

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class (last one)

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

We'll conclude text today. But before that, let's think of this stanza from Nagarjuna's Letter to a Friend.

60

Even more foolish than someone who uses a gold vessel ordained with golden gems to collect his vomit is a person who born as a human performs negative deeds.

There is this analogy. Suppose someone uses a vessel ordained with golden gems to collect his vomit. If someone sees this person doing that, they'd think he's really foolish. He'll become an object of ridicule of others.

If we, born as humans, fail to make use of our human rebirth, then we are more foolish than the person in this analogy because our human rebirth is very precious. It can be used to achieve wonderful goals. If we just waste it and not do meaningful things with our precious human rebirth, then we are many more times foolish than this person who uses a precious vessel to collect his vomit.

For those of us with some confidence on the spiritual path and keen to train our minds, it's very important for us to be mindful of this fact that we have a precious human rebirth. This is really the root of the spiritual path to remind ourselves we have a precious human rebirth that's very difficult to obtain and greatly meaningful.

We need to think about it. How did we end up in a human rebirth? If you have some free time, you can think about this question. How did I obtain this human rebirth? Is it because there is some kind of creator out there who decided I should take a human rebirth and so I ended up in one or something I obtained from some external source? Why am I in a human rebirth?

How about the decision from our parents? Maybe it's because our parents want a daughter or want a son that we came to existence. But if you think about it carefully, it's not so simple. Some parents have that motivation and decide they want a child but they don't get it as they wish for. What this means is there are some other causes and conditions that need to come together for our human existence to be produced. Thinking about the causes and conditions carefully you see many special causes and conditions need come together for us to be born in a human existence. Using reasoning, you

understand this human existence is something quite unusual. Some of you might think maybe it's because I decided rather than someone else decided – I decided and that's why I'm a human now. If that's the case, it follows we should be able to have a future human existence by deciding now. But does it lie with us that if we want it, we'll get it? If you check carefully, a human existence this life isn't a something we just choose next life. This human existence is quite an unusual existence.

Although there are many human beings on this earth, it's interesting for us to see there are so many varieties of experiences and different kinds of situations for these human beings. Some human beings live in very luxurious conditions. Others live in difficult, hostile conditions. Some are born with defective faculties. Others engage in harmful behaviour and so on. These human beings existing on planet earth are very diverse in terms of their experiences.

If we examine our own circumstances, we will probably conclude we are the lucky ones because even though there are many beings on this earth who have very difficult life experiences, difficult conditions in terms of living environment and so on, we are in a very good place. We have complete sense faculties. We have many opportunities made available to us. If we waste our good fortune, then it's really a huge shame. We're making a huge loss if we don't make good use of our opportunities.

So it is very important for us to recognize the value of our human existence because if we are able to recognize our existence is a very precious one, then we won't take it for granted. We won't waste it and let it be consumed by meaningless activities. We'll be able to use our human existence in a beneficial way. In "The Treasury of Knowledge", in the opening stanza, the expression of worship, he says:

to whom ever has utterly destroyed the darkness with respect to all,
extricates migrating beings from the mire of cyclic existence
and teaches in accordance with the meaning
homage to you

He's paying homage to this teacher who has completely destroyed darkness and frees sentient beings from cyclic existence. Such a Teacher (Buddha) can teach in accordance with reality. He's able to reveal reality as it is, without the slightest error.

Vasubandhu says Buddha is someone who teaches in accordance with the meaning of reality. This is significant because the reason why we experience problems and unhappiness in our lives is that we don't know reality as it is. Because of our obscurations, misunderstanding of reality, then we make wrong choices. As a result, we are not able to achieve our aims. Instead of achieving our aims, we end up in some trouble that's unpleasant, undesirable. So Buddha is someone who has direct experience of what it takes to achieve true happiness. Based on this experience that he had, he taught the Dharma accordingly. So the Dharma he teaches accords with reality.

In Vasubandhu's expression of homage to the Buddha, he praises Buddha as someone who teaches in accordance with meaning of reality. But you may think Vasubandhu is a Buddhist and out of blind faith, he's paying homage to the Buddha. If you have this doubt, then you should think about present day scientific research. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said in meetings with scientists that scientists have expressed the view that Buddhism is the science of the mind. They have conducted experiments and done research and they're able to verify that what's been taught by the Buddha in terms of the mind to be valid. So these scientists have expressed the view Buddhism isn't a religion but the science of the mind. So the teachings in Buddhism have been examined and verified by scientists so it's not out of blind faith that we say Buddha is someone who teaches in accordance with reality.

This time, we really are very fortunate in that we have a very good form of existence. We have met many favourable conditions that enable us to develop ourselves in a very positive way. When we talk about Dharma, the Buddhist teachings, these are teachings that we can check and verify for ourselves. Are they valid? Beneficial? So when we explore Buddhism through various things like reading books, coming together to listen to Buddhist explanations in class, trying out the instructions, these activities are worthwhile. Because if we sincerely try to reflect on meaning of Buddhist teachings, we'll find a positive transformation will come about. We hope we can achieve this. We hope we can transform our minds in a positive way. We'll be able to experience benefit as a result of this mental transformation. This is why we come together to discuss the Dharma.

We've completed the 37 stanzas that are the main part of the text. Now we come to the last part of the text: the conclusion and summary. This has 5 sections. First is the statement of the purpose for composing this text. What's the purpose of composing the 37 practices of Bodhisattvas?

The stanza is:

Here I have set down for those who wish to follow the Bodhisattva path,
Thirty-seven practices to be adopted by all the Buddha's heirs,
Based on what is taught in the sutras, tantras and treatises,
And following the instructions of the great masters of the past.

Two parts to this stanza. First explains the purpose of composing the text. Here, it says I've set down for those who wish to follow the Bodhisattva path 37 practices to be adopted by all the Buddha's heirs so who wishes to follow the path knows what they are, in the correct order.

Second part explains what he's composed. For the purpose above, he composes the text. But what does the text consist of? It's "Based on what is taught in the sutras, tantras and treatises, And following the instructions of the great masters of the past". The content of this text isn't fabricated by him. It's based on sutras, tantras and treatises. Treatises refer to commentaries written by great Indian masters to explain Buddha's thought. The

contents of this text is based on these great classics and not simply something he made up himself.

The next stanza, the author wants to express the fact there are no mistakes in this subject matter that he expresses.

Since my intellect is only feeble and I have studied but a little,
This is not a composition likely to delight the connoisseurs,
Yet since I've relied upon the sutras and what the saints have taught
I feel these are indeed the genuine trainings of the Buddha's heirs.

Although we've finished discussing the 37 practices, we're still looking at the text, because after the 37 practices have been stated, there are still 4 or 5 stanzas left. This is the part we are looking at.

In the first half, the author is saying it's not that I'm highly intelligent and I'm very alert. So this text I've composed is not a poetic composition showing great skills in rhetoric and so on. He's expressing this is not likely to please the scholars.

Even though that's the case, since I've relied upon the sutras and what the saints have taught I feel these are indeed the genuine trainings of the Buddha's heirs. So: Although I'm not very intelligent, yet this text I've composed is composed by relying on the sutras and what the saints have taught. Saints are these excellent holy beings who have explained that the sutras of the Buddha are of 2 types: definitive (sutras) and sutras of interpretable meaning. Some sutras can be taken literally. Others need to be interpreted. By relying on what the Buddha has taught, he says this text is not mistaken – doesn't contain mistakes.

The third stanza is a request for patience and this is done in order to avoid arrogance or pride. This is a practice adopted by the scholars whether they are Indian or Tibetan. Regardless of how skilled or learned they are, they won't claim everything they teach is the absolute truth so you need to listen to me. Rather, they say what I've expressed is my understanding in case this explanation does not suit you, I request for your forgiveness. I say sorry if these explanations don't go down well with you. This is an expression of humility.

Still, the tremendous waves of activity of the bodhisattvas
Are difficult for simple-minded folk like me to comprehend,
And I must therefore beg the indulgence of all the perfect saints
For any contradictions, irrelevancies or other flaws this may contain.

The text that's been composed by these Indian scholars actually don't contain errors. We can be 100% sure because the scholars who compose these texts. They have completed their studies. They have done their studies in a very thorough manner. On top of that, they have engaged in the practice of what they've studied. Having completed their training, they compose texts. These texts are not just simply written by them. They

undergo a very rigorous examination by other scholars. All other scholars examine their texts for flaws. Only after they've approved the texts are they circulated. So we can be sure the texts composed by these Indian scholars, especially of Nilanda University, are free from errors.

So the main point of this stanza is to request patience in order to avoid arrogance. Just imagine a particular scholar writes at the end of his composition: all I've said is 100% true and accurate. Believe me. You need to take what's written here as absolutely true. Someone who reads this may generate a negative feeling thinking this guy is really boastful. How conceited he is. Instead of benefiting the mind of the reader, this kind of claim will cause negative emotions. It can cause the person to produce afflictions. So the last thing bodhisattvas want is sentient beings to generate negative thoughts and have negative emotions. So if they express humility and say in case there are mistakes in this text, please bear with me, this will prevent any possibility of the readers generating negative thoughts. And generating critical thoughts and complaining about the composition, author and so on. So this in itself is practice of patience in the face of harm, provocation to let the mind become disturbed. So it's a practice of forbearance.

In this stanza he says the tremendous waves of activity of the Bodhisattvas are difficult for simple-minded folk like me to comprehend. You may recall he says "I've relied upon the sutras and what the saints have taught I feel these are indeed the genuine trainings of the Buddha's heirs". But here, he adds: still, these vast activities of Bodhisattvas are hard for someone like to understand in my entirety. So I must bear indulgence of any perfect saints for contradictions, irrelevancies or other flaws. So in case there are contradictions between what I've said, and other flaws, I beg the forgiveness of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The fourth stanza is a dedication of virtue for the sake of making the composition meaningful. He's dedicating virtues he's created. This is an important practice. If one doesn't dedicate virtues properly, there's the risk it can be destroyed by anger. If one loses one's temper and becomes very angry, there's danger the roots of virtue created in the past are damaged and they can't create effects.

Through whatever merit has been gained, may all beings
Generate sublime bodhicitta, both relative and absolute,
And through this, come to equal Lord Avalokitesvara,
Transcending the extremes of existence and quiescence.

The first two lines. There are two kinds of minds of enlightenment. The relative mind of enlightenment refers to what we refer to as conventional enlightenment: wanting to attain Buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings. Absolute bodhicitta is realizing final reality. When you realize absolute bodhicitta, or ultimate mind of enlightenment, then you'll be able to transcend the extreme of existence. You won't be reborn in cyclic existence. When you realize relative bodhicittva, you transcend the other extreme: quiescence. You won't abide in this individual peace for yourself. By realizing these two bodhicittas,

you'll be able to avoid these two extremes and obtain Buddhahood. And so come to equal Lord Avalokitesvara.

Fifth section in conclusion is a colophon for the sake of knowing the four excellences. Mentioning the colophon for understanding the four excellences:

This was composed in a cave near Ngulchu Rinchen by the monk Tokme, a teacher of scripture and reasoning, for his own and others' benefit.

What are the 4 excellences?

1 is what is composed. The text composed is the text explaining the 37 practices of Bodhisattvas. These are like a summary.

2 is the purpose. What's the purpose of composing the text? In this colophon, it's stated it's for his own and others' benefit. Not because he wants to earn reputation as a great scholar or doing this out of intellectual curiosity for some kind of academic purpose. He wrote this text so he can familiarize his mind with the practices of Bodhisattva and train his mind in these practices. Other people who read this text can understand the practices of the Bodhisattva and attain liberation and full enlightenment. This text was composed for his own benefit and that of others.

3 concerns the excellence of author. It's stated it's by Tokme, a teacher of scripture and reasoning. Scripture refers to sutras, tantra, and treatises. Reasoning refers to using logic to settle upon the points that have been taught in scripture. This teacher of scripture and reasoning composed this text.

4 is excellence of location. It's composed in a cave near Ngulchu Rinchen.

We've completed in a rough way the explanation of this text. I've explained the text according to what I've understood so maybe that explanation isn't quite complete and when listeners listen and don't completely grasp, so when we try to engage in practice, so perhaps we are not able to practice in entirety.

This is actually the reality of spiritual practice. It doesn't happen overnight. So you should not expect to grasp everything 100% and practice it immediately. It has to occur in a gradual organic way. The more we're able to listen to the teachings, to reflect on them, put them into practice. The more we can progress on the spiritual path. With more attention, we will have more mindfulness and introspection. We can recall more clearly the advice in the teachings and avoid negative behaviour. In a gradual manner, we will be able to reduce the negative aspects of our body and speech and slowly we will be able to make progress on the spiritual path. So don't expect to understand all from the beginning and put everything into practice in the beginning. If you think like that, you'll be discouraged easily.

This advice that was given by Nagarjuna in his Letter to a Friend is relevant here too. 118 he says:

Whatever guidelines there are for you in those words
Would be difficult even for a monk to carry out perfectly.
(So, try to make as) the essential nature of your conduct
Whatever (aspects) of these (that you can),
And by entrusting (yourself) to the good qualities (coming) from that,
Make (this) lifetime meaningful.

He taught this text to a layperson. He said these guidelines would be difficult even for a monk to carry out perfectly. So you should try to make the essential points the nature of your conduct. Try to practice them as you can. Don't think I'll be able to practice perfectly from the start.

Since Nagarjuna said that, we should also remind ourselves that we should not expect to practice everything from the start but put the essential points into practice.

I'd like to remind you about the content of stanzas 35 and 36.

35

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to slay attachment
And the rest-mind's afflictions – at once, the very moment they arise,
Taking as weapons the remedies held with mindfulness and vigilance.
For once the kleshas have become familiar, they'll be harder to avert.

We need to catch them and use weapons the remedies. Because if we are careless / reckless, these afflictions will overtake our mind. So it's important to exercise mindfulness and vigilance. We need to nip them in the bud.

36

In short, no matter what one might be doing,
By examining always the status of one's mind,
With continuous mindfulness and alertness,
To bring about the good of others – this is the practice of all the Bodhisattvas.

This is the practice. You have to examine the status of your mind with continual mindfulness and alertness. One should try to always act for the good of others. These two stanzas are very beneficial for the mind. If you can remind yourselves every day of these two practices, then it would be very beneficial for your daily activities. All of you are busy. It would be hard for you to read this text on a daily basis. But perhaps you can wake up and read these 2 stanzas and try to implement them in your daily life. E.g. when you go to work, you meet people, you try to remember that you don't want to indulge in afflictions. E.g. open mouth to speak to people, ensure you don't create misdeeds unnecessarily. At the end of the day, when you get home, at night, you can reflect on how you've done during the day. In the morning, I set this motivation to not be under the

afflictions and bring about the good of others. How did I do today? Was I able to fulfill these aspirations I generated this morning. Do a review. If you've done well, avoided afflictions, exercised mindfulness and vigilance and be nice to others, then rejoice: cultivate joy in your mind. That will cause positive energy you've generated to increase even more. However if you reflect on the day and conclude I haven't been so successful, then you can do some kind of purification. You can recite some mantras and generate regret for negative actions you've created and purify those negative energies. Practice occurs in this way, in a gradual way. If you can persist in our practice on a daily basis, then you find our negativities will be reduced. Eventually, they'll be eliminated. That's the way to go about spiritual practice.

If once in a while you find you have extra time, then you can pick out one stanza and think about its meaning. Read and ask yourself what is the practice here? Contemplate its meaning. Then it's very beneficial.

Another way. Say you're very busy and stressful day at work. When you come home, you're agitated. You can't sleep. You can use this text and try to read it and think about it. It can be the case by trying to understand the meaning of this text, you become sleepy and fall asleep easily. Another way to use this text. If you can't fall asleep, then can try to use this text and you'll be fresher the next day. Greatly beneficial b/c if you sleep this way, your whole sleep becomes virtuous.

I believe there is benefit in our having gone through this text, from both the side of the teacher and the student. It's commendable you've made effort to come to attend these classes, so usually you are busy. You study / work. During the weekend, you take time off to come all the way to the Centre to attend these classes. So I think there is benefit in our having conducted these classes. Having participated in these classes. As a conclusion, I will read the beginning of this text so there is this tradition of reading the first part of the text at the end of a series of explanations. This creates an auspiciousness for the students to receive such teachings again in the future and the teacher to offer such explanations in the future.

I'd like to mention the transmission of this lineage. I received this at least once from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Maybe twice. In our tradition, the unbroken lineage is said to be very important. So I've received the lineage from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. By listening to this explanation, you've also received the unbroken lineage. So there's blessing attached to receiving this transmission. If you've understood the meaning of the stanzas, that's wonderful. At least, you've received transmission lineage of the text.

At the end, we will make extensive prayers to dedicate prayers and so on. We'll recite usual ones and if you find you're not able to think very extensively about how to dedicate virtues, then just think: I will do as the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have done. This then includes everything they've done. B/c they have these complete dedications. That is a way of dedicating as well.