

**Transcript of the teachings by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on
*Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, 2014***

Root text: *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva, translated by Toh Sze Gee. Copyright: Toh Sze Gee, 2006; Revised edition, 2014.

Lesson 2**11 February 2014**

The four seals. Chapter 1, Verses 1.1 to 1.5: Expression of homage (meaning of *Sugata*, the excellent abandonments and excellent realisations). Pledge of composition. Expression of humility. Actual explanation of the stages of the path.

THE FOUR SEALS

I had talked about the four seals in the past. All of you should think about them on a regular basis. The four seals are:

1. All compounded phenomena are impermanent.
2. All contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering (or misery).
3. All phenomena are selfless and empty.
4. Nirvana is peace.

The treatises on logic composed by the great logicians Dignaga and Dharmakirti stated that because it is impermanent, therefore it is in the nature of suffering. What they are saying is similar to the four seals. But what they said is not meant to be taken literally, i.e., just because something is impermanent, it is in the nature of suffering. We have to understand the import of that statement.

Why is it that contaminated phenomena are in the nature of suffering? This is because they are impermanent. This is what we have to figure out. Once we understand this, then we move on to the next seal.

(Because it is in the nature of suffering, therefore) it is selfless.

There are many ways to interpret and to understand this statement. This is something we need to think about and come to an understanding for ourselves.

Because it is impermanent, it is in the nature of suffering (or misery).
And because it is in the nature of suffering, it is selfless.

Once you understand all these assertions, you will come to understand how nirvana is peace. Although there is no direct statement alluding to this but, in meaning, it can be understood that:

Because it is selfless, therefore nirvana is peace.

This is an extremely important and fundamental point to understand. In fact this

vital point is the very root of the entire Buddhadharma. When you understand for yourself how nirvana (or liberation) actually exists and how it is possible for you to achieve it, this is when you truly begin to experience the teachings of the Buddha. Whatever learning and studying you do is to move your mind towards that understanding. Once you gain that kind of conviction, it helps you to have belief and faith in the Dharma and to aspire to actualise it.

The four seals attest a doctrine to be a Buddhist doctrine so they are very important and you should reflect on them continually.

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I have talked about the title of the text and the translator's homage. Now we start with the actual text that starts with the author paying homage.

### EXPRESSION OF HOMAGE

#### Verse 1.1

Respectfully I pay homage to the Sugatas who are endowed with the dharmakaya,  
As well as to their children, and to all who are worthy of homage.  
Here I shall describe how to engage in the vows of the Sugatas' children,  
The meaning of which I have summarized in accordance with the scriptures.

What are the objects to whom the author is paying homage? The objects that he is paying homage to are the Three Rare Sublime Ones or the Three Jewels, together with all those who are worthy of homage. After paying homage, he states his intention of composing this text.

#### *Meaning of "Sugata"*

In the commentary there is an explanation of the word *Sugata*. In English, it is translated as 'gone to bliss.' In Tibetan, it is made up of two words, *de* and *sheg*.

- *De* is translated as 'bliss.' Essentially it means something that is good and wonderful.
- *Sheg* means to go, to have gone, or to have become that.

#### ~ *The excellent abandonments*

The goodness referred to in *de* or bliss refers to the excellent abandonments and the excellent realisations. In terms of the abandonments, they are usually described in terms of three characteristics or features.

| <b>Three features of the excellent abandonments</b> |                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Abandonment                                      | Having abandoned the afflictive obscurations.                                |
| 2. Well abandoned                                   | Abandoning the objects of abandonment such that they will never arise again. |
| 3. Thorough abandonment                             | Abandoning the two obscurations completely.                                  |

Why are there these three features? There is a purpose behind these three features.

- The first feature of abandonment is abandonment, which means having abandoned the afflictive obscurations. This is to set the Buddha apart from non-Buddhist practitioners who have achieved the actual concentrations, such as the concentrations of the formless realm and even the highest level of samsara called the peak of samsara. These sentient beings do not have any manifest afflictions. They have achieved this quality. But the abandonment achieved by the Buddha is very different from this.
- The second feature of abandonment is well abandoned (or good abandonment). This is to distinguish the quality of abandonment that the Buddha has achieved from that achieved by some Hinayana superiors. In the explanation of the Hinayana paths, there are individuals who have achieved the Hinayana superior paths. Among those who have achieved the superior paths, some are called stream-enterers and some are called once-returners.<sup>1</sup> Although the stream-enterers and once-returners are Hinayana superiors, they have not yet abandoned the seeds of the innate afflictions, i.e., the innate apprehension of a self. Because this is so, they do take rebirth in cyclic existence unlike the Buddha who has achieved good abandonment whereby his objects of abandonment will never return and arise again.
- The third feature of abandonment is thorough abandonment (or literally, abandonment without leaving anything behind). This is to distinguish the quality of the abandonment that the Buddha has achieved from the abandonment achieved by the hearer foe destroyers and the solitary realiser foe destroyers. Thorough abandonment means having abandoned *both* the afflictive obscurations and non-afflictive obscurations (or knowledge obscurations).<sup>2</sup> This kind of abandonment that the Buddha has achieved is something that the hearer arhats and the solitary realiser arhats have not achieved.

So apart from the quality of abandonment that the Buddha has achieved, we can talk about this quality of abandonment in terms of their three features, i.e., abandonment, well abandoned and thorough abandonment. These three features of the excellent abandonments that the Buddha has achieved are to enable us:

- to understand that the Buddha's quality of excellent abandonment is different from the abandonment achieved by those who have reached the peak of samsara.

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<sup>1</sup> The stream-enterer refers to a superior being on the Hinayana path of seeing who will never be reborn in the three lower realms again. The once-returner refers to a superior being on the Hinayana path of meditation who will return to the desire realm only one more time. (First Basic Program, Module 5, Lesson 2, page 1).

<sup>2</sup> All the faults we possess are included in the two obstructions: obstructions to liberation (also known as afflictive obstructions) and obstructions to omniscience (or non-afflictive obscurations, knowledge obscurations). Obstructions to liberation such as ignorance, anger and attachment prevent us from attaining liberation from samsara. The imprints of these afflictions are obstructions to omniscience; they prevent us from realising all objects of knowledge directly and simultaneously. (First Basic Program, Module 5, Lesson 2, page 2).

- to distinguish the Buddha's quality of excellent abandonment from the quality of abandonment achieved by the stream-enterers and once-returners.
- to distinguish the Buddha's quality of excellent abandonment from the abandonment achieved by the hearer arhats and solitary realiser arhats.

When you know some of these points, then when you think about the Buddha in terms of what he has abandoned, you can see that the quality of excellent abandonment that the Buddha has achieved is very different from those achieved by non-Buddhists.

In order to appreciate these points, first one would have to know some of these things and you can only do so through learning. In order for you to fully appreciate the points that I have just explained, you have to know the presentation of the concentrations of the form and formless realms, the process for reaching the peak of samsara, the presentation of the Hinayana path, the different kinds of Sangha, what exactly is a stream-enterer, a once-returned and a Hinayana foe destroyer (or hearer arhat and solitary realiser arhat). Ideally we should be explaining all these topics but it is not possible to do so because we do not have the time.

If you want a simple explanation, you can take the *Sugata* to mean 'gone to bliss,' with bliss referring to the excellent abandonments and the excellent realisations.

*Khen Rinpoche: So it can be very simple or it can be very complicated.*

~ *The excellent realisations*

When you look at bliss in terms of the excellent realisations, again we can look at them in terms of three features.

| <b>Three features of excellent realisations<sup>3</sup></b> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Exalted knower                                           | The omniscient wisdom of the Buddha that directly sees the meaning of selflessness. This knower is superior to a non-Buddhist.                                                                                                                                      |
| 2. Stable exalted knower                                    | The stable wisdom of the Buddha that directly sees the meaning of selflessness and is the antidote to the innate afflictions and their seeds. This knower is superior to the superior beings of the Hinayana path, the stream-enterers and once-returners.          |
| 3. Thorough exalted knower                                  | The wisdom possessed by a buddha that completely understands all the three paths (the paths of the hearers, solitary realisers and bodhisattvas) who is also able to teach it directly to others. The <i>Sugata</i> is thus superior to the arhat or foe destroyer. |

These terms are found in the texts of Dignaga and Dharmakirti. The purpose of explaining the excellent realisations in terms of the three features is the same as before. It is to set apart the quality of the Buddha's realisations from others. For those individuals who have achieved the formless realm absorptions, including those who have reached the highest level of samsara, the peak of samsara, that is quite a

<sup>3</sup> From First Basic Program, Module 5, Lesson 2, pages 1 & 2.

feat in itself. But compared to the excellent realisations of the Buddha, it is nothing. Although these individuals have achieved the highest possible level of existence in samsara, they have not realised thusness (or selflessness) directly.

- The first feature is an exalted knower that directly knows or perceives thusness (or selflessness, the truth).
- The second feature is the stable exalted knower. The Hinayana superiors, the stream-enterers and once-returners have perceived the truth directly. However their direct realisation of selflessness is not as stable as the realisation of the Buddha. Why? Because although they have realised the truth directly, they have not yet abandoned or destroyed the seeds of their innate self-grasping. So unlike the Buddha, the stream-enterers and once-returners have not achieved a stable realisation.
- The Buddha has a wisdom that is termed the thorough exalted knower because he sees each and every thing exactly as it is, including the paths of the three vehicles. As such, he can work perfectly for the benefit of sentient beings unlike the hearer arhats and solitary realiser arhats.

So in this verse the “Sugatas” refer to the Buddha Jewel who is the object of homage.

Respectfully I pay homage to the Sugatas who are endowed with the dharmakaya,

“The dharmakaya” here refers to the Dharma Jewel.

The dharmakaya is the truth body, which consists of the nature truth body and the wisdom truth body.

- The nature truth body is the naturally pure sphere that is free of all the stains.
- The wisdom truth body is the wisdom or exalted knower in the continuum of the Buddha superior.

These two truth bodies are the ultimate true cessations and the ultimate true paths respectively. These are the final **and** the ultimate Dharma Jewels.

“Who are endowed with the dharmakaya” is referring to a person who is endowed with the dharmakaya. This person refers to the Sangha Jewel.

So this first line, “Respectfully I pay homage to the Sugatas who are endowed with the dharmakaya” is referring to the objects of homage. The objects of homage are the final Buddha Jewel, the final Dharma Jewel and the final Sangha Jewel, i.e., the final Three Jewels are the objects of homage.

“As well as to their children”: “Children” in general refers to the bodhisattva but here it is referring in particular to the superior bodhisattvas.

“To all those who are worthy of homage”: “Those who are worthy of homage” are basically the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of the Mahayana.

I think this verse of homage is paid primarily from the perspective of a Mahayana refuge. The objects of homage are the final Buddha Jewel, final Dharma Jewel and the

final Sangha Jewel. In addition to that, the superior bodhisattvas and so forth of the Mahayana are also included as the objects of homage.

The first line, “the Sugatas who are endowed with the dharmakaya,” is also referring to the four bodies (or four kayas) of the Buddha, Whilst directly indicating the dharmakaya, the two form bodies are also indicated indirectly. The two form bodies are the complete enjoyment body, the sambhogakaya and the emanation body, the nirmanakaya.

There are many explanations about what a buddha is. The whole point is to help us understand who we are taking refuge in. We always go for refuge, “I take refuge in the Buddha, ...” and whether we use the words, “Buddha” or “Sugata” or the “One Gone to Bliss,” or we talk about full enlightenment, we are essentially talking about the same thing. This explanation here helps us to gain a better understanding of our objects of refuge.

### **PLEDGE OF COMPOSITION**

After paying homage to the Three Jewels, what follows is the pledge of composition.

Here I shall describe how to engage in the vows of the Sugatas’ children,  
The meaning of which I have summarized in accordance with the scriptures.

“Here I shall describe how to engage in the vows of the Sugatas’ children” is the pledge of composition.

“The meaning of which I have summarized in accordance with the scriptures”: The author is saying that he pledges to give a summary of the paths of the bodhisattvas, i.e., how one generates the mind of enlightenment and, on the basis of that, how one trains in the bodhisattva deeds.

How will he go about his explanations? The author said that he is doing it in accordance with the Buddha’s intent and with what is laid out in the teachings of the Buddha. He is not composing this text according to his own whims and fancy, writing whatever comes to mind. He is not creating something new.

If he is going to compose this text in accordance with the intent of the Buddha and with what is already laid out in the Buddha’s teachings, what is the point then of writing this text since its contents are already in the teachings? Shantideva’s purpose was to summarise the key points of the path so that one can easily understand or realise the intent of the Buddha for oneself.

### **EXPRESSION OF HUMILITY**

Verse 1.2  
There is nothing here that has not appeared in the past  
And I have no skill in the art of rhetoric;

Therefore, not to enact the welfare of others,  
I composed this in order to acquaint it to my mind.

“There is nothing here that has not appeared in the past” is an expression of humility. Shantideva is saying that he is not an expert in the meaning of the teachings.

“I have no skill in the art of rhetoric”: He also says that he is not skilled “in the art of rhetoric,” i.e., he is not an expert in language and the use of words.

The point behind this expression of humility is that pride is an obstacle to one gaining qualities. So whether one is composing a text, studying or whatever one is engaged in doing, it is important to do so without pride arising.

“Therefore, not to enact the welfare of others”: He is saying that he did not compose this text in order to help others realise quickly the meaning and intent of the teachings of the Buddha.

“Not to enact the welfare of others” refers to those who have the ability to understand the Buddha’s teachings on their own. Shantideva is saying, “I did not compose this text for their benefit but, rather, I composed this in order to acquaint it with my mind.”

#### Verse 1.3

For due to acquaintance with virtue,  
The force of my faith will for the time being increase because of these.  
If, however, these are seen by others  
Equal in fortune to myself, it will be meaningful.

Whether composing a text or engaging in some other activity, besides doing so without any pride, one should also engage in the activity happily with a sense of enthusiasm and delight. One may not have pride, but when one is not enthusiastic or feel discouraged, it is also difficult to achieve one’s goal.

Shantideva is saying that he himself will benefit from composing the text because when he composes such a text, which talks about the practices of the bodhisattvas, it increases his own faith in those practices. If somehow his composition should be read or seen by others who are similar to him, it is likely that they will also reap the same benefit. So he composed this text with that kind of enthusiasm and delight.

We had just looked at the author’s expression of humility and his expression of the purpose of composing the text. The lesson we can draw from this is that in whatever we do, there should be an absence of pride on our part. At the same time, we must have courage. We must not be narrow-minded and be easily discouraged. When one is narrow-minded and lacking in courage, I don’t think we would be a suitable receptacle for qualities to arise. So whatever we do, we should not be proud but instead, engage in our activities with enthusiasm, delight and confidence.

**ACTUAL EXPLANATION OF THE STAGES OF THE PATH**

Next is the actual explanation of the stages of the path that consists of:

1. **exhorting** one to take the essence of one's basis endowed with the freedoms and endowments and
2. explaining the method to take the essence.

*Exhorting one to take the essence of one's basis with its freedoms and endowments*

Verse 1.4

The pleasures and endowments are very hard to find.

Since they accomplish the purposes of beings,

If I do not accomplish benefit upon this,

How will I acquire this in the future?

The topic, the human life of freedoms and endowments, has already been discussed in the module<sup>4</sup> on the stages of the path to enlightenment in the section on the path that is shared with the person of small capacity. Since we have already covered this, I don't think there is any need for further explanation here.

*Khen Rinpoche: By now, when you merely hear a single sentence, dal jor di ni nye par shin tu ka, you should have the complete understanding of that subject in your mind.*

For example, the first line says, "the pleasures and endowments are very hard to find." You should be able to expand on this sentence on your own.

*Khen Rinpoche: So when you read that sentence, you have to remember the entire lam-rim!*

When we talk about meditation, this is what meditation is. Based on some short verses, you analyse and reflect on their meaning. The text is saying that our human life of freedoms and endowments is very difficult to achieve. When you look at this sentence, the question should arise in your mind, "Why is achieving a human life of freedoms and endowments so difficult? What are the reasons proving that it is indeed difficult to obtain?" It is put to us here that the human life of freedoms and endowments that we have achieved is very difficult to come by. This is just a statement but what is the reason that this is so? The reason is this: this human life of freedoms and endowments is difficult to attain because its causes are difficult to achieve.

In general, without a cause, there will not be an effect. Look at how the law of causality works in the external world, e.g., there is no smoke without fire. There is no sprout without a seed. Likewise the law of causality also applies in the internal world of the mind.

If causes are needed to actualise this human life of freedoms and endowments, then the next question that arises is this: What are the causes for a human life of freedoms

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<sup>4</sup> Second Basic Program, Module 1.



and endowments? It is not so straight-forward and requires much analysis and reflection.

To become an ordinary human being, one has to refrain from at least one non-virtue. But with regard to a human life of freedoms and endowments, we are not talking about being born as an ordinary human being. We are talking about being born as a human being with eighteen qualities, i.e., a human being who is free of eight features and who is endowed with ten features. This is the kind of human rebirth we are talking about here, i.e., the perfect human rebirth. Such a human life of freedoms and endowments is extremely difficult to come by. Why? Because its causes are extremely difficult to actualise.

In order to be born as a human being with these eighteen qualities:

- First we must live a very pure ethical life, i.e., observe very pure ethics.
- Our practice of ethics must also be complemented with the practices of generosity and so forth.
- In addition to that, these practices must be completed by pure aspirational prayers, i.e., the aspiration to be able to obtain such a rebirth again in the future.

We should ask ourselves when we look at our own mind whether we have these causes or not; whether we find it easy or difficult to create these causes.

When you look at the words, “the leisures and endowments,” their meaning should immediately arise very clearly in your mind. This can only happen for someone who meditates and reflects regularly. A person who reflects on this regularly will be very familiar with this because he has thought about it. When he thinks about the words, “the leisures and endowments,” their meaning will immediately come to mind. This person will understand, “Oh, I really have this human life of freedoms and endowments”. This is the result of reflection and meditation.

For those who do not meditate and who do not reflect, putting aside the meaning of the words arising clearly in their minds, they would not even be able to count what the eighteen features are. For example, when they look at the words, “leisures and endowments,” only then will they start counting and even counting becomes difficult. If merely counting the eighteen qualities is challenging, one can forget about understanding the meaning of these words. When one does not really know the meaning of these words, how can change occur in the mind?

When one is habituated to reflection and meditation, by simply seeing and thinking of the word, “leisures,” immediately one feels, “Now I really have this wonderful opportunity to practise the Dharma because I am free of all these major hindrances and obstacles.” Because one has this kind of understanding, one would be able to generate a great sense of joy that one has attained something truly wonderful.

This is something that everyone has to do for themselves—to sit down, reflect and think: Will I get such an opportunity again in my next life? The only way to answer that question is to look deeply inside your own mind to see whether you have the ability to create the causes or not. Then you will know whether you will get such a life again in the future.

You have to know what the causes are. When you look at your mind and you realise that you find it difficult to create the causes or if you lack the causes for such a rebirth again, you have to identify what the causes are and start working on actualising them.

At this juncture, when you have found such a life with all its conditions for practice, if you do not make use of this opportunity, it will be very difficult for you to obtain such conditions again in the future. It will be very difficult. You have to think about this for yourself and then really persuade yourself to make the most of this opportunity while you can.

In short, this verse 1.4 is exhorting and imploring us to take this opportunity now. We have to take this opportunity to make use of this human life of freedoms and endowments that we have achieved.

Having persuaded ourselves to take advantage of this opportunity, how do we go about doing so? What is the best way to extract the meaning and essence out of this human life of freedoms and endowments? The explanation starts with verse 1.5.

There is a general explanation of how to extract the essence and then there is the detailed explanation of the individual topics under which the benefits of bodhicitta will be explained.

As mentioned before, it will not be possible for us to study the text together with all the outlines from the commentary. Anyway today we have finished with the exhortation to extract the essence from this human life of freedoms and endowments. In the next lesson, we will look at the actual way of extracting the essence and, in particular, we will look at the benefits of bodhicitta.

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The three things that we need to actualise in order to obtain a human life of freedoms and endowments in the future are:

1. Pure morality. You need very pure morality. What is the measure of “pure morality”? What does that mean? We have to think about this.
2. The practice of pure morality must be complemented with the practices such as generosity and so forth. Having said that, we can ask ourselves this: In order to achieve a human life of freedoms and endowments, do we need to practise all these practices?
3. We need to make very “pure” aspirational prayers. Again what exactly does this mean?

So there are many things to think about.

Khen Rinpoche: These three questions are for the senior students, the graduates from the Basic Program class.

- What is pure morality?
- One’s practice of morality must be complemented with generosity and so forth. Does this include all the other practices?
- We need to make pure stainless aspirational prayers. What does “pure” here mean?

These points appear throughout the teachings. When you look at the lam-rim, the stages of the path to enlightenment, in the section on the human life of freedoms and endowments, the discussion of these three points are there. You need to think about them.

It is said in the teachings, in order to become a human being, you need to practise morality. But in order to have a human life of freedoms and endowments:

- You need to practise very pure morality.
- You need to practise generosity and so forth.
- You need to make pure stainless prayers.

These three are said to be very difficult to achieve and very difficult to practise. Because the causes are difficult to achieve, you know that it will be very difficult for you to achieve such a rebirth again in the future. When you realise that now, that it will be very difficult for you to achieve such a rebirth again in the future and you do want to achieve such a rebirth in the future, then naturally you would want to practise the causes for achieving such a rebirth again in the future. You would strive to actualise the causes. When you happen to be someone who really wants to have such an opportunity again in your future life and you know you have to create the causes, automatically you would work at creating the causes on your own. You do not need someone to push you or remind you. You will do it on your own.

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## **MEDITATION PROGRAMME**

Remember we announced towards the end of the previous module that we will start a voluntary meditation program? It is completely voluntary and will last for a minimum of one year.

If you want to take part in this one-year voluntary meditation program on the lam-rim, the stages of the path to enlightenment, you have to register and put your name down. Registration will start fairly soon, perhaps in the next lesson.

If you register, you must commit to meditate and reflect on the lam-rim for a minimum of 15 to 20 minutes a day. Regardless of whether you succeed or not, whether you find that you can meditate or not, once you register, you have to do it **every day**. The point is to do it every day. That is the commitment.

Before you can start meditating, first you must make a promise or a pledge to yourself. You must have the intention and the willingness to meditate. You must be able to tell yourself, "This is something I will do every day. It will be part of my life. For 15 to 20 minutes a day, at this time, I will sit down in this particular place and I will do it!"

The meditation is to be done on your own at home. We will not be doing it together as a group. It is to be done at home on your own every day. This is completely voluntary. Only sign up if you can commit to it and see it through. Perhaps we can start registration in the next class. In the meantime, think about it.

We are not necessarily looking for many people. This is not the point. The point is that you must want to do it and you must do it voluntarily. You must feel happy doing it. Even if it is just a few people—two or three people—that is fine.

The point is that we have to start because Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been advising us and the centre quite a few times to do it. So it is not right if we do not do it. So we have to start.

Now we are only concerned about whether you want to do it or not and starting the programme. This is not the time to think about whether you will get any results out of the meditation or whether realisations will arise. These are question marks but if you do not even start, then there is no basis for even thinking about or considering these questions: “Will I get any results out of this? Will I get any realisations?” There is no basis even to think about these questions when you won’t even start. You should start and then we can talk about it one year later.

The plan is that for those who sign up for the program perhaps every now and then, say, in intervals of three to four months, you can all come together, share your experiences and discuss about the practice.

*Khen Rinpoche: After three months, you can share with each other your meditation experience. You may have very interesting experience. Anyway, we have to try. Those who wish to try, give your name and contact details. After that, we will discuss how to start and when to start. I think I will make some guidelines.*

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