful state of mind not, along with ensuring that what has already been established becomes firmer and steadier so that it does not decline, and that which has been firmly established to further increase. This is how the meditation practice will help us to obtain a peaceful state of mind, that we all naturally wish for.

So in this way we can see that the conditions for our happiness and wellbeing do not lie entirely with external circumstances, but in developing our inner qualities. The more attention we pay to further developing our inner qualities, the greater our genuine sense of wellbeing and happiness will be. When our mind is in a happy state, it will definitely have a positive effect on our physical health as well; a happy mind naturally brings about a healthy body. That is something that we need to consider.

As mentioned previously, it is essential for us to secure a positive motivation for engaging in the teachings. The optimum positive motivation can be generated by thinking along these lines: In order to benefit all sentient beings, by liberating them from all suffering and establishing them in supreme happiness, I need to achieve the ultimate state of enlightenment first. So for that purpose I will listen to the teachings based on the explanation of this text composed by the great master Shantideva, and put it into practice well.

The four main sections of the text are the meaning of the title; the translator's prostration; the meaning of the text and the meaning of the conclusion.

## 1. MEANING OF THE TITLE

In our last session we explained the meaning of the Sanskrit title of the text *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, by breaking it up into its parts. *Bodhi* means enlightenment;

*sattva* means brave or courageous one; *charya* means action; and *avatara* means introduction.

As explained in our last session, it is really worthwhile to contemplate each of these components of the title. For example, *bodhi* or buddha relates the state of enlightenment. So what does that state of enlightenment, or buddhahood actually refer to? By contemplating the meaning of each part of the Tibetan word for it, *jang chub*, we understand that the state of enlightenment encompasses having overcome all adversities and negativities and accomplished all qualities.

Whenever we hear the name Buddha, or relate to the Buddha when engaging in practices of making offerings, paying homage and so forth; it is good to remember that the Buddha refers to a being who had first generated bodhicitta to become a courageous one (*sattva*), and thereby achieved enlightenment, a state in which all defilements have been abandoned and all supreme qualities fully established. He did that for the sole purpose of benefitting all sentient beings.

The practical benefit of contemplating the meaning of even just one word such as 'buddha' is that when we aspire to achieve enlightenment, (as we did with the motivation that we generated earlier) we gain a true sense of what it is that we are aspiring to achieve. When aiming to achieve enlightenment, we are aspiring to achieve a state where we have removed all faults and defilements, and acquired all possible qualities.

Defilements fall into two main categories — deluded obscurations and obscurations to omniscience. Deluded obscurations i.e. the delusions themselves, are obscurations to achieving self-liberation, whereas the imprints of the delusions are the obscurations to omniscience.

For as long as we have the imprints of the delusions in our mind, in particular the mode of mistaken dualistic appearances, to that extent the obscurations that prevent us from reaching the fully omniscient state of enlightenment, will always be present.

Understanding that the Buddha was an enlightened being, endowed with the characteristics of having overcome all defilements and accomplished all supreme qualities, means that when we do prostrations or make offerings or request blessings from the buddhas, we do so with that understanding. This will help us to purify the negativities of our own three doors of body, speech and mind, whilst receiving the blessings of the Buddha's holy body, speech and mind. That is a very meaningful way of relating to the Buddha. Of course, we could go into more detail here—however let us proceed with the text.

It is essential that we have a proper understanding, right from the beginning, as to what enlightenment really means. Then, when we relate that to our own practice, we will have the understanding that we are aspiring to achieve a state where all adversities or defilements have been completely abandoned and all positive qualities have been completely accomplished.

It is also really important to understand that the state of enlightenment is not obtained instantaneously. Rather, our commitment to avoid each and every tiny non-virtue, while acquiring each every good quality, becomes the

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basis for creating the causes for achieving enlightenment. This gradual process will eventually add up to the point where we reach the state of overcoming all faults and acquiring all good qualities. It is essential that we have this understanding.

This is a very pungent instruction for our own personal practice. Whenever we find ourselves intentionally avoiding some negativity or non-virtue, and voluntarily adopting good virtue, we can rejoice and feel encouraged by the fact that we are creating the basic causes for enlightenment. This is no trivial achievement but a very significant one that can be a source of tremendous encouragement for our daily practice.

Every time we make sincere attempts to overcome faults, and acquire positive qualities, we are getting closer and closer to enlightenment; meanwhile creating the causes for a genuinely calmer and more peaceful state of mind. When we sincerely adopt this practice in our everyday life we will find that our mind gradually becomes a little bit more settled and peaceful. In this way we can see how engaging in these practices on a daily basis is really worthwhile as we experience the benefits right now. It is not as if we have to wait until enlightenment to experience positive results from our practice. In fact the positive results we experience now will lead onto obtaining more significant qualities in the future.

Other texts explain that one benefit of presenting the title in Sanskrit is that it is the language used by the buddhas of the three times when they turned the wheel of Dharma. Presenting the title of the text in its original form blesses our mind with the blessed language of the buddhas. Using the original Sanskrit title also leaves a good imprint on our minds to be able to master this language so that we can listen and teach in Sanskrit ourselves. In addition the Sanskrit title indicates the authenticity of the text, showing that it originates from the source of great Indian treatises.

If the title is presented in Sanskrit for these reasons, we might well wonder why it is also presented in Tibetan. The purpose for doing that is said to be to remember the kindness of the Tibetan translators. Without the great lengths that the Tibetan translators went through to translate the text, it would be very difficult for us to access these great treatises now. Only a few scholars in Tibet were able to translate the original Sanskrit into Tibetan, but through their efforts many, many more Tibetans have been able to study those texts, and put their instructions into practice.

The great Tibetan masters have studied, meditated on and practised the instructions on *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* in unbroken succession. They were able to do so because of the translation of this and other Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. Without the translations they would not have been able to study these texts. In my own case, I attempted to study some Sanskrit, but I wasn't able to master it to a point of being able to confidently read and study the Sanskrit versions. I have only been able to make attempts to understand these classic texts because of the availability of the texts in Tibetan.

In fact many of the classic Indian texts don't seem to exist in their original Sanskrit form, but they are all available in

Tibetan and therefore are available for translation into other languages. So the English translations of these texts are based on the Tibetan translations. Therefore it is quite appropriate for us to remember and celebrate the work of the great Tibetan translators; without their work we would not have the English translations that we use today. Apparently some of the classic texts have been translated into Japanese, and perhaps some into Chinese. I have heard that it is not very easy to translate them into Japanese, as one also needs to be a master of classic Chinese. So in this way we can see the significance of remembering the kindness of the Tibetan translators.

On the right of the altar there are over one hundred volumes of Tibetan translations of all of the Buddha's words, which are called the *Kangyur* in Tibetan. On the left we can see the *Tengyur*, the two hundred or so volumes of commentaries by the great Indian masters called, also translated into Tibetan, and hence available to this day.

## THE FIRST BUNDLE

Although not presented in the English translation, in the Tibetan text, right after the title there is mention of the *First Bampo*. This relates to the system of applying separate sections in the original text. The word *bampo* comes from the Tibetan word used, for example to describe the bundling of hay into a haystack, or a bunch of flowers when you bundle together individual flower stems. Similarly when parts of the text are bundled together as one section, the collection is called a *bampo*. There is also the term *bamdrol* which refers to a sub-section of a *bampo*, which contain specific number of verses—three hundred verses in some cases and five hundred in another text. The *Heart Sutra*, a short text containing only twenty-five verses, has only one *bampo*.

## 2. TRANSLATOR'S PROSTRATION

*I prostrate to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.*

There is no literal explanation of this line in Gyaltsab Je's commentary, as its meaning is quite clear. However Gyaltsab Je does, however, explain the purpose of the prostration as follows:

The purpose of the translator's prostration is to pacify the obstacles to the translation and to identify this text as a commentary belonging mainly to the sutra basket of teachings, although in general it is a commentary on all the baskets of teachings.

Here the word *basket* refers to the collections of the Buddha's teachings.

*Pacifying the obstacles to the translation* includes the obstacles to the completion of the composition. Thus, the prostration to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas is done as a way to receive their blessing during the translation, in order for the translator to complete the composition successfully.

Because *all buddhas and bodhisattvas* encompasses all supreme beings, paying respect to them is the optimum means to accumulate extensive amounts of merit. It is due to the merit that one possesses that one will have success in whatever one does. Here in the west people talk about luck or fortune. I am not really sure what that means, but



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from the Buddhist point of view we need to have a sufficient amount of merit to accomplish anything that we wish to accomplish.

The second part of the commentary explains that prostrating to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas also implies that this text belongs to the *sutra basket* of the Buddha's *teachings*. This is in accordance with a decree by an early king of Tibet that all translations had to begin with a salutation to indicate to the readers the collection of the Buddha's teaching that the text belongs to. For texts that relate to the *sutra basket*, as is the case here, the salutation is to all buddhas and bodhisattvas. The texts that belong to the *abhidharma* collection have a salutation to Manjushri, the deity of wisdom; while those belonging to the *vinaya basket* have a salutation to the Omniscient One meaning the Buddha.

So just from the prostration in the beginning of the text, we can immediately detect that this text belongs to the *sutra basket* of the Buddha's teachings. In addition to the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings, these salutations can also relate to the three trainings; the training of morality, the training of concentration and the training in wisdom. The *sutra basket* relates to the training of concentration, the *abhidharma* to the training of wisdom and the *vinaya basket* relates to the training of morality.

When these three trainings are related to the three baskets of the Buddha's teachings, as in this case, they are called higher trainings to indicate that the trainings surpass the practices of other traditions. Consequently a higher training surpasses other forms of training.

Even though they are presented as higher forms of training, we all have, to a certain degree, some level of morality, concentration and wisdom within ourselves right now. We all practise some form of morality in our present state, and to a certain degree we are all able to engage in meditation, and we all have a certain amount of intelligence or wisdom. So, these trainings are not unfamiliar or irrelevant to us. When we notice that we do have these trainings within ourselves to a certain degree, it encourages us to further develop them.

In fact all of the Buddha's teachings are said to be presented in a practical way, suitable for the capacities of the various dispositions of his disciples. It is said that even if we don't have the actual practice, we may have the seed of the practice, or the potential to practise, or even a similitude of that practice.

For example when we recited the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer*, that form of taking refuge complemented with bodhicitta is the means for us to adopt all three levels of practice. The very act of taking refuge encompasses some form of morality; when we take refuge very sincerely, with a contemplative mind and strong faith, it encompasses concentration; and our understanding of the benefits of taking refuge, encompasses wisdom. When it is complemented with bodhicitta then that act of taking refuge becomes the ultimate form of refuge which is the Mahayana refuge. Thus the practice of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta encompasses all three levels of practice, and that is why it can be considered a very significant and high form practice. This is how we can relate to the practice in a practical way.

### 3. MEANING OF THE TEXT

The commentary refers to the *First Bambo*. As that makes it clear that this is the first section of the text, there is no need for further explanation.

The text has two main sub-divisions:

3.1. The preparatory actions for explaining the stages of the Mahayana path

3.2. The actual explanation of the stages

As I have explained previously, the headings themselves can tell us what the actual contents of the text will be. They are presented in a very meticulous and logical manner. Initially the preparatory actions or preliminary actions of the Mahayana path are explained, which is then followed by the actual explanation of the stages of the path.

#### 3.1. THE PREPARATORY ACTIONS FOR EXPLAINING THE STAGES OF THE MAHAYANA PATH

This section of the text has three subdivisions:

3.1.1. Homage

3.1.2. Pledge of composition

3.1.3. Humility and the reason for joyful composition

##### 3.1.1. Homage

The homage has three subdivisions:

3.1.1.1. The purpose of paying homage

3.1.1.2. Summary

3.1.1.3. Meaning of the words

##### 3.1.1.1. The purpose of paying homage

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the purpose of paying homage thus:

By expressing the qualities of special objects and going for refuge, one comes to be understood as a holy being, and the obstacles to the composition of the treatise are pacified. In the end, one attains definite goodness and other disciples will also follow this example. As a result, they too will achieve all accumulations of goodness.

It is good to understand the significance and relevance of this presentation. The statement *by expressing the qualities of special objects and going for refuge, one comes to be understood as a holy being*, contains a great truth. We all regard Shantideva as a great master and holy being, so it is clear that as a result of his respectfully paying homage to holy beings, he in turn came to be regarded as a holy being himself. Thus, when one takes sincere refuge in a holy object and practises the commitments of refuge, we can understand the positive outcome will be that one will attain the state of becoming a holy being oneself.

When *the obstacles to the composition of the treatise are pacified* then all obstacles during the composition will be removed, and *the end* result is that *one obtains definite goodness and other disciples will also follow this example*. And *as a result they too will achieve accumulation of goodness*. In short, paying homage encompasses a twofold benefit, i.e. benefit for oneself and benefit for others.

This is in accordance with the practice of all the great holy and noble beings. In whatever activity they undertake, they first take refuge in the Three Jewels and a particular deity they have strong faith in, such as Tara, or

Avalokiteshvara and so forth. It is customary for all holy beings to pay homage before they engage in any activity.

Recently I heard the national anthem of Sri Lanka and, if I am not mistaken I thought I heard the word *namo* at the beginning of the anthem. As I understand *namo* means salutation, and because Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country I assume that it is a salutation or prostration to the Buddha, which is quite significant to have in a national anthem.

### 3.1.1.2. Summary

*1ab. To the tathagatas possessing the dharmakaya, their children*

*And to all who are suitable for homage I prostrate respectfully.*

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

Shantideva prostrates to the Triple Gem and all others worthy of homage.

### 3.1.1.3. Actual meaning of the words.

In Tibetan, the Sanskrit word *Sugata* is translated as *de sheg*. *Sugata* is comprised of two words, *su* meaning 'great bliss' and *gata* means 'gone or completely gone beyond'. So the meaning of *sugata* is that by relying on the blissful bodhisattva path, one obtains the result of the ultimate enlightened state, which is a state where one has gone completely beyond cyclic existence.

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on this section by stating:

The term *sugata* relates to abandonment and realisation.

Here, *realisation* particularly relates to *dharmakaya*, the truth body of a buddha.

Gyaltsab Je then presents the *three qualities of excellent abandonment* in the form of analogies.

- Similar to a person possessing a good body, if one has exhaustively abandoned the afflictive obscurations, then one has gone to the good or beautiful.

When one has exhaustively abandoned afflictive obscurations then one has gone to the good or beautiful stage of enlightenment.

- Similar to having completely purified a contagious disease, one has gone beyond falling into cyclic existence through the power of the afflictions.
- Similar to a well-filled vase, having gone to all and thus having gone to bliss, through having exhaustively abandoned the non-afflictive ignorance.

Next, Gyaltsab Rinpoche explains the meaning of the word *sugata* in relation to the Tibetan word *shegpa*.

[*Dewa* or] bliss is referred to as good, and [*shegpa* or] 'gone' means to have become the living example of that.

Then Gyaltsab Je states:

The three [qualities of excellent abandonments] respectively distinguish a non-Buddhist who is free from attachment, from a stream enterer [or once returner], and a Hinayana arhat.

That covers what are called the excellent abandonments.

In general there are three particular types of abandonments: newly abandoned; abandoned to the point where it never reoccurs again; and exhaustively abandoned.

Gyaltsab Je's explanation of the three types of *excellent realisation* reads:

Having gone to bliss because of 1) directly understanding the suchness of the two selflessnesses; 2) having stable understanding; and 3) understanding all. Respectively these distinguish the three kinds of persons as well.

Then the first two lines of the root text are discussed.

Earlier, the word *sugata* was explained in terms of the Tibetan word *de sheg*, meaning *bliss* and *gone* respectively. So when the verse reads *to the tathagatas*, it is referring to the qualities of a buddha or enlightened ones, who are endowed with excellent abandonments and excellent realisations.

Next the commentary refers to the words *possessing dharmakaya*. The first line of the verse refers to the Buddha Jewel.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary states:

These lines show the praise to the Buddha Jewel.

Next, Gyaltsab Je's states that:

The dharmakaya is the naturally pure sphere free from all stains, which is the Dharma Jewel, and those possessing it are the ones gone to bliss.

*The dharmakaya is the naturally pure state free from all stains which is Dharma Jewel.* This refers to the truth of cessation within the Buddha's continuum. Having first presented the definition of the dharmakaya, i.e. that it is naturally pure from all stains which is the Dharma Jewel, Gyaltsab Je then goes on to explain that *those possessing it are the ones gone to bliss*. Thus the first line encompasses all three jewels, *tathagatas*—the Buddha jewel; *possessing the dharmakaya*—the Dharma jewel; and *their children*—the Sangha jewel.

As the commentary reads:

The first<sup>1</sup> and second<sup>2</sup> terms also contain the two form bodies of a buddha, and the second term also represents the truth of cessation and the truth of the path of a bodhisattva. Hence, all Buddha Jewels and Mahayana Dharma Jewels are the object of prostration.

*Children* refers to superior bodhisattvas; with their inclusion the Triple Gem is complete.

Here we need to explain why *bodhisattvas* are referred to as *children* or, more literally, the sons of the buddhas. This is in accordance to ancient royal system in India where the king's son, the crown prince, is recognised in the social hierarchy as the one who will be entrusted with the sovereignty of the kingdom as well as the key to the treasury. In other words, the king's son, who is of the lineage of the king himself, is the one who will be entrusted with the most valuable assets of the kingdom.

Using that analogy, the son or the children of the buddhas are the bodhisattvas who hold the complete

<sup>1</sup> Tathagatas

<sup>2</sup> Dharmakaya

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lineage of the Buddha's doctrine. Just like being entrusted with the key to the treasure vault, through their realisations they hold the key to the knowledge of the Buddha's teaching, which leads to enlightenment. As the Buddha in his physical form has passed into nirvana, it is the bodhisattvas who are preserving and maintaining the Buddha's teaching, and causing it to further flourish.

Just like the crown prince holds the lineage of the king, the bodhisattvas hold the complete unmistakable doctrine of the Buddha. Just as the crown prince assumes and continues the work of his father when the king reaches old age or passes on, bodhisattvas establish the doctrine of the Buddha and cause it to flourish in the minds of other sentient beings.

Gyalsab Je concludes his commentary on *The Meaning Of The Words* with:

Shantideva prostrates respectfully with body, speech and mind to them, and to all others worthy of prostration, such as abbots, preceptors and so forth.

The commentary further explains, [this part is missing in the translation] that at the end of the second line in the first verse of the root text, there is the Tibetan letter *te*, a continuative particle which indicates that there is something else to follow. If we were to use a continuative particle such as 'having' in the English translation, then the verse could read, 'Having prostrated respectively to the tathagatas possessing the dharmakaya, their children, and all suitable for homage', that then would indicate that something else has to follow the prostration. It is similar to saying, 'Having washed, I will take my meal'. If you just say 'I have washed' then that in itself doesn't indicate another action to be followed. But if you say 'Having taken a shower...', then that indicates an action to be followed after the shower.

This Tibetan continuative particle *te* is also used in the offering prayer *Lama sang-gyā lama ch'ö, D'e-zhin la-ma ge-dün-te, Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-te*, which implies that something else is to follow that. However there is nothing that follows after the mention of lama. So that's why there are some teachers who say that rather than saying, *Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-te* it is better to say *Kun-gyi j'e-po la-ma-ny*. That is because the *nyi* has the connotation of referring to only the lama himself. Nevertheless the word *te* is used in the actual prayer.

The parts up to now in the text have been quite technical and perhaps a bit tedious. However, because the explanations are presented in the commentary, we need to cover it. It has its place and purpose, so it is good to have an understanding of it. Henceforth the explanations in the text will be more straightforward and easy to follow.

After this evening, you might, at the very least, have a better understanding of what the word Buddha refers to and what a bodhisattva actually means.

Another thing that may be relevant and practical is the significance of doing prostrations. The act of prostration to holy objects accumulates the merit to be able to successfully engage in whatever activity we choose.

As the great master Potawa mentioned in one of his works: Don't rely too much on humans, rather make

strong prayers to the enlightened beings and deities. I think he is making a great point there. The deity can be whatever enlightened deity one has a strong connection with.

Just recently someone mentioned to me how making strong prayers to Tara has been really helpful in their life in times of difficulty or problems. He is an older person who helps other elderly people. He told me how one of the people he was helping scolded him a lot, which was really very uncomfortable. It was hard to confront this elderly person to try to stop that abuse, so, he said, 'In desperation I started to pray to Tara, and recited some mantras, which actually started to help my own mind'. Apparently the old man who had been making comments such as, 'Don't come near me again', so he was just sitting in a corner. But a little while after the volunteer started reciting the Tara prayers the elderly man called out saying, 'So you are not coming towards me are you?' And he replied, 'well, if you want I could come near you again' If you are happy I will come', and the old man said, 'Please do come over'. So it seems that conflict was immediately appeased by praying to Tara and reciting those prayers.

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

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*Edited Version*  
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# Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

བྱང་ལྷོ་སེམས་དཔའི་སྤྱོད་པ་ལ་འཇུག་པ་བཞུགས་སོ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

26 February 2013

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We can now engage in our meditation practice. The motivation that we generated in the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* that we have just recited will suffice as our motivation for this practice.

The first two lines of this prayer identify the objects of refuge. In the Tibetan version the first line reads *To the Buddha, the Dharma and the highest assembly*; the **Buddha** relates to the supreme guide; and as this is a Mahayana refuge, the **Dharma** encompasses the truth of the Mahayana path and the Mahayana truth of cessation; while the **highest assembly** specifically indicates the Mahayana Sangha. It is because the Sangha is regarded as a highest or supreme assembly, that making offerings to them is considered to be a highly meritorious deed.

In the lam rim teachings, refuge is presented in four categories: identifying the objects of refuge; explaining the causes of going for refuge; the manner of going for refuge; and having taken refuge, the stages of training. These are really significant points to bring to mind whenever one takes refuge.

The second line of the verse in Tibetan, *I go for refuge until I am enlightened*, indicates the duration of going for refuge. As it is the Mahayana refuge, one goes for refuge until reaching the complete state of enlightenment. In the common refuge, such as when one takes the lay person's vows, it is going for refuge until the end of one's life. The *I* indicates the individual person who is going for refuge, and *go for refuge* indicates the objects of refuge and the manner of taking refuge, intact with the two causes for taking refuge.

Thus, going for refuge implies that the **two causes for taking refuge** are intact. The first cause is to have unbearable **fear** of taking rebirth in the lower realms in particular, and experiencing the sufferings of cyclic existence in general. Out of this fear arises the second cause, which is **wholehearted reliance** upon the objects of refuge, the Three Jewels.

The **manner of taking refuge** has four points outlined in the lam rim teachings are: recognising the qualities of the objects of refuge; recognising the differences between the objects of refuge; going for refuge with acceptance; and abandoning going for ultimate refuge in other objects. These points are implicitly indicated in the prayer as well.

The main point is that this one verse of taking refuge and generating bodhicitta encompasses a complete and really profound practice. Reciting this verse and contemplating its meaning is, in itself, a meditation practice. Treating it as a mere preliminary formality and assuming one is going onto some higher form of practice afterwards is completely missing the point. Without the basis of taking refuge wholeheartedly, with the complete understanding of what refuge and generating an altruistic mind involves, there is no real practice.

We need to consider the reason why this is such a profound practice. At an individual level we want to be free from the miseries of unfortunate rebirths and the shortcomings of

samsara in general. Without obtaining that freedom ourselves we cannot possibly benefit all other beings. So our primary concern must be adopting the best methods to free ourselves from the miseries and sufferings of the lower realms in particular, as well as the suffering of samsara in general. How we do that is solely dependent on taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Only these objects of refuge give us the methods to free ourselves from cyclic existence.

The second half of the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* indicates the generation of bodhicitta. In *from the virtuous merit that I collect*, the *I* indicates the individual person who is collecting the merit. The *merit* is the merit one accumulates specifically from generosity, morality and meditation. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has indicated on several occasions that using the Tibetan word *tsok-nam kyi* which includes both accumulations, rather than *sonam kyi*, which identifies only merit, would be much more meaningful as it encompasses both the collection of wisdom, as well as the collection of merit. That, as His Holiness explains, will encompass far more virtues, and also reminds us of the importance of engaging in both accumulations. The virtue that comes from both accumulations thus serves as a substance for generating the altruistic mind of bodhicitta. As you may recall, during initiations and so forth, it is customary to bring a small offering when taking the bodhisattva vows, to represent the bodhicitta substance. Here the virtue from the two accumulations serves as a supreme substance for generating bodhicitta.

In the last line, [here the English translation corresponds exactly to the Tibetan]— *to be able to benefit all sentient beings*, indicates the purpose for taking refuge which is to benefit other sentient beings. Those who are familiar with the definition bodhicitta will recall the two aspirations that are needed to qualify as bodhicitta — the aspiration to achieve enlightenment and the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings.

In the words *may I attain the state of Buddha to be able to benefit all sentient beings*, the *state of Buddha* identifies the aspiration to achieve enlightenment, while *to benefit all sentient beings* identifies the aspiration to benefit others. So the combination of these two aspirations qualifies bodhicitta as the supreme altruistic mind. The words *may I attain* indicates generating that specific aspiration in the form of a very strong wish. In one of the commentaries on Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, called *Clear Meaning*, it explains by quoting a sutra that bodhicitta is developed in the nature of generating a strong wish. Amongst the twenty-one commentaries on Maitreya's *Ornament of Clear Realisation*, the most supreme one is said to be *Clear Meaning*, composed by Indian master *Haribhadra*.

Thus the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* suffices for our motivation when it is based on having the full knowledge and understanding of what it encompasses. I'm exhorting you not to forget these points and keep them firmly in mind. The reason why I remind you of these points again and again is because taking refuge and generating bodhicitta is essential and crucial for any practice to become meaningful.

Now we can engage in the meditation practice. [*Meditation*]

In our last session we covered the homage, so what are the objects of the homage? They are the Three Jewels, and all others worthy of prostration, such as abbots, preceptors and so forth.

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## 1.2. Pledge of composition

The pledge of composition has four sub-divisions:

- 1.2.1. Identifying the subject
- 1.2.2. Rejecting the fault of self-creation
- 1.2.3. Rejecting repetition
- 1.2.4. Identifying the purpose, essential purpose and relation

### 1.2.1. Identifying the subject

The relevant words of the root text are:

1c. ...to the discipline of the tathagatas' children

Here Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

This is a compendium that contains all the stages of the path that cause one to achieve enlightenment, such as the practice of the perfection of generosity and so forth, that were engaged by the buddhas and bodhisattvas upon initially generating the mind of enlightenment.

The order of the lines in Tibetan is different from the English translation we are using. As the commentary explains, *tathagatas* indicates the buddhas, and *children* indicates the bodhisattvas. So *generating the mind of enlightenment* specifically indicates the bodhicitta that has to be developed. So developing bodhicitta and then engaging in the *practices of the perfections of generosity and so forth*, leads one to that ultimate state of buddhahood.

The word *discipline* refers to engaging in the practices such as the perfection of generosity and so forth after having generated the mind of enlightenment.

Here we need to understand that the *perfection of generosity and so forth* implies the practices of the six perfections such as morality, patience, joyous effort, enthusiasm, meditation and wisdom, which will be presented individually in later chapters. By engaging in these practices bodhisattvas reach the ultimate state of enlightenment. Even though the literal translation of *dom* is *discipline* or *vow*, as used in this translation of the root text, the word *dom* has the connotation of a *compendium* as used in the commentary.

Thus, Shantideva's text is a compendium that contains all the stages of the path that cause one to achieve enlightenment

### 1.2.2. Rejecting the fault of self-creation

This is covered in the words:

1cd. This introduction ... according to the teaching.

In explaining these words, Gyaltsab Je poses a hypothetical question to Shantideva:

Have you not made it up yourself? Who is supposed to believe in this?

As a response to that Gyaltsab Je goes on to say:

There is no fault of self-creation, this introduction to all the stages of the Mahayana path is according to the explanation of the scriptural teachings of the Buddha.

This is a rejection of the fault of self-creation.

### 1.2.3. Rejecting repetition

Again Gyaltsab Je raises a hypothetical question in his commentary:

Yes, one generates realisations in dependence on the scriptures, but to what end compose this text?

In other words: what reason is there to compose this text? The response is in these words in the root text:

1d. I shall formulate in brief...

Then, in accordance with the root text, Gyaltsab Je indicates Shantideva's response:

There is no fault of repetition because I explained the teachings in a condensed way so that the meaning of the scriptures can be easily realised.

These few lines contain a very significant point that indicates the great kindness of Shantideva. As indicated here there is no repetition of other texts as this composition is *formulated* in a *condensed* or *brief* form. We need to derive from this how incredibly kind Shantideva has been to compose a text that condenses all of the essential points of the Buddha's teachings.

As the opening hypothetical question indicates, *one generates realisations in dependence on the scriptures*. This, of course, is true. One can generate realisations in dependence on the scriptures, which, as the Buddha's own words, are stainless and faultless. However, the reality is that there are so many volumes of text of the Buddha's words that it would be virtually impossible to even find the time to read all of them. That is because we are living in degenerate times. Our life span is short, we lack a significant amount of wisdom and we lack enthusiasm or joyous effort, and on top of that, with our dull intellect we are quite lazy!

To re-emphasise that point, the reality is that we are living in degenerative times where our life span is short in general and not fixed, which means that death can occur at any time. We also lack wisdom, enthusiasm and on top of that we are lazy. This indicates that even if we were to find the time to read the Buddha's words, it would be hard for us to derive their entire meaning. Nor do we have the capacity to condense these words into a manual of practices that extracts the essential points. Thus Shantideva's kindness is limitless, as illustrated by his presentation of this text which contains the essential points of all of the Buddha's teachings in a condensed form.

As mentioned in the past, the teachings on the *Prajnaparamita* (which means the wisdom gone beyond) are contained in four thick volumes. It is virtually impossible for us to try to read and understand all of that, and then to condense it into a set of practices. Hence, the relevance of this compendium compiled by Shantideva. As indicated here, by relying on Shantideva's text we can easily realise the meaning of the scriptures.

### 1.2.4 Identifying the four, purpose and so forth

First Gyaltsab Je identifies the subject which is:

The Mahayana path and its result are the subject

Secondly, Gyaltsab Je mentions the purpose:

Then to ultimately attain enlightenment in dependence on this is the essential purpose.

The purpose can be divided into the initial purpose and the ultimate or essential purpose. The initial purpose is to understand the meaning of the text and the *essential purpose is to achieve enlightenment*.

The third point is the relationship between these two purposes, which is, as Gyaltsab Je explains:

...that the later does not come about with the earlier...

Here *the later* means that the later part of the text or subject is *dependent* on the *earlier* explanations.

The final point is the purpose of making the pledge, which is so that the composition will be carried all the way through to its conclusion.

It is customary for the great scholars to make a pledge to complete their composition. From this we can understand that once we make a promise it is important to keep that promise and fulfil it.

### 1.3 Humility and joy in composition

This section has three sub-divisions:

1.3.1. Humility and not written primarily for the purpose of others

1.3.2. The reason for joyful composition

1.3.3. Expressing that it becomes meaningful for others of the same fortune

#### 1.3.1. Humility and not written primarily for the purpose of others

The Tibetan word for *humility* has the connotation of letting go of one's pride. This heading is indicating that the composition was not intended to instil pride but rather the opposite - letting go of one's pride.

The first two lines of verse two relate to this heading:

2. *I do not express anything that did not exist earlier  
And I also do not possess poetic proficiency.*

As a way to explain these two lines Gyaltsab Je raises another hypothetical question:

If it was written according to the teachings of the Buddha, and one needs to attain realisations in dependence on the teachings of the Buddha, why then did you compose this text?

The answer to the hypothetical question is presented as if Shantideva himself was responding:

There are two reasons why I have not written this treatise for those who can easily realise the meaning of the subject matter by depending on the teachings of the Buddha:

This is indicating that the treatise was not intended for people who could easily realise the meaning of the subject matter by depending on the teachings.

The two reasons are:

This text does not express anything that is not already taught in the scriptures.

Here Shantideva is posited as saying 'I've not presented anything that has not been explained by the great masters such as Asanga and so forth, who composed great treatises on the Buddha's words'. Again, this is indicating his great humility.

The second reason is:

Although there is no difference in meaning, I also do not have the poetic proficiency to be able to make changes to the words according to their heaviness, lightness, increase and so forth.

Other treatises are written in very poetic ways, using elegant words with subtle meanings, as do some of the scriptures of the Buddha which have a lot of poetic analogies. Here Shantideva is implicitly indicating that he has overcome pride in two respects: pride in understanding the meaning of other sutras, which is saying, 'I have not presented any extra meaning here which has not been presented before'; and pride in relation to quality of his words, saying, *I do not have poetic proficiency*. These are the two reasons why the text was not written for the purpose of others.

There can also be another implication in the words *it was not written primarily for the purpose of others*, which is that this treatise is not intended for those who assume that they can

gain realisations without relying on authentic sources of the Buddha's words and the great masters of the past. There are those who feel attracted to treatises that are written in a very poetic way, regardless of their contents. Shantideva implicitly indicates that this is not the purpose of the treatise. That is my recollection of how His Holiness explained it. If you have a copy of the treatise of those teachings, you can refer to that, but that's how I remember it.

Then having mentioned the explicit and implicit reasons why the text was not written for the purpose of others, the next question is, 'If there is any purpose, then what is it?' This is covered in the next section.

#### 1.3.2. The reason for joyful composition

In essence this is saying, 'It is not that I don't have any purpose for composing this text, as I do have great reasons for a being joyful about this composition'.

The root text states:

- 2cd. *Therefore my intent was not for the purpose of others.  
I composed this to acquaint my own mind,*

Gyaltsab Je's commentary essentially indicates that Shantideva is saying:

There is a reason why I composed this treatise. It is for acquainting my mind, so that what I understood earlier does not decrease but increases.

This is a very significant point for us to consider, and it is a personal instruction for us as well. As Shantideva indicates, he composes this treatise *to acquaint* his *mind* with whatever he has *understood* from the Buddha's teachings in the past, so that it *does not decrease, but further increases*.

I try to remind students that it is essential to preserve the understanding we have already gained in the past, and reflect upon it again and again as a way to increase our knowledge. Sometimes people learn something and then put it aside, and go off to find something new, without utilising what they have gained from the earlier teachings. So we need to be mindful about avoiding this.

Another point of personal instruction is that the way to ensure one's understanding and knowledge do not to decrease, and to enable it to increase further is to acquaint one's mind with those teachings again and again. That is the only way to ensure our understanding does not decrease and further increases.

Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary goes on to explain that:

The reason for using the determiner *this* is to indicate either that the text is already complete in the master's mind, or that he is composing it, and that it is not yet complete.

Saying that *the text is already complete in the master's mind* describes the way in which Shantideva composed the text. We would write a few paragraphs, and then search for other material, and incorporate that and then go onto the next chapter and so on. We have to find the resources as we go along. In this case, however, Shantideva already had the full understanding and knowledge in his mind before commencing his composition.

More specifically, having that knowledge already in his mind definitely indicates that through his earlier studies and practices Shantideva had gained a full understanding of the Buddha's teachings. He was endowed with that understanding in his mind before engaging in the composition.

In relation to this, the qualities of a scholar are said to be three-fold: they are great masters of debate; they have great knowledge and they are masters of composition.

Being a **master of debate**, means that having removed all mistaken views, there are no faults in their understanding of the Buddha's words or teachings. Being a **master of knowledge** refers to having clear and unmistakable understanding of the Buddhadharmā. Being a **master of composition** means having the quality of ensuring that the doctrine, i.e. the Buddhist teachings, do not decline but remain for a long period of time. The teachings explain that of these three qualities the quality of composition is the most supreme, because it ensures that the knowledge does not decline but remains for a long time to benefit many.

I have often encouraged people to write down their experiences. If they want to write a book, I encourage them to do so. From a practical point of view others will appreciate what has been written and can learn from it. If someone with knowledge keeps it to themselves, then their knowledge will die with them, as there will be no record of their knowledge or experiences. So we can see that, even from a conventional point of view composing and writing books is a good deed; it survives the person and remains for others to appreciate in the future. Also there can be financial benefits from writing books, as many authors do.

With respect to Shantideva's composition, we can see that Shantideva definitely had that greater purpose and intention in mind. He composed this text as a way to benefit beings for many generations, just as we are now doing.

To explain a further point Gyaltsab Je poses another hypothetical question:

Shantideva composed the treatise for the purpose of self. If he did not understand it, then he was unsuitable to compose the treatise; if he understood it, then that in itself is enough to meditate on. So what need is there then to compose the text?

This is a reasonable question to ask even though it is a hypothetical one. It also indicates that without having understanding, there is nothing to meditate on! This hypothetical question is raised as an introduction to the next two lines of verse:

*3ab. To familiarise with virtue and the strength of my faith,  
Initially this will increase them.*

Gyaltsab Je answers this question from Shantideva's perspective:

I composed the treatise to familiarise my mind in an uninterrupted manner with the extensive virtue that I entered into earlier. By putting it in the form of the treatise, it also increases this mind more and more.

Hence, by composing the treatise through the force of my faith, wisdom and compassion, all three of these will initially increase in my continuum.

So the reason for being joyful about having composed this treatise is that *my faith, wisdom and compassion, will initially increase in my continuum*. The word *initially* also has the connotation that:

... in dependence on that, others of equal fortune as me to see this treatise, will also understand it.

That is also implying that while it helps to increase the virtue in Shantideva's own mind through acquaintance with it, others who also have the fortune to see it will also understand this treatise.

### **1.3.3. Expressing that it becomes meaningful for others of the same fortune**

This particular point is indicated in the next two lines:

*3cd. Should others of equal fortune to myself  
See any of this, it will be meaningful for them.*

As Gyaltsab Je explains in his commentary:

The purpose of others is also definitely accomplished, because when other Mahayana practitioners of fortune equal to mine see this text, it will become as meaningful to them as it is for me.

Here we can see the great extent of Shantideva's kindness and compassion and the consideration that he has for other beings. As we relate to the text we will begin to see the extent to which he has benefitted others. Of course, as all great masters of the past have agreed Shantideva was not only a great scholar and master, but a great, noble and compassionate being. The main point here is the humility and great joy with which Shantideva begins this composition.

There is a two-fold meaning in these lines: on one hand Shantideva adopts humility, which counteracts pride, and on the other hand, he finds great joy in composing the text. We need to reflect on these two points with respect to both our study and practice, and our everyday life. We need to be very mindful of protecting ourselves from the two extremes of pride on the one hand and despondency or low self-esteem on the other. These two are said to be the main obstacles that prevent one from gaining knowledge in the first place and then being able to maintain that knowledge and practice.

If one has great pride, then that will definitely prevent one from obtaining knowledge from authentic sources. The assumption that one knows everything and there's no-one better than me and so forth will prevent one from gaining more knowledge from others. Whereas the other extreme of being despondent, also prevents one from developing further. Feeling despondent is actually another form of laziness, in that that comes in the aspect of feeling 'I am not capable of doing that', which means that one does not engage in gaining knowledge. Adopting a sense of humility and having a great joyful mind overcomes these two extremes, because they encourage us to adopt the practices and study and so forth.

Overcoming pride and adopting humility and having a joyful mind aren't just related to the composition of the text. It is also a way to benefit others of equal fortune. This is specifically indicated in the text. Thus there is a two-fold benefit – for oneself and others.

We can often see these two extremes being displayed. There are times when one walks tall with an air of superiority: 'I know everything; I am the master of all'. Then there are other times when one curls up in a corner thinking, 'I don't know anything, I am worthless'. These are important points to reflect on during the course of our whole life. If we wish to lead a meaningful life, then we need to ensure that we protect ourselves from these two extreme attitudes.

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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26 February 2013 week 3

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# Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara*

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

5 March 2013

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As was extensively explained last week, the taking refuge and generating bodhicitta prayer can suffice as our motivation. Bringing to mind the meaning of that prayer is the best way to generate a positive motivation for the meditation practice. [meditation]

When a practice is preceded by the *Refuge and Bodhicitta Prayer* then it becomes a very profound practice indeed. In meditation one makes an attempt to keep a focused mind, not just with a single-pointed focus but with the residue of that understanding of having taken refuge and developing the altruistic mind of bodhicitta. Then our focus on the object of the meditation will be encompassed by the great virtues of that earlier practice.

The lam rim tells us that refuge is the entrance to the Buddha's doctrine while generating the altruistic mind of bodhicitta is the entrance to the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle practice and path. So we can see the importance of this practice.

## 2. THE ACTUAL EXPLANATION OF THE STAGES OF THE PATH

This is sub-divided into two categories:

- 2.1. Exhortation to take the essence of the basis with its freedoms and endowments
- 2.2. The method for taking the essence

### 2.1. Exhortation to take the essence of the basis with its freedoms and endowments

The relevant line from root text is:

*4a To find such freedoms and endowments is extremely rare.*

Here we need to recall the presentation of the precious human birth in the lam rim teachings. I would like to explain the topic of the precious human rebirth as presented in the lam rim, however that would take too much time. Nevertheless it would be good for those who have received the lam rim teachings in the past to apply your understanding here. Specifically the lam rim presentation has three main points: identifying the precious human rebirth; the rarity of the precious human rebirth, and the ease with which it can be lost. This line from the text relates to identifying the precious human rebirth and how it is extremely rare.

In the Tibetan word *dal-jor*, the first syllable *dal* has the connotation of being free from certain conditions, while the second syllable, *jor*, relates to conducive conditions, more specifically to the conducive conditions for practising the Dharma. Amongst the ten endowments, five are in relation to oneself and five are in relation to other factors. These will be presented later on.

So a precious human rebirth is identified as being a human rebirth that is free from certain adverse conditions and endowed with certain good conditions, and it is this combination of conditions that enables us to practise the

Dharma. When we relate to the precious human rebirth in this way, we can see that it has a more profound meaning than any ordinary human rebirth.

If we can immediately relate whatever teaching or practice that is being presented to the lam rim then, because of the extensive explanations presented in the lam rim, it becomes much more meaningful and profound. If something is mentioned in a few words in other texts, and we incorporate into it our understanding from the lam rim, we will be able to savour the real meaning of the words.

I'm in no way about to boast, but when I was studying in the monastery I made attempts to memorise the entire outline of the lam rim. Then I was able to read and familiarise myself with the subject matter while keeping in mind its place in the whole outline. If you were ask me to recite the outline now, my memory might fail me in my old age, however when I was capable of memorising it I took the opportunity to do so.

Having such a holistic approach to study, and then trying to implement it in my practice, means that even though I have not been able to acquire any profound realisations, I can safely say that as a result I have a happy mind wherever I go. Whatever the occasion, I seem to naturally be able to have a positive outlook and maintain a happy state of mind. I attribute that to the genuine attempts in studying and practising the Dharma in the earlier part of my life.

The main point that I am emphasising here is that as you now have all the conducive conditions and opportunities to practice, it is really worthwhile and meaningful to apply yourself, as much as possible, to incorporating whatever understanding you have gained from your study into some level of practice. If you wish to have a genuinely relaxed and happy positive state of mind in your old age then it is worthwhile to invest in that now, when you have the time and when you are capable of putting some energy into it.

Rather than treating the explanations in the teachings as a mere process of intellectual understanding, try to relate them to your own personal life and practice. At this point, we are identifying the precious rebirth which has conditions of the eight freedoms and ten endowments. Reflect on how we have all of these freedoms and good conditions right now, and how we have the perfect opportunity to make our life meaningful. In this way we can exhort ourselves to utilise the opportunities we have now, seeing them as an opportunity for personal practice, rather than as mere external conditions.

When Venerable Michael's mother met me recently, she told me about how when she first met the Dharma, she was one of the first Westerners who went to the Tibetan Library in Dharamsala when Geshe Dhargye was teaching there. She said that there were only five or six students attending the teachings at that time and 'except for me all of them have become scholars'. She recalled that Geshe Dhargye constantly exhorted the students, 'While study is important, make it more than just an intellectual understanding. The most important thing is to practise well'. As the great masters of past used to say, 'We are not deprived of knowledge or understanding but lack the practice'. So if you find that having understood the Dharma hasn't helped to subdue your mind then that is not a result of lacking knowledge, but a consequence of lacking the practice.

To return to the line from the root text, *To find such freedoms and endowments is extremely rare*, the lam rim teachings



present the rarity of finding a precious human rebirth in three points:

1. The causes required to find it are difficult to obtain.
2. An analogy illustrating the difficulty of finding a precious human rebirth
3. Contemplating the difficulty in terms of number; i.e. the number of human beings in general is much less compared to numberless other sentient beings

Gyaltsab Je begins his commentary on the line from the root text thus:

One needs to make certain that one practises the Dharma on this basis...

This is an exhortation to take the essence of the precious human rebirth. Then Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains:

... that possesses freedoms and endowments, because it is very difficult to find such a basis that possesses the eighteen dharmas ...

In relation to the lam rim outline on the difficulty of finding such a precious human rebirth, if one were to ask the question: *why is it be difficult to find such a basis that possesses the eighteen dharmas?*, then the answer is:

... due to it being very rare to establish the causes for it.

We can see how this very logical presentation is profound in itself, as it is also a presentation of the interdependent nature of cause and effect. Without a cause, there cannot be an effect, which means that if one wishes for a positive result or effect, one has to acquire the causes. The interdependent relationship between a cause and its effect is such that if one is lacking, the other cannot come about. Without acquiring the causes, one cannot experience the effect that one wishes for. That is the logic that is being presented here.

If the causes for such a rebirth are so rare, one may further ask, 'Why is it so rare? Why is it difficult to establish those causes?'

Here, Gyaltsab Je explains:

To attain a human body one needs to practise a single act of pure morality ...

Students who studied Chandrakirti's Middle Way text, the *Madhyamakavatara*, may recall that one of the verses says that there is no more supreme cause for obtaining high status and definite goodness other than morality. In other words, the supreme cause for obtaining high status is morality. What Gyaltsab Je is also saying here is that one cannot possibly obtain a human life, let alone a precious human life, without having observed a single aspect of morality in the past.

At this point we can ask, 'What else do we need to practise in order to obtain a precious human life endowed with the eight freedoms and the ten optimum conditions?'

To this Gyaltsab Je's commentary replies:

One needs to support it with the practice of generosity and so forth ...

Thus one needs to support morality with the practice of generosity, and so forth, which includes the rest of the practices of patience, joyful effort, meditation and wisdom.

Then the commentary further explains:

... and complete it with stainless prayer. This is exceedingly difficult to find.

*Stainless prayer* means that the prayer needs to be without the faulty stain of merely focusing on the benefits of this life. Thus, if one were to practise morality, for example, with the

intention of merely being appreciated by others or to become famous in this life and so forth, then that morality is tainted or stained with the intention of seeking benefit merely for this life. The meaning of prayer is aspiration, so if one's aspirations are mainly to obtain benefits in this life, then that is all one will achieve and one's practice of morality will not become a cause for obtaining a precious human rebirth in the next life, or any of the other forms of high status. To ensure that one's practice of morality becomes a cause for obtaining a good rebirth in the next lifetime (such as having high status), the practice of morality must be completed with an aspirational prayer that is focused on future lives beyond this one. Any aspiration that is focused beyond this lifetime will be a pure or stainless prayer.

A precious human life that possesses the eighteen dharmas is rare because the causes are so difficult to obtain. We need relate this to our own personal practice. Do we possess all the causes? Are the causes intact or not? How do we go about ensuring that we have the causes? Simply put, the basic cause is, as explained here, observing morality. Here we can think about each of the ten virtues and consider whether they are intact within us. Do we abide by the morality and ethics of not killing? If so, then one act of morality is observed and is thus intact, and we can rejoice about that. Do we refrain from stealing? If so, then that is another act of morality that one is observing. One can go through each of the remaining non-virtues: sexual misconduct; the four of speech, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech and gossip; and the three of mind, covetousness, harmful intent and wrong views. Check within yourselves? Ask, 'Am I abiding by these ethics or not?' If so, then we can rejoice about the fact that there is no question we have created the causes for a good rebirth in the next lifetime. If we focus on that and make aspirational prayers for that to occur then we will definitely have the basis for a fortunate rebirth, and so we can rejoice!

If, on the other hand, any of these virtues are lacking, we can still make a genuine attempt to try to incorporate that practice and to abide by the morality of refraining from the ten non-virtues. When it comes to understanding the teachings, looking outwards to see whether or not others have these causes doesn't help oneself. It is only by checking one's own mental continuum that the teachings become meaningful. Then all of these explanations become personally relevant.

There is the story from Tibet, where a lama was once giving a teaching on this very point of the difficulty and rarity of finding a precious human rebirth. Upon hearing this, someone attending the teaching said, 'Oh the lama must never have been to China, because China is full of people!' Clearly this individual did not have a real understanding of what a precious human rebirth meant, let alone relating it to himself.

Having explained how that precious human rebirth is very rare and difficult to obtain, the lam rim teachings go on to explain that such a rebirth is very meaningful. Thus having contemplated the rarity and difficulty of obtaining the precious human rebirth, and then determined that the causes are all present within oneself, one should then contemplate how meaningful that is and how it can be utilised for great purpose.

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## Contemplating the great meaning of the eight freedoms and ten endowments

The remaining lines from Verse 4 read:

*abcd If I do not do anything beneficial now  
To achieve the purpose of sentient beings  
How shall I subsequently attain it perfectly?*

The first two lines present the great benefit that can be derived from having a precious human rebirth, and the last line shows the rarity and the difficulty of finding it. In his commentary Gyaltsab Je explains how to contemplate the meaning of the freedoms and endowments in accordance with the meaning of the verse:

On the basis of this possession of the freedoms and endowments one needs to accomplish the purpose of others, because one has attained the basis, in dependence on which one can realise the higher status and definite goodness of others, which is their purpose. Hence one should practice with great effort.

*Because one has obtained the freedoms and endowments*, one has responsibility for helping others to achieve their purposes as well. Everyone is determined to fulfil their own purposes. This can be seen even in a worldly context, where people run around trying to achieve so many things – study, work and so on. Without an intention to achieve some purpose no one would bother to do anything. The most beneficial purpose, even as a temporary goal, is to inspire others to obtain high status and definite goodness. The ultimate purpose of course is to help them to actually achieve enlightenment.

There's no need to mention that, if a mere worldly purpose relates to some temporary benefit in this life, then most people are more than capable of achieving such personal goals and benefits in this life. Here, however, the purpose extends beyond this life. It is a goal that is oriented towards achieving a purpose in a future life, which is a very noble purpose.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary further explains:

Should one not accomplish the happiness of the next life and beyond, due to the idea of one's permanence and the like, ...

This is an exhortation to practise with great effort now, when we have all of the eight freedoms and ten optimum conditions intact. All too often we fall victim to grasping at permanence. Every morning when we wake up, we assume that we will live for a long time, and our day ahead is premised on existing well into future. We have this view that our life is permanent and durable and will last for a long time. That is where we fall short, because we don't contemplate the reality of how fragile our precious human rebirth is, and how it could end at any time. That is what is being explained here.

... then how shall one subsequently attain such a perfect base again?'

The stronger the notion 'I am not going to die', the stronger our attachment to this life's concerns becomes. If we have strong attachment to the pleasures of this life, then we have not contemplated the reality of how our life is impermanent and that we can perish at any time. Conversely, the best way to make life meaningful is to contemplate the impermanence of our life, knowing that it can end at any time. With such an understanding of the impermanence of one's life, strong attachment to this life's concerns and pleasures will definitely be reduced. In this way we can see the significance of the practice of contemplating impermanence and understanding that death can occur at any time.

If, on the other hand, we hold onto the notion that, 'I'm only 25 now, I am young and I have to work hard and save a lot because I am likely live to be 100!', then all one's time and energy will go into in acquiring as much wealth as possible to fund that long life! But the reality is that no matter how much wealth we accumulate out of our strong sense of attachment to this life's concerns, there will be no real sense of satisfaction. As the great Indian master Asvaghosa said, 'The lack of satisfaction is one of the strongest forms of suffering that one can experience'. Without that sense of inner satisfaction, then all the wealth in the world will not be adequate, and there will never be enough. That is the disease of dissatisfaction. We really need to contemplate how a sense of satisfaction comes from understanding how our life is very fragile and that there is no point in grasping too strongly at the affairs of this world.

As I often comment, if one is satisfied with having enough to survive on for one day, then each day can be a meaningful and happy one. If we can train our mind to be satisfied with what we have each day, and do the same the next day, and the next, then that will be sufficient to carry us through our life!

If, on the other hand, one holds on to the notion of definitely living to be 100 one then starts to calculate how much one would have to earn to last that long. Once one starts making those calculations, it can bring about lots of anxiety and fear, 'How am I going to be able accumulate enough money to last me for that long?' With all these unnecessary calculations and fears, one can actually become very anxious! But those fears are caused by nothing more than one's own fears and doubts, what we call the superstitious mind. It seems that many retired people start worrying about whether their savings will last them until the end of their life. They go over and over the calculations, thinking 'Will it be enough?' 'I am just spending and there's no money coming in'. Those sorts of fears and doubts end up making them quite miserable. It seems that some cannot even enjoy the food they are eating because they so preoccupied with such worries and anxieties.

The teachings on the meditations on death and impermanence tell us that death will definitely come. That is certain. Contemplating the certainty of death is really meaningful because the more one incorporates that understanding and actually puts it into practice the more the fears and anxieties about having to plan for the future naturally subside, and one becomes more relaxed and more flexible.

When we begin to understand the significance of this practice, we will begin to reap the benefits of that practice. As presented in the teachings, the first point is that death is certain. Yet while death is certain, the time of death is uncertain. So there is a certainty about death but there is no certainty about the time of death. The reality of that uncertainty about when death will occur is contemplated in two main points.

1. There is no certainty about the time death will occur. It can happen to the young as well as the old. Also death does not spare the rich; it happens regardless of whether one is rich or poor.
2. There are many more conditions for death than there are conducive conditions for survival. Even those very conditions that are usually conducive for survival can in fact become a cause for death. As we all know, there are many ways to perish after having a nice meal: it could be food poisoning; some die from over-eating; people choke on their

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food. There are many things that are normally conducive for our survival but which can be a very cause for death.

The point is that reflecting upon all of these realities will reduce our strong notion that our life is permanent. When that idea of a permanent life is overcome, then strong grasping at the necessities for survival or at the pleasures and attachments of this life will naturally be reduced. Then the mind will be much calmer and more relaxed.

Another important point is that reducing attachment does not necessarily mean getting rid of one's possessions. Divesting ourselves of possessions will not eradicate attachment to things. It's the grasping that one has to remove, not the possessions. One can still utilise one's possessions—the main thing is to reduce strong attachment to them. Then, at the time of death, one will be able to die very peacefully and because there is no attachment and clinging to possessions there will be nothing holding one back, and it will be a genuinely peaceful death.

The significance of these points is that while we may not be able to do anything to prevent our death, which is a reality, we can definitely do something to prevent fear and anxiety at the time of death.

Preparation for death has three main elements: 1) practice of morality, 2) supported by practices of generosity and so forth, and 3) completed with stainless or pure prayers.

We can choose to observe the morality of abiding by the ten virtues by refraining from killing and stealing and so forth. When we have voluntarily adopted an ethical way of living such as abiding by the ten virtues and refraining from the ten non-virtues, then that is the ultimate preparation and protection for us at the time of death.

As a result of one's preparation for death, one can actually feel great joy and happiness about experiencing death. That is definitely possible when one has adopted the practice of engaging in the ten virtues and avoiding the ten non-virtues, which serves to protect us from anxiety and fear at the time of death. We can be protected from those fears by the practices that we have engaged in during our life.

Of the three objects of refuge the Dharma Jewel is the actual refuge, and it is the Dharma, the practices we have done, which are the ultimate refuge and the ultimate protection at the time of death and beyond. So we can incorporate that understanding as well.

The word Dharma has the connotation of 'holding onto', which can also mean to protect. So when we incorporate the literal meaning of Dharma, we can derive the understanding that it is the practices one has established which will hold or protect one from the fear of unfortunate rebirths. We really need to understand how the practices that one has incorporated into one's life, is the actual Dharma refuge, the ultimate protection.

Of the Three Jewels, the Sangha will be unable to protect us from fear and anxiety at the time of death and the unfortunate rebirths beyond that, although there may be some blessings from their prayers. If the actual Buddha were present, he would be able to render some assistance. But the real protection comes from one's own practice, from one's own mind. What we can call uncommon or particular cause that protects one from the fears and anxiety at the time of death and beyond is the actual practice, the Dharma that one has incorporated within oneself. There is great solace in knowing that one has established the basis of Dharma within oneself, and has engaged in the practices to the best of one's ability. Then one will have confidence about facing death

without any fear and be able to joyfully and happily go beyond onto the next life. Real solace comes from one's own practice.

The actual definition of the word 'dharma' is 'that which holds its identity'. So the literal meaning of dharma incorporates all existence. Therefore all existence uses the term 'dharma', because everything that exists has that nature of holding its own identity.

We can apply that definition of dharma of holding its own nature or identity to this glass. The fact that this object is an object which holds its own identity or nature means that whoever relates to it will be able to relate to it as a glass. As long as its identity as a glass remains intact, it will always naturally retain that identity, and thus be able to function in that way. Thus we can always relate to it as a glass.

If it didn't have the ability to hold its own identity, then people would no longer relate to it as a glass, because it could change from one thing to another. It is good for us to have an understanding of that general definition of dharma, as well as the Dharma that is one of the Three Jewels.

The next session is the discussion evening. It is part of the study group discipline to participate in both the discussion and the following exam. The discussion is a meaningful commitment, and it is good to come to it with a joyful and happy mind as a way to further extend one's understanding.

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

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright  
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Edited Version*

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The login username is "studygroup", the password is "bwol" (just remember "Bodhisattva's Way of Life").

## Discussion Week 5 (12.03.2013)

**Week: 1** (12 February 2013)

Having extensively explained the importance and great advantages of love and compassion, we now turn to the techniques of how to develop the genuine wish to benefit others based on love and compassion. This is precisely explained in the text we have chosen to study.

1.a) What is the name of the text we have chosen to study?

b) Who composed it?

2. We will be studying a commentary on this text.

a) What is the title and who wrote it?

b) What is the meaning of the title?

3. The Sanskrit title of the text is *Bohdisattvacharyavatara*.

The English translation of *bodhi* is **enlightenment**. The Tibetan translation of *Bodhi* is **jang chub**

a) What is the connotation of **jang**?

b) What is the connotation of **chub**?

c) What does **sempa tib. (sattva skt.)** mean?

4. a) What is the definition of **charya**?

**Week: 2** (19 February 2013)

b) What are the three stages the action can be divided into?

5. Defilements fall into two main categories. What are they and give a brief explanation of each.

6. In accordance with a decree by a Tibetan king all translations have to begin with a salutation. There are three 'baskets' of teachings.

a) Name each basket and give the salutation that indicates each.

b) Which of the three trainings does each basket relate to.

7. What is the purpose of paying homage?

8. What does the Sanskrit word **Sugata** mean?

**Week: 3** (26 February 2013)

9. 'The second half of the refuge prayer indicates the generation of Bodhicitta.'

Give a brief explanation of the following lines;

*'from the virtuous merit that I collect,'*

*'to be able to benefit all sentient beings*

*'may I attain the state of Buddha to be able to benefit all sentient beings'*

**PTO**

10." **1c. ...to the discipline of the tathagatas' children"**

What does the word 'discipline' refer to here?

**Week: 4 (6 September 2011)**

11. How can we come to a point where we can rejoice about the fact that there is no question that we have created the causes for a good rebirth in the next lifetime? [Pg 2, col 2, para 2]

12. What is the point of reflecting on the realities of death and impermanence.? [Pg 4, col 1, para 1]

13. It is good for us to have an understanding of the general definition of Dharma as well as the Dharma that is one of the three jewels. Explain the two. [ Pg 4, col 1, para 7 to col 2,para 4]

# Exam

Name:  

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**Block 1****Week 6:** (19 March 2013)  

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Having extensively explained the importance and great advantages of love and compassion, we now turn to the techniques of how to develop the genuine wish to benefit others based on love and compassion. This is precisely explained in the text we have chosen to study.

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a) Name each basket and give the salutation that indicates each.

b) Which of the three trainings does each basket relate to.

7. What is the purpose of paying homage?

8. What does the Sanskrit word **Sugata** mean?

9. 'The second half of the refuge prayer indicates the generation of Bodhicitta.'  
Give a brief explanation of the following lines;  
'*from the virtuous merit that I collect,*

*'to be able to benefit all sentient beings*

*'may I attain the state of Buddha to be able to benefit all sentient beings'*

10." **1c. ...to the discipline of the tathagatas' children"**

What does the word 'discipline' refer to here?



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