

English Dharma talk  
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By Geshe Pema Tshering  
Land of Compassion Buddha Edmonton  
<http://compassionbuddha.ca>

## **Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 2**

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

Let's begin by reflecting on the stanza from the Master Nagarjuna's Precious Garland, in which he talks about cultivating the root of enlightenment: compassion, bodhicitta and so on. First, we need to consider the fact that from among the various types of happiness, the highest form of happiness is that of Buddhahood or highest enlightenment.

Why is it that in Buddhism, enlightenment is the highest form of happiness that one can ever attain? The word for enlightenment in Tibetan is ... - it contains two syllables *trang?* and *chu?*. First syllable has a connotation of completely purified. One has eliminated all shortcomings. One's cleared away all faults. Second syllable means fulfillment of all excellent qualities. One's realized all one needs to realize. One's attained all good qualities.

In the beginning, it's important for us to understand what happiness is. We all want it and seek it. Happiness comes in various forms. Short term happiness, long term and so on. If we do not really understand what this is all about. Then in our quest for happiness, it would be easy for us to make mistakes. By making mistakes, we won't find the happiness we want. Although we don't want suffering, we'll end up with problems and difficulties.

It's crucial that we have a good understanding of the causes of happiness. If we want happiness, we need to create its causes. If we fail to do that, we won't get the results we want. Similarly, we need to understand what the causes of suffering are. If we want to dispel suffering, rid our problems, we need to avoid creating the causes of suffering. It's important for us to identify accurately the causes of happiness and suffering at the beginning. How do we create the causes of happiness? This is important because if we don't properly understand the causes of happiness, we won't be able to properly create it. This is like planting a crop. The benefit of a good crop is easy for us to understand, but if one doesn't know how a good crop comes about, what causes of a good crop are, then one isn't able to get the results.

If we want to attain the highest happiness of full enlightenment, we need to create the right causes. The second syllable represents the fulfillment of all good qualities. If we understand the causes of these good qualities, then we are able to create those causes and bring about this fulfillment of all excellent qualities.

We all want happiness. Not only do we want happiness, we want the best kind of happiness. Therefore, we should have interest in this phenomenon called enlightenment. It's not something we can achieve just by making prayers. As Nagarjuna pointed out, the root of enlightenment is bodhicitta. Bodhicitta or mind of enlightenment serves as the seed for the fruit of enlightenment.

Some of you may be thinking I don't really need highest enlightenment. I just want to be happy in this life. In my life, I encounter problems, difficulties. If I can rid them, I'll be satisfied. That will be good enough for me. But the reality is this: as soon as we attain a certain kind of state, we'll want a better state. We all strive for improvement. E.g. we are in a relatively good state. There are people around us who are poorer, more difficult situation than us. When those people look at us, they think oh you know, they are in such a good state. If only I can improve my situation and achieve that state. You can see there's always this relative happiness and we have a constant wish to achieve a better state. So we in our state want to be free from our problems. As soon as we achieve a certain state, we always look forward to an even better state. This is the state of our mind. So in that way, we should eventually strive for highest enlightenment, Buddhahood. In order to attain that, the root is bodhicitta. How do we generate the mind of enlightenment? We need to study the methods. The text we will look at: 37 practices of Bodhisattvas will explain how.

Let me introduce the author of this text. His name is Gyalse Tokme Zangpo. He is a Tibetan scholar. He's not Indian. The treatise we'll study is Tibetan. The author lived at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. He was known as a Bodhisattva.

You can see his name Gyalse – literally means the son of a king. It doesn't mean prince in this context, because here, we are talking about someone who's a spiritual son born from the Buddha's teachings. As a result of following the teachings of the Buddha, he engaged in practice and entered the path. He then is a Bodhisattva, a child of the victors.

Let's look at the title of this text more closely. It's called the 37 practices of all the Bodhisattvas. Here, we are talking about the practices a Bodhisattva would engage in. Practice would involve mental practice (what to think) and other forms of practice (behaviour and so on). Here, the title is the 37 practices of all Bodhisattvas. It explains how these practices are done from the experience of the author. The author isn't just giving an intellectual exposition but sharing these from the point of view of his own experience. He understood the benefits of practice and so on. In 37 stanzas, he explains these practices. So the title is 37 practices. Unlike certain other texts that include additional sentences at the beginning or end, such as expression of worship or promise to compose text or conclusion, it has precisely 37 stanzas. It doesn't have the extra supplementary stanzas which add to more than 37 stanzas.

At the beginning, there's an explanation of how the teacher should explain the text. What kind of mental attitude he should have. Then the explanation of how the student should listen – what kind of motivation the student should have.

The extensive explanation of how the teacher should teach and student listen has been presented in previous classes. Today, I'll just explain briefly how teacher should teach and how student should listen. The teacher should have a good motivation for providing explanations because the teacher understands that the students want happiness. They don't want suffering. Due to not understanding the methods of achieving happiness, dispelling suffering, living beings continue to suffer. In order that living beings can find happiness and rid happiness, they need to know the methods. So the teacher thinks: to benefit students in this way, I'll explain the text. The student should also have positive motivation. We've discussed briefly the significance of enlightenment. Student should think: I want to achieve highest happiness (enlightenment) and to do so, I need to know the methods. There are many methods. I need to learn how to eliminate faults and have excellent qualities. So important for both teacher and student to have positive motivation.

Let's explain the structure of the text. At the beginning, we have what's called a background. It provides an opening to the text. Then it has an actual text. It has 37 stanzas. Then dedication of merit.

The background information regarding this text has the title. There's an expression of worship to the extraordinary figure. Then the author's promise to compose the text.

The title is the 37 practices of all the Bodhisattvas. After that, we have the actual text being laid down. It starts with this homage: *Namo Lokeśvaraye!*

Now Namō Lokeshvaraye is homage in the Sanskrit language. You might wonder, the author is Tibetan. Why is there this homage in a different language? The teachings of Buddhism can be based to the teacher Buddha. So India is really the source or origin of Buddhist teachings. To make that known, the author expresses homage in the Indian language.

So Namō means I pay homage or I make prostrations. Avalokiteshrava refers to Avalokiteshrava or Chenrezig or Guan Yin. The last syllable there means to. So all together it means I pay homage to Avalokiteshrava.

What's the purpose of paying homage to Avalokiteshrava? In general, when we engage in a virtuous activity, it's likely that we encounter obstacles. These obstacles come about because of our lack of merit. So if we have plenty of merit, then no matter what we do, we'll be able to complete that activity. We'll be able to achieve success. Here, one pays homage to Avalokiteshrava who's seen as indivisible from one's own teacher, Guru, so that one can create merit. If one's rich in merit, then the activity that one engages in will not have obstacles. So at the beginning, one pays homage to Avalokiteshrava, who's seen as inseparable from one's teacher.

So next we have this stanza, which is homage in Tibetan.

1

You see that all things are beyond coming and going,  
Yet still you strive solely for the sake of living beings—  
To you, my precious guru inseparable from Lord Avalokita,  
I offer perpetual homage, respectfully, with body, speech and mind.

The first line of this verse says “you see that all things are beyond coming and going”. You refers to Avalokiteshrava. What’s expressed here is the fact that phenomena are free of inherent existence. Similar to the idea expressed in one of the last stanzas you recited in the prayers at the beginning of class: where it says all phenomenon like a star, a visual elaboration, lamp, illusion, dewdrop and so on. Here, we understand this idea of phenomenon as not inherently existence. Coming and going aren’t independently existing. One can go to enlightenment. One can come from a past life. One can go to a future life. But all of these don’t exist inherently. Avalokiteshrava sees all things are beyond coming and going.

If this is the first time you’re hearing this idea, this may be strange. What do you mean there’s no coming and going? Because I come to the Temple and later I’ll go. What’s meant here (all things are beyond coming and going) is that there’s no coming and going that exists from its own side, by not depending on causes and conditions. There’s production and cessation, but they depend on causes and conditions. They don’t exist from their own side. However, when we look at things, they seem to exist. They seem to have some intrinsic existence. E.g. when we look at plants, we see them growing. These plants seem to be able to grow in an intrinsic way by not depending on causes and conditions. Perhaps we can understand they need causes and conditions to grow, but when they appear to us, they seem to have some concrete existence. When we say all things are beyond coming and going, we mean they don’t have intrinsic coming and going.

You might find this explanation confusing. We see things as existing inherently, from their own side, but what’s the problem? To illustrate the fault of seeing things as existing independently, let me use this example of anger. So sometimes we get angry, say at a person. And when we are in this fit of anger, usually we will see that person as existing in an independent way, from their own side. This person doesn’t depend on causes and conditions. They are repulsive, irritating and annoying, intrinsically from their own side. We don’t see this situation as really fluid, as coming about through causes and conditions. Our anger arises from such perception. If we are really able to understand there’s no inherently repulsive person, then this will reduce the force of our anger by seeing that all this depends on many causes and conditions coming together. The anger we experience will weaken quickly.

Avalokiteshrava achieved highest enlightenment. He can see all things are beyond coming and going. All things are beyond inherent existence. However, he doesn’t just relax and enjoy emptiness. Rather, out of compassion, he wants to help all living beings achieve the same state of happiness. So he strives for the sake of living beings. The first two lines say

You see that all things are beyond coming and going,  
Yet still you strive solely for the sake of living beings—

So Avalokiteshrava is very kind. Out of compassion, he strives solely to benefit living beings. Understanding and appreciating his kindness, the author makes homage to Avalokiteshrava, who's seen as inseparable from his own teacher, precious Guru.

So he says

To you, my precious guru inseparable from Lord Avalokita,  
I offer perpetual homage, respectfully, with body, speech and mind.

Respectfully, with body, one makes prostrations. With speech, one offers praises. With mind, one generates faith.

It's natural that one respects someone who's shown one great kindness. Here, Avalokiteshrava is very kind and worthy of homage. This is like someone who's been very kind to us in our lives, e.g. benefactor, who gives us opportunity to work and so on. By appreciating the kindness of one's Guru, inseparable from Avalokiteshrava, one pays homage to the Guru who's inseparable from Avalokiteshrava.

Now there are many Buddhas. Why does the author chooses to pay homage to Avalokiteshrava among the many Buddhas? The Buddhas are equal in their achievements, in terms of the excellent qualities in realizing reality. However, Avalokiteshrava is associated particularly with compassion and bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. Avalokiteshrava has taken responsibility for living beings in terms of developing enlightenment and bodhicitta. The second reason for the author to do so is the text he's composing mainly explains how to develop bodhicitta. Because the Dharma he will explain relates with bodhicitta, therefore, he pays homage to Avalokiteshrava, who embodies this quality of compassion and bodhicitta.

The next verse we see is the promise to compose the text. The author makes a commitment to present the practices of Bodhisattvas. He makes his promise that he'll describe what these practices are.

The verse reads:

2

The perfect buddhas, who are the source of all benefit and joy,  
Come into being through accomplishing the sacred Dharma.  
And since this in turn depends on knowing how to practise,  
I shall now describe the practices of all the buddhas' heirs.

The first line says "The perfect buddhas, who are the source of all benefit and joy". This is because the Buddhas through their achievement of full enlightenment are able to

benefit all living beings in many ways. They are able to see how to bring about the short term and long term happiness of living beings and every form of happiness. They are the source of all benefit. Also, they are the source of all joy because the Buddhas were enlightened by the path of enlightenment. By doing so, they achieved the highest enlightenment, which is the highest form of joy.

The next lines in this second verse say: the Buddhas come into being by accomplishing the secret Dharma. By practicing the path and culminating the practice of the path, the Buddhas attained their state. When we talk about the realizations, we are talking about the true paths and true cessations. All the past Buddhas have practiced the paths and true cessations. If we want to attain highest enlightenment like they did, we also need to engage in practice. To practice properly, we need to know how.

And since this in turn depends on knowing how to practise,  
I shall now describe the practices of all the buddhas' heirs.

To know how to practice, we need to study. I want to do this so you can know how to practice.

To illustrate this using an example, if someone wants to be a good Doctor, this person needs to undergo many years of study and training before one can actually become a really skillful Doctor. So one needs to understand really well the various types of sicknesses. This depends on many years of study and practice. One needs to begin with elementary studies and progress to the most advanced studies. Here, if one wishes to attain the state of highest enlightenment, which one has the best abilities to benefit all living beings, then one needs to know how to practice in order to reach that state. There are many stages to go through. Here, the author is saying I shall describe what these practices are. By living beings knowing what they are, and underdoing practices, can attain Buddhahood. I shall compose this text that composes of 37 stanzas describing practices of Bodhisattvas. The author has his motivation for composing this text.

If one wants to be a good Doctor, not sufficient to just make prayers. The achievement of being a good Doctor can't be bought. There's no other path. Rather, other than studying and training in the appropriate methods. Similarly, for spiritual achievement, one needs to study and train one's mind. It's not sufficient to make prayers. One wants to achieve enlightenment or any form of happiness, simply by making prayers, one won't achieve one's goal. It's important to understand how to achieve happiness, how to eliminate suffering. Buddhism offers many forms of advice on how to achieve these goals. It's helpful if we can read explanations on these methods. If we can't find time to read books, at least we can try to remember the essential advice of Buddhism and try to train our mind so that in that way, we may derive benefit.

We've gone through the background information of this text. Now we read the actual text: the 37 practices. The actual text is divided into 2 sections. First, there is the preliminary practices. Second is the bigger section: how to train in the 3 scopes of the path. 3 kinds of path for beings of 3 capacities.

The preliminary section consists of certain stanzas. First has to do with contemplating the precious human rebirth. Human rebirth that has all the freedoms and privileges. This stanza reads:

1.

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to study, reflect and meditate,  
Tirelessly, both day and night, without ever straying into idleness,  
In order to free oneself and others from this ocean of samsara,  
Having gained this supreme vessel—a free, well-favoured human life, so  
difficult to find.

The first stanza talks about us having gained this supreme vessel – a free, well-favoured human life, so difficult to find. There are many types of human existence. The kind of existence we've obtained is a precious human rebirth that has all the freedoms and privileges. This is said to be like a supreme vessel, like a big boat or ship that can ferry you across the ocean. It's rare and difficult to find.

The precious human rebirth we have has 18 qualities. What it says in the 4<sup>th</sup> line: we've gained a free, well-favoured human life, this is one endowed with 18 kinds of attributes.

The 18 attributes consist of 2 groups: 8 freedoms and 10 privileges. 8 freedoms are in 2 groups: 4 human freedoms and 4 non-human freedoms.

What are the 4 non-human freedoms? [paraphrased: There are 4 states]: hell, hungry ghost, animals, and long life gods. These are non-human states and we are free from being these. These are the 4 non-human freedoms.

Why are these called the non-freedoms? These is because if one is reborn in one of these 4 non-human states, one lacks freedom to engage in spiritual practice. If in hell, one's constantly tormented by extreme pain. One has no way to practice Dharma. If reborn as hungry ghost, one has no way to engage in Dharma practice b/c they're constantly tormented by hunger and thirst. The minds of these beings are filled with desire to find food and drink, nothing else, so no chance to engage in Dharma. If reborn as animal, no freedom to engage in spiritual practice. Usually, animals aren't most intelligent. Of course, certain animals who are clever, but no way to engage in mental training, spiritual practice. A long life god lacks kind of mental capacity to engage in spiritual practice. Therefore, it's said if one's born as a hell being, and so on, and one doesn't have the freedom to practice, therefore, to be able to engage in spiritual practice, one needs to have these 4 kinds of freedoms in terms of non-human states.

What are the 4 human freedoms? Here, we are talking about freedoms free unfavourable states. What are these unfavourable states? If one's reborn in a border region, e.g. far place where Dharma is not available, no teachers of Dharma, then you lack opportunity to practice Dharma. Another freedom has to do with freedom from wrong views. If you hold wrong views, you think Buddha, Dharma, karma don't exist, and results of karma

don't exist and soon, then you won't have the confidence in the Dharma to engage in practice. So that's obviously an obstacle. Another freedom has to do with being in the place where other Buddhas come. We are free from being born when the Buddha hasn't come, b/c if the Buddha hasn't come, then Buddha's teachings won't be available. Indeed, there are long periods (eons) when Buddha doesn't come so his teachings aren't available. The fourth human freedom is we are free from having faculties that don't work: e.g. if one can't hear or can't speak and so on, this will prevent us from accessing Dharma.

It seems like we don't have time to go through the 10 privileges today. Perhaps we can save that for next week. Perhaps just elaborate on some points we brought up today. So far there's been quite a bit of mention of hell realms. You may wonder why are talking about them and intense suffering and so on?

The point is we need to understand how precious our human existence is. It's of great value.

In our world, there are many human beings. Besides human beings, there are many forms of life: animals, birds, insects and so on. When you look at all these living beings, you can see that they all want happiness. No one wants to be deprived of happiness. However, the reality is, many beings can't find happiness they want. So they may not have a good understanding of the causes of happiness or methods for eliminating suffering. So b/c of that confusion, they end up deprived of happiness and having problems and difficulties in their lives.

Without having to talk about all the living beings on planet earth, we just need to look around us. There are people who have huge problems in their life: great misery. Some turn to alcohol to reduce their sorrows. When you think about it, do these people want happiness? Of course. It's just they don't know the means for achieving true happiness. We are like them. We are human beings. Therefore, when we have this discussion of a precious human rebirth how we have the 8 freedoms, free from the 4 human unfavourable states and the 4 non-human ones, then we appreciate our human existence and think we are really fortunate compared to some other human beings. I'm in a really good state.

When we discuss these attributes of a precious human rebirth, they can help us to appreciate our human existence more. We can think I'm really fortunate compared to some other living being. How lucky I am. I have a fortunate existence and a mind that I can use. I have a certain clarity I can apply to spiritual practice. This existence I have is really precious. I should use it well. That awareness and appreciation is the first step to engage in spiritual practice and try to take responsibility for our wellbeing.

In a previous course, we studied the text by Nagarjuna entitled Letter to a Friend. In that text, an example is given of how a person who doesn't cherish his human existence will get despised by others, criticized by others. This example of a precious vessel is given. If you have a precious vessel made of gold or silver and ornamented by diamonds and precious stones, if a person fails to realize the value of this vessel / container and puts

filthy substances inside and doesn't use it, then other people will laugh at this person. They'll see this person is really wasting the potential of this precious object. They will say what a foolish guy. This guy is really dumb b/c this vessel is really useful but he's not using it at all. Similarly, we have a precious human existence. If we don't use it to achieve happiness, then we're not making use of our precious potential in the same way this guy isn't using his precious vessel. If we don't use this vessel to achieve happiness in this life and future lives, then it's a huge loss. Then wise beings, such as Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, will be looking at us and lamenting, what a pity / waste. This person has a huge potential but not using b/c failure to realize value of it.

We will use the remaining time for Q/A. Before we do that, let me summarize what we discussed. The main point is this precious human rebirth. This precious human existence is something hard to obtain. We should reflect on this point carefully. E.g. if you go out, you may see someone who's drunk too much alcohol and fainted. You may not think much. But if that person was you, what would you think? If someone you were born into circumstances that lead you to become like that, what do you feel about that? There are people who are not sensible. Again, when you look at this from a spectator point of view, maybe not much. But what if you were born like that, how would you feel about that? So here, the contemplation that we are advised to do is to reflect on the freedoms that we do enjoy. And we can develop an appreciation for these freedoms we have by imagining if we didn't have them. So corresponding non-freedoms. Just think about the human non-freedoms. If we had those non-freedoms, how would we feel about our existence? So through such a reflection, we hope to develop some kind of true appreciation for our human existence and to cherish it and use it for spiritual practice to engage in Dharma.

Tonight when you go to bed, you may stay awake the whole night (laughter).

Q1: Regarding the 4 categories in the non-human freedoms and those beings, for many of us who have a daily practice who pray for sentient beings, are these beings covered in that way? Are we able to be helpful to them although they can't engage in spiritual practice on their own?

So in terms of our prayers benefiting these beings, perhaps there's some benefit. E.g. dedicating fruit to hungry ghosts so their hunger may be alleviated. But the real benefit is experienced by you yourself. b/c of your very vast thought wanting to benefit others, you create merit. This positive energy is what enables you to increase your mental capacity, Dharma practice and also propels you closer to enlightenment. Once you attain enlightenment, you have the potential and real opportunities to benefit living beings in a better way. So prayers are beneficial in that way. In terms of immediate benefit, there may be some. But the real benefit comes from it compelling you to achieve enlightenment so you truly benefit others.

Q2: What is a being without a vessel? Does a being have shape or form before it's placed in a vessel? Does it know if it exists or not? If it's not in a vessel, how does it experience?

Translator clarifying: so you are asking does a being know he's placed in this vessel that's mentioned in the first stanza?

Answer: In this first stanza, we talk about using the supreme vessel to free oneself and others from the ocean of samsara. This boat is an analogy for the circumstances we find ourselves in. So here, the ocean of samsara or cyclic existence represents the difficulties or problems we face. There are many varieties. They are represented by this ocean. We are trying to cross this ocean. We want to pass beyond difficulties and sufferings. We are trying to cross this using this boat / vessel in stanza 1. In the past, there are no planes. You can cross a body of water by using a boat. So what is this ship that enables us to pass beyond our problems and not have to experience difficulties again? This ship is our human life, that has all the freedoms and privileges. So the vessel, the boat, represents our human life. So using this precious human life, we will cross the ocean. So when we use the human life to obtain a state beyond suffering and problems and misery. So this boat is our human existence. A well-favoured human existence with all the freedoms and privileges.

Question: What about before we have this position in human life? Does a being know if it exists or not? Or does it only find out after it's placed in the vessel of human life that it does exist?

Translator clarifying: Does one know it exists before it comes into human existence?

Question: Or that it exists? Yeah. I guess. Yeah.

Answer: How do we know our human existence exists before we become a human being? it's not easy to ... In Buddhism, we explain the human existence is the result of many causes and conditions. In order to create these causes and conditions, one needs to be in favourable state. E.g. it would be hard for an animal or in the lower realm to completely create all these cause and conditions. It's very likely that one actually creates the causes and conditions for human being while one's reborn as a human being. It's likely previously in a human existence, one creates the causes and conditions for a human existence.

Let me elaborate on my answer to your question. What are the causes and conditions for a precious human rebirth? Here, we are talking about a human existence with 18 attributes. One needs pure ethics first. By practicing pure ethical conduct, one will have the first set of causes. The second type of causes is making stainless prayers to be able to obtain a precious human rebirth. Third, one needs to engage in practices like generosity, charity, morality and so on. So through a combination of these causes and conditions, one will be able to obtain a human existence with 18 good qualities.

Let's talk more about ethics. This is mainly explained in terms of avoiding the 10 nonvirtues. The 10 nonvirtues consist of 3 of body, 4 of speech, 3 of mind. First set have the nonvirtues of body. These are killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. It's hard for an animal to practice these. E.g. killing. An animal wouldn't have the thought it's not

right for me to take lives of other beings. Would an animal have this mind restraining itself from stealing? This object is owned by someone else. Not right for me to take it. The third nonvirtue: sexual misconduct. Would an animal think this other being is the spouse of another being and it's not right for me to engage in sexual misconduct? Would an animal think it's not right for me to force myself on another being for sexual pleasure? ... in terms of speech, also difficult, lying, harsh speech and so on. An animal doesn't really have speech, then it's hard to actively restrain from the nonvirtues of speech. It seems like these forms of ethical conduct can't really be practiced by animals.

It's likely you've had a precious human rebirth before, so you can create causes and conditions... So you should relax and think you've had human existences in the past.

I mean we can't remember what happened in the past, but we can think I'm not going to make a loss so that I'm not going to become worse off than before.

If one has a human existence and then one in a later life becomes a dog / cat and so on, this is really quite a pity. So one should ensure that one doesn't become worse than one's present state.

The main point of this discussion is we do have a very precious human rebirth with incredible opportunities and so on. We shouldn't waste it. We should cherish it and use it, not in a negative way.