

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class ?

Text at <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/gyalse-thogme-zangpo/37-practices-all-bodhisattvas>

Before we begin, let me explain one of the practices we do at the Centre. There's this practice of making light offerings while reciting Om Mani Padme Hum. This light offering comes in the form of a lotus flower with an electric bulb at the centre. You may wonder why do we do this?

There are 2 levels of significance to making this light offering that takes the form of a lotus flower. When we encounter problems in our lives, there are various reasons for these difficulties. One reason is ignorance. We have ignorance in our mind. We don't know reality fully. As a result of that, we run into problems. So you can imagine the situation where you are in a very dark place. And there's no source of light. If you have to move about in the dark, you may trip, fall, hurt yourself. You may not be able to get to where you get to. Similarly, when we have ignorance in our mind, it means that our mind is influenced by darkness. We're not able to see clearly. In order to counteract this ignorance, we need to have wisdom. We need to have the light of powerful wisdom to dispel the darkness of confusion and ignorance. When we offer light, that light symbolizes wisdom. So we are generating this aspiration to dispel our ignorance with the light of wisdom. Another reason why we run into problems in our lives is we are very self-centred. We are always thinking only about our own welfare, not caring about others. We run into problems. So to counteract that self-centredness, we need to generate compassion, altruism for welfare of others. This lotus that's the form of this light offering symbolizes compassion, altruism. When we make this light offering we are actually trying to generate two kinds of aspirations. One is the aspiration to generate wisdom, in order to dispel darkness of ignorance. The second aspiration is to be able to generate great compassion in our mind in order to reduce and eliminate our self-centredness.

When we make the light offerings, we recite the Om Mani Padme Hum. What does it mean? Om – (Sanskrit) has 3 parts to form Om. Those 3 parts symbolize the ordinary body, speech, and mind. The kind of ordinary body, speech and mind we have right now. The second (Mani) means jewel. This refers to a very precious material. In today's terms, we can think of it as diamond. If you have a diamond, then this diamond can help to dispel your poverty, fulfill your needs, so this diamond symbolizes compassion. The next word (Padme) refers to lotus. In this context, it symbolizes wisdom. We know a lotus can grow out of mud but it's not tainted by mud. Like our dwelling in cyclic existence, which is contaminated existence, yet we can be untainted by drawbacks of

existence. This symbolizes wisdom. So Padme and Mani mean method and wisdom. Last syllable: Hum, represents body, speech and mind of fully enlightened beings. They've totally purified. We started with contaminated body, speech, and mind. At the end, we have fully enlightened. Symbolizes transformation from impure to pure state.

In our minds we have this aspiration to dispel darkness of ignorance and to generate compassion in our continuum. Physically, when we carry this lamp and make this offering, we are creating virtues of our body. With our speech we recite mantra, we create virtues of speech. Mentally, we recall significance of offering we're making, we create virtues of mind and so we do Dharma practice.

At the beginning of class, I usually give an introduction by talking about something related to the Buddha's teachings instead of going straight away into the subject matter by reading the verses of the text. This is because some of you may not have been attending the class from the very beginning. If we just go straight into the text, you may feel disoriented. For that reason, I always give a brief introduction to Buddhist teachings.

Let me start by explaining the meaning of a stanza from a sutra. These are the words of a Buddha. This sutra is an individual liberation sutra. It's said this speech emerging from the mouth of the Buddha is nectar for embodied beings and dispels all sicknesses of the afflictions, therefore reflect on this meaning correctly. It is appropriate to listen to the speech of the Buddhas by taking it to your Crown.

There are many religions in the world and they have different teachings. In Buddhism, teacher is Buddha. What are the attributes of the Buddha's speech? We say that the Buddha's speech is nectar for beings with intelligence and gods and so on. For them, by engaging in the hearing of the Buddha's teachings, reflecting on meanings, meditating on teachings, they are able to achieve happiness and wellbeing. That is an attribute of the Buddha's teachings. Why is that the case? b/c the Buddha's teachings are like nectars for ears of these beings. If you are to physically consume nectar (ambrosia), your body and mind will be pervaded by bliss. So here, Buddha's teachings are likened to this nectar that is able to give happiness and dispel all sicknesses and afflictions.

So physical nectar when consumed can dispel discomfort of the body. Can dispel physical sicknesses and bring about physical, mental bliss. So the Buddha's teachings are like nectar in the sense that it can dispel mental discomfort. And bring about mental wellbeing. So it is important for us to reflect on the Buddha's teachings, b/c by thinking about the meaning of the Buddha's teachings, we can bring about a transformation of the mind. But before we can contemplate teachings properly, we need to be clear about the meaning. So we need to engage in listening, studying about teachings. So we engage in listening of Buddha's teachings.

We all want happiness. We don't want any unhappiness. Where does the latter come from? As it's said in this stanza we just went through, the afflictions are the cause of our unhappiness. They are like a sickness that cause us to feel unwell, unhappy, discomfort. Among these afflictions we have what are called the 3 poisons of mind: attachment,

anger and ignorance. Among these, ignorance is root of all afflictions. It causes attachment, anger. So if we are able to work on ignorance, then we'll be able to reduce the causes of unhappiness. This ignorance is also the self-grasping mind, conception of self. What benefit can we gain from listening to the Buddha's teachings, learning about Buddha's teachings? We'll be able to reduce the self-grasping mind. This self-grasping mind when reduced and eliminated reduces our disturbing emotions and anger. If we are able to reduce these disturbing emotions, our happiness will increase. This is because happiness and unhappiness are opposites. If we able to reduce our unhappy states, then naturally we will have a greater sense of wellbeing. This is the purpose of us coming together to learn the Buddha's teachings: to increase happiness and reduce unhappiness.

The Buddha's teachings are open to anybody in the sense that regardless of whether or not you're Buddhist, you're free to listen to Buddha's teachings, free to listen to books that explain Buddhism, reflect on meaning. It might be the case some of you belong to other religions. There's no restriction from Buddhism that certain types of people can listen to Buddha's teachings. General teachings are free to everyone. Everyone's free to learn Buddhism.

This permission I just spoke about isn't something that came from me. It was actually permission granted by the Buddha himself. You need to understand at the time of the Buddha, there were many different races, casts in India. Buddha himself pronounced his teachings were available to anyone / everyone. As long as they can benefit from his teachings, they can find greater happiness, reduce their suffering and so on. They are free to use his teachings. Regardless of caste, race, Buddha's teachings are made available to everyone.

Back to text: 6 perfections. I'll explain sequence and hindrances to practicing the 6 perfections.

Why 6 perfections are presented in this particular order? It's generosity, ethical discipline, patience, and so on. Why not ethics first, patience first and so on? There's a good reason for this particular order.

Why is generosity first among 6? Generosity is explained to be the cause of receiving resources, having wealth, your needs fulfilled. Everyone needs food, drink, medicine when we fall sick and so on, without exception. Everyone wants these favourable conditions. We need resources when we need them. For that reason, generosity is taught first. This differs from ethics. Ethics is presented as 2nd. Ethics is said to be cause of a good rebirth. Not everyone is concerned with their future life. For that reason, generosity is taught first. Everyone's concerned with needs. To establish such favourable conditions, generosity is taught first.

Then why is ethical discipline taught after generosity? It's because by practicing ethics, one will ensure one will receive a good rebirth. This is important b/c having practiced generosity, one creates causes of receiving resources, wealth and so on. However, if one fails to observe ethics, then one will fall into a lower realm. On that basis, one doesn't

have the full freedom to enjoy one's wealth, the results of one's generosity in past life. There are animals who are born into luxurious circumstances belonging to ... but the rebirth of an animal or any other lower rebirth is not the best support for enjoying resources. To ensure results of generosity can be used in the fullest manner, one would want to be reborn in an upper realm, so resources can be enjoyed in a continuous full manner, so ethics is taught so you can enjoy a good rebirth in the future.

Some of you may wonder what's wrong with being reborn as an animal. Some animals have fantastic lives. They lead very enjoyable lives. What's wrong with being reborn as an animal, especially if they have access to all kinds of resources from e.g. practicing generosity before? Yes, some animals have good lives. But animals can't practice virtue in the sense that they may experience wellbeing, good conditions, good food, good dwelling and so on, but they exhaust the good fortune that they have, b/c they're not really in a state to create virtue. This means after they've used their merit, positive energy, then they'll fall into a miserable state. Their good state will not last forever. So we would want to ensure we are reborn into a rebirth in which we can create virtue. If we are reborn into an upper realm, then we are able to meet spiritual beings, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas who are able to guide us on the spiritual path. By meeting these spiritual guides, we are able to hear teachings, contemplate, meditate on teachings. That way, we'll be able to attain liberation from cyclic existence, and full enlightenment from Buddha.

The next perfection is that of patience. The first perfection (generosity) causes the availability of resources in the future. The second perfection (ethical discipline) causes a good rebirth. The third perfection (patience) is what causes an attractive appearance. You can't deny someone who has a pleasant appearance receives better treatment from other people. Even an animal that's cute looking, attractive looking, receives better treatment than animals that are hideous and so on. We want to ensure we have an appearance that causes joy in others, others mental delight. For that reason, it's important to practice patience.

If you are wondering which part of the text we are discussing, we are on stanzas 25 to 30.

The fourth perfection is that of joyous effort. In stanza 28, this is called enthusiastic diligence. Why is this relevant? To obtain happiness, we ... ultimate happiness free from samsara. To obtain such states, we need to put in effort. For that reason, enthusiastic diligence is explained.

This joyous effort is defined as enthusiasm for virtue. You feel enthusiasm for virtue. It counteracts laziness.

Simply having joyous effort isn't sufficient if you want to attain liberation and enlightenment. On top of striving for virtue, we need to have concentration. If we have joyous effort, e.g. making prostrations, circumambulations, etc. Those alone won't lead us to ultimate happiness. So we need to train in concentration.

By training in concentration, we'll be able to counteract distraction. b/c when the mind is single-pointed, distraction can't arise. So concentration is antidote to distraction. But concentration alone isn't enough for us to attain liberation. We need to also develop wisdom. In the training in wisdom, we engage in analysis analyzing reality. Through a union of calm abiding and special insight (Shamata and vipassana). We'll be able to develop wisdom that leads us out of cyclic existence. Wisdom counteracts corrupted wisdom.

With that, we've completed discussion of the 6 perfections. Let us move onto a new section consisting of 4 stanzas. These teach 4 main trainings in sutras. And commentary of intention of those sutras.

31

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to scrutinize oneself continually and to rid oneself of faults whenever they appear. For unless one checks carefully to find one's own confusion, one might appear to be practicing Dharma, but act against it.

In stanza 31, the practice of scrutinizing oneself and to rid oneself of faults is explained. Here, we may appear in such a way that we are very good persons. We are good people. People think well of us. They say you are so nice, good, kind and so on. There is a danger that we don't turn inwards and look at our own shortcomings. It is possible for a person to look very good, noble on the outside but harbor very negative intentions in his mind. This person can be thinking about how to harm others. How to say negative things to others. But look very nice on the outside. So Bodhisattvas are aware of this danger and constantly scrutinize themselves and when faults they try to eliminate those faults. We should use the Dharma as a mirror to understand ourselves, to understand our inner minds. So the Dharma can serve as a witness through which what's really going on within us. We should use what's taught in Dharma to check ourselves. We should try to eliminate that fault.

This stanza is particularly relevant for ordained monks and nuns, who are teachers of the teachings. There is danger so many people are interested in Buddhism, let me give you blessings and if you receive them, next life you'll receive this success and that success and so on. There's a danger this person is a cheat and imposter on the inside. It's important for people in such positions to check their motivations and intentions and ensure their minds aren't polluted by negative motivations, faults. So this stanza is more relevant to teachers than students.

If you're actually able to give blessings, then it's not a problem if you claim to do so. But if not, then it's very risky. The Buddha actually stipulated 4 kinds of actions that the monks have to avoid committing. These are called the 4 defeats. One is that of telling a big lie. This big lie has a very specific connotation. These 4 defeats are if any one of the four is created, the monk loses his vows. One of these is telling a big lie. We mean in which one pretends to have some sublime realization. Even though one has no sublime

realizations, one lies about that and claims to have some sublime realization. The Buddha was very serious and stipulated this telling of a big lie of one of the 4 defeats.

Next stanza 32 talks about abandoning speaking about the misdeeds committed by others. There is this danger that our minds are disturbed and we talk about others' faults.

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to speak ill
Of others who have embarked upon the greater vehicle,
For if, under the influence of destructive emotions,
I speak of other bodhisattvas' failings, it is I who am at fault.

The main point in this stanza is we should avoid speaking ill of others, especially those who have embarked on the greater vehicle, who are practitioners of the Mahayana Vehicle. If we do that, our own good qualities will degenerate. Our own good qualities will be weakened and reduced. If we do that under the influence of afflictions, negative states of mind, then we ourselves are at fault.

When I was in the monastery, my teacher would often give advice regarding not criticizing others. Different teachers have different styles. Some read texts. But mine would give advice, sometimes the whole session on advice without opening the textbook. He would say guard your mouth. This means we have to be careful about what we say. When we meet people, then we start talking. We start talking, blah blah blah. Very easily, we can start talking about others' faults. Complain this person, that person. So my teacher emphasized again and again, it's important to guard our speech and not to criticize others.

In the sutra, it's stated that we don't know who the Holy Beings are. It's possible you meet someone who's actually a very spiritually advanced being. Might be a Buddha / Bodhisattva. They won't proclaim, hey, I'm a Bodhisattva. You never know who these beings really are. B/c of common appearance, you may see them in a negative light. If you speak badly to this person, nasty manner, rude way, you can create negative karma easily. If they are very advanced, then you create very negative karma. It won't lead to many possibilities except a bad outcome. If what you say won't be beneficial, then better not to say. If there's no benefit in opening your mouth, then better you keep it closed. If you say something, you want to ensure it's of benefit.

We meet people all the time. If we have this tendency to complain and groan and moan, then it's better we keep our mouth shut. If we complain about others and talk about their faults, criticize them, then our minds become negative.

But really what comes out of this is you will suffer a big loss. That person is somewhere out there. Nothing happens to this person while you are complaining, and generating negative energy. There's no benefit at all. This person doesn't suffer as a result of you moaning. You yourself suffer a big loss. It's better for you to keep your mouth shut. Since an action like that brings about loss, it's better we try to avoid it.

33

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to let go of attachment
To the households of benefactors and of family and friends,
Since one's study, reflection and meditation will all diminish
When one quarrels and competes and honours and rewards.

Stanza 33 is probably directed mainly at ordained monks and nuns. Reason why 1st 2 lines – by being attached to one's sponsors, friends and so on, one's Dharma practice will become damaged. So the main activities of practitioner is to engage in study, reflection and meditation. If one has a very strong clinging to one's friends and so on, then one's Dharma practice will degenerate. So practice of Bodhisattvas to let go of benefactors, family, and friends.

The fourth of the 4 trainings taught in sutras is abandoning harsh speech. This is explained in 34

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid harsh words,
Which others might find unpleasant or distasteful,
Since abusive language upsets the minds of others,
And thereby undermines a bodhisattva's conduct.

If one speaks harshly, then one can hurt others. If one speaks very unkindly, you're stupid, ugly, repulsive, hideous, things like that cause others' minds to be injured. So others will find such speech unpleasant, distasteful, upset. If a Bodhisattva were to cause this to happen, the Bodhisattva's own conduct would be damaged. So important to speak nicely to others, and not cause harm to others.

In Tibetan, the word for harsh speech is ... It has connotation of speaking roughly, in a nasty way, as if scolding the other party. But in reality, what's meant by harsh speech does not have to be rough speech. b/c sometimes we can cause others to be hurt even though we speak in a seemingly nice way. We may even speak in a poetic way. Our speech has some mean connotation. Though it sounds nice, we may imply something very unkind. Although speech can be performed very eloquently, if there's some content that can cause others to be hurt, then that qualifies as harsh speech.

Interestingly, if one has a good motivation for saying whatever one says, even though outwardly, it sounds harsh, it won't be harsh speech.

Question 1

When you speak of good motivation, to make someone laugh, what would be an example of good motivation?

Answer 1

Speech motivated by good motivation. There's a proverb in Tibetan which says the speech of one's parents is only for the good of the child. In most cases, 99%, parents have great affection for their child and only want good for them. When parents give advice to their children, it's so the children can grow up to become a good person, successful, a healthy person and so on. Parents do not have negative intentions in their mind. Although this advice can sometimes be unpleasant to hear, it may take the form of a scolding. If child is acting unskillfully, then parent may need to speak in a very aggressive manner. And the speech can be unpleasant. However, it is spoken with a good motivation, wanting the child to turn out well. That's an example of speech carrying good

Question 2

What does wisdom counteracts corrupt wisdom mean?

We have what's correct wisdom, wisdom that discerns the way in which things exist. Discerns reality. But it's possible to have a wisdom that analyzes non-virtue and that's interested in non-virtue. That kind of wisdom is corrupted wisdom.

An example of corrupted wisdom is the kind of intelligence that analyzes I want to kill this guy, how should I kill this guy, when, where. ...

Question

How do I meditate on this instruction by Lama Zopa Rinpoche following purification? "In emptiness, there is no I, creator of negative karma; there is no action of creating negative karma; there is no negative karma created".

You have to reflect on how you, agent of purification, purification practice itself (e.g. recitation of mantras), and negative karmas that's purified, are all empty of independent existence. You need to counteract this tendency to view these 3 aspects as something that exists from their own side. You need to counteract thinking they don't depend on causes and conditions.

I am empty of inherent existence. This purification depends on causes and conditions. That negative karma is also depending on causes and conditions.

We are saying these factors, agents, action, object don't exist from their own side. We don't say they don't exist at all. We just say they don't exist inherently, intrinsically. How do they exist? Conventionally. They exist through mere labeling. In other words, how do you exist? You label dependence on aggregates (form, feeling aggregates etc.). you don't exist independently. Let's say an example of an oil lamp. You may have this sense there's an oil lamp. You glance and there it is. But if you think about it, it has no intrinsic existence. b/c it's the product of various causes and conditions. E.g. to have this oil lamp, then this wick has to absorb oil. There's some oil that's in a container. There's all these components. But when we first see this lamp, we don't get this sense it's just

labelled on a bunch of components. We think there's some identity that's the oil lamp. But there's no inherent ... so it does exist, by depending on causes and conditions. It doesn't exist inherently. It can't exist without depending on causes and conditions.

Follow up question: but how do I meditate on: in emptiness, there is no I, creator of negative karma and no creating of negative karma. I'm confused b/c I think I created it. I also wonder: if I think this way, I'm abdicating responsibility.

No one is denying you created some negativity. What we are trying to refute is fact that you can possibly create any negativity in an inherent way, that you created this negative action in an independent way that doesn't depend on causes and conditions, in a concrete independent way without relying on causes and conditions. We're not saying all's good. We're saying there's no inherent creator of negative karma. No creator of this misdeed without relying on causes and conditions. We're not saying you think I didn't create it. b/c if you did it, you did it. What we say you didn't do it inherently, intrinsically.

e.g. a murderer kills a victim. We don't say when that happens, there's no murderer, killing, victim. We say no murder that happened independently. No murder that happened without relying on causes and conditions. But this karma doesn't exist intrinsically. It does not exist on its own side.