

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 3

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

In a sutra by the Buddha, he states that all beings wish to be free from suffering realms. We all wish to be free from lower rebirths of hell realms, hungry ghost realms and so on. Regardless if you accept the existence of lower realms, we do accept that many forms of suffering exist. We don't want suffering. We want happiness, a good rebirth, human being / god. We have an innate wish to be free from suffering, pain, old age, death. But these wishes can't just be achieved simply by making prayers.

So if we don't want any form of pain or misery and we want happiness and wellbeing, how do we achieve these goals? So the Buddha in this sutra says the best means is that of cultivating a good heart. This refers to the ultimate good heart, the mind of enlightenment, bodhicitta. The Buddha in the sutra pays homage to bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment.

This mind of enlightenment is what brings happiness in every way. If we are interested in achieving happiness for this life, bodhicitta is the way to go. Not only does it bring happiness in this life, it also causes good rebirths and makes us happy in the future. It helps us achieve all our goals. This altruistic mind also helps us benefit others so they also achieve their goals. So there's no better method for happiness than this mind.

How to we achieve all these goals? We want to work on this marvelous mind of bodhicitta? How do we cultivate such a mind? How do we go about generating this mind? In order to learn the methods, we need to listen to explanations. E.g. this text offers a method for cultivating the method of enlightenment. After listening to explanations on how to develop bodhicitta, we should bear in mind these explanations. We try to put them into practice. Progressively, we try to generate this mind of enlightenment. It can't happen overnight. You won't do it in 1 or 2 days. It takes time, gradual practice. To meditate effectively, we need to engage in contemplation first. Contemplation of what we need to meditate on. Without reflecting properly on what we're meditating on, it's not effective. Effective contemplation needs listening to explanations. We need to learn about the subject properly. So therefore, the processes of listening / hearing the teachings, contemplation, and meditation are very important.

What's the nature of this altruistic mind of enlightenment? Wishing to place all living beings in the state of nirvana, state beyond sorrow. Do you have the ability to place all living beings in the state of highest happiness now? Probably no. In order for us to help

living beings, we need to achieve the state of full enlightenment, because with that kind of situation - full enlightenment, then we'll have the ability to help all living beings and place them in nirvana. So we generate this wish I want to attain full enlightenment to free living beings from suffering and place them in nirvana. That's bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment.

If we want to generate this wish to free living beings from suffering, then we need to first understand how they are tormented by suffering. B/c without understanding there's suffering, then the compassion to free them from suffering will be very weak. It's necessary to reflect on the various forms of sufferings that are tormenting sentient beings. Indeed, in cyclic existence / samsara, there are diverse forms of suffering. One can look at a very wealthy man and think this person has everything he wants. When he travels, he goes in a fancy car or even an airplane. He lives in a beautiful mansion with every kind of luxury you can imagine. He eats all delicious food. He has all he wants; how can he be suffering? This reflects we're not aware of certain forms of suffering.

Let's say we were not in such a good financial situation and we look at this rich man and think he's so happy. But if we check, he may have certain worries that you don't have. E.g. he's a rich businessman. This work involve a lot of worry and stress. B/c he's in that kind of very high position, he's under the kind of fear that someone may hurt him. He may think I live in a building that's very secure; if I don't, there may be danger and someone may come attack me at night. When it comes to food. He may have preoccupations he doesn't have. He may think I really need to take care of my health – can't go to any restaurant, need a good one; else get sick. Outside may seem happy; internally may have stresses and worries we don't have.

You know when this rich man looks at us, he may think they're not engaged in such stressful work. They're not so busy. They have fewer worries than me. They survive fine. They eat / drink how they want. They have a dwelling. They must be living carefree lives. He may think we are really happy. The reality is although we lack his stresses, we have our own.

Regardless we are rich or not, we all have certain forms of common suffering. Aging, sickness and death are the great equalizers b/c all of us are subject to these things. We all dread these forms of suffering. We fear these forms of suffering. Everyone's exactly the same. There's no way to avoid these passages in life. We should learn to be more sensitive to others' sufferings. E.g. during the course of the day, 24 hours, we can try to understand that others are also suffering in the same way we are suffering. Whenever we experience problem / difficulty, we can understand we're not the only one with this. Others have similar forms. We're all in the same boat. This is really helpful for developing compassion by reminding ourselves others also have this suffering. In Shantideva's Engaging in Bodhisattva Deeds, he says: if you don't even dream of a certain experience when you are sleeping, then how would you understand others have this similar experience? In a dream, if we don't understand suffering for ourselves, our own experiences in terms of wanting to be free from suffering, how would we, in our

waking life, be able to wish others be free from suffering and engage in actions to benefit them and free them from suffering?

After we die, we have to take rebirth. We don't want to end up in a miserable state. So we should consider this possibility and generate a sense of concern even dread for taking a bad rebirth, ending up in some negative rebirth such as being born as an animal and so on. By reflecting on this possibility, we generate a strong wish to avoid a bad rebirth. That can help us in turn appreciate our present existence as a human being, how privileged we are. We're really fortunate b/c if we don't appreciate our present existence, although it's very valuable, then it's very likely we'll waste it and not make good use of it.

In the last class, we looked at the first stanza. This first stanza mentions this precious human rebirth. If you look at the root text, in the last line, there's mention of this supreme vessel of free, well-favoured human life. Free means the 8 freedoms / leisures. We did that last class. Today, we look at what it means to have a well-favoured human life: 10 privileges.

Today we look at the 10 privileges. Divided into 2 sets. 5 personal and 5 circumstantial. First 5 relate to qualities oneself should have and so have a well-favoured existence. Other 5 relate to others; even if one has the 5 positive privileges, there are circumstantial privileges from others that make one's human existence even more favourable. So the 2 types: 5 personal and 5 circumstantial related to others.

The first of the 5 personal privileges is being born as a human being. If you want to engage in spiritual practice or Dharma practice, the most ideal rebirth is the human rebirth. Being born as a human being is the first personal privilege. All of us are born as human beings, so we have the first one. Second is being born in a central region. Here, it refers to a region where the Buddha's teachings exist. If you're born as a human being, but we're born in a place where the Buddha's teachings don't exist, then we won't have access to the Dharma. We are indeed born in a place where the Buddha's teachings exist, so we indeed have the second privilege.

Third personal privilege is being born with complete faculties, so we can hear and speak and so on. If e.g. you're deaf, you can't hear explanations and so on. If we can't speak, we can't express ourselves. We can't speak to others; this will be an obstacle to receiving teachings and engaging in practice. We are all born with complete faculties, so we are all endowed with the third privilege.

The fourth personal privilege is not having committed a heinous action. Heinous action here refers to an extremely negative action such as killing one's father / mother intentionally; killing a full destroyer (Arhat) intentionally, or causing a schism in the Sangha community. We haven't done these; so we are endowed with the privilege of not having committed a heinous action.

Fact we have the first four personal privileges doesn't mean we have the fifth one. B/c we may not have any wish to engage in Dharma / develop spiritually. The fifth is being interested in the Dharma. Those are the 5 personal privileges.

5 circumstantial privileges that depend on others: first is being born when a Buddha has come. It's not always the case that a Buddha has come to a certain world. It's possible for thousands of years, a Buddha doesn't appear. If e.g. a previous Buddha has come and his teachings have vanished and the next hasn't come yet, there's this period of void where no Buddha appears. If we were born during this intermediary period, then we won't be born in a place where the Buddha has come. This would prevent us from practicing Dharma. We have this first circumstantial period because we are indeed born in a period where the Buddha has come.

Next has to do with period where we're born in a period where Buddha taught Dharma. It's possible Buddha came but find no suitable disciples so the Buddha won't teach the Dharma at all. We're not born in that period. We are born in this period when the Buddha has taught the Dharma.

We also have the next circumstantial privilege where the Dharma exists and is flourishing. It's possible the Buddha comes, teaches the Dharma, but over time, his teachings decline and vanish. We're not born in that period. We're born in the fortunate period when the Buddha came and the Dharma still exists and is flourishing.

Even if we have the first three circumstantial privileges, we still need a personal interest to learn the Dharma to really benefit from the existence of the teachings. So we have this fourth circumstantial privilege to be interested in learning the Dharma.

The fifth circumstantial privilege is the fact that we find ourselves in a place where people explain the Dharma out of compassion. If there are teachers but they don't teach out of compassion, they may not teach Dharma in the best way that may benefit us. The situation is these days, there are sincere teachers, who teach out of kindness and compassion.

If we check, we'll likely find we have all 10 of these privileges. We enjoy all 10 privileges. We then need to ask ourselves, is this something we'll enjoy all the time? In past rebirths, did I have these privileges all the time? In the future, I'll be able to take a human rebirth again with all these privileges? This is something we need to think about. If you have a house in Canada, and you also have one in the US. If you need to leave Canada you can go to the house in US. There's another house right there waiting for you. You don't need to go to the US and look for a house and so on.

Let's consider Planet Earth and look at all the living creatures who share this planet earth. A huge part of our earth is covered with water. In the oceans you find all kinds of animals. So many varieties of life. And surface of life: many kinds of animals. If you think about bugs, there's so many bugs. Also there are beings who live beneath the earth, in the earth. You can look at the sky, so many birds. There are so many different types

of living creatures. If you compare human beings to non-human beings, human beings actually form just a small portion of the living creatures on this earth.

Compared to all the living beings on earth, human beings are very few. If you compare the number of human beings with the number of beings, with a free, well-favoured human life, endowed with 8 freedoms and 10 privileges, there are even far fewer human beings with this precious human rebirth. Among these beings who have the precious human rebirth, not everyone's really interested in religion Dharma. There are a small portion who are interested in Dharma as presented by the Buddha. Among such people, not everyone has the complete favourable conditions to engage in Dharma practice, e.g. lack time. If you think about the number of people who can make use of precious human rebirth to practice Dharma, very few.

If you look at these various forms of life in Planet Earth, you'll see some beings are in states of wellbeing, some are not. It's not the case that those unfortunate living beings (suffering in misery) choose to be like that. No one purposely thinks I want to be reborn as a bug or certain kind of animal. Or that I want to reborn as an unhappy person / with lots of problems. No one makes that kind of choice.

A certain kind of life comes about through its respective causes and conditions. If the causes and conditions come together for a certain kind of existence, although we may not want it, it will happen. Likewise, if the causes and conditions aren't complete, although we want it badly, it won't happen. These circumstances are created by the causes we create.

Let's consider a human rebirth. What kinds of causes do we need to create if we want a good human rebirth? First, we need to lead an ethical life. This means: We need to avoid creating the 10 nonvirtues. This is the main basis for taking a good human rebirth. In addition: We need to also make stainless prayers: wish wanting to attain a good human rebirth. On the basis of having practiced ethics, we generate this wish: may I be reborn as a human being in a good rebirth. We also need to have practiced generosity, patience, and other good qualities. This is b/c let's say if we fail to practice patience, then we would have gotten angry and so on. This actually creates the cause to be reborn with an ugly appearance. Having an ugly appearance can create obstacles in leading a happy life. If we fail to practice generosity, this again can create problems for us, as it is a cause for us to enjoy resources we want. So without practicing generosity, we may be reborn in state and find ourselves in poverty, not find food / drink. If we are in that state, there's no chance we'll think I want to engage in Dharma practice and so on. To create the cause for a human rebirth, we need all these to come together: ethics, making prayers, and engaging in practices like generosity and patience.

If we want a precious human rebirth in the future, we need to create the causes now. The fact we get to enjoy a human rebirth now is a sign we created the necessary causes before. It's helpful for us to reflect again and again on this precious human existence we have. We can go through the 10 privileges and I have this and this. In this way, you generate a sense of how fortunate you are and we can also go through the list of the 8

freedoms and check, I'm free from this unfavourable condition. I'm free from this unfortunate circumstance and so on. In this way, we can think how fortunate I am. The benefit of contemplating this way, we grow to appreciate our human existence so we don't waste it.

We do have a marvelous human existence. By reflecting on the points earlier, we'll cherish this. This is actually very hard to find. We won't get it again and again. This is like a supreme vessel. This is like a ship, a big ship that you can use to ferry yourself and others across the ocean. It talks about how to free oneself and others from this ocean of samsara, having gained this vessel, basically, we're not talking about a small flimsy boat, we are talking about a sturdy, huge ship that can ferry many across the ocean. There's no danger this boat not fit our companions or be shipwrecked before we reach the shore and so on. This big ship of very fine quality that can protect not just ourselves but also others: all our companions and living beings. We can cross the ocean with this ship.

This precious human rebirth we have is like a ship. A very fine quality huge capacity ship that can ferry ourselves and others across the ocean of samsara. Not only can we use this to get rid of the suffering of this life, it can also help us rid suffering of future lives. On top of protecting us from suffering, we can also protect others from suffering. Others tormented by various problems and difficulties. This precious human existence we have. Stanza 1: last lines:

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.

What do we do with this precious human rebirth?

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.

This is the first of the Bodhisattva practices.

We have this precious human rebirth endowed with 8 freedoms and 10 privilege. Here it talks about the practice of Bodhisattvas. However, we have the same potential. We can also engage in such practices. The only difference is whether or not we seize the opportunity to engage in Dharma practice. This understanding that we should make good use of our precious human rebirth.

We finished explanation for first stanza. Let's read through it.

Next is renouncing one's homeland.

2. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to leave behind one's homeland,
Where our attachment to family and friends overwhelms us like a torrent,
While our aversion towards enemies rages inside us like a blazing fire,
And delusion's darkness obscures what must be adopted and abandoned.

There are 2 different ways to understand this practice of leaving behind one's homeland. First is more literal. If one is living in a place where one is surrounded by one's family (parents, siblings, etc.) and friends, then there's this danger that our attachment to them becomes very strong and overwhelms us like a torrent.

Also, in such a state, we may find ourselves ... one may have people who can't get along with; one's parents and siblings and friends can become enemies and so on; so here, it's said that our aversion towards enemies rages inside us like a blazing fire. When this happens, our virtue will diminish.

Under the influence of attachment and aversion, one can lose one's discriminating wisdom. One loses the ability to tell between what should be done, what should be discarded, what's beneficial, what's harmful, good for self and others and so on. This occurs when one's under influence of these afflictions and negative emotions.

If one is really interested in cultivating bodhicitta and one finds that one comes under the power of attachment and aversion and illusion when one's surrounded by family and friends in one's homeland, one would leave behind one's homeland and go off to another place so that one can develop one's bodhicitta practice further.

That was the literal reading but there's another reading which carries far greater significance: the implicit meaning conveyed by this stanza.

What's the meaning of the word homeland? It basically refers to a place where one spends one's life. E.g. if you live in this place, sleep, eat and do various activities in this place. This is what homeland means to most of us.

This homeland actually has a different meaning. It doesn't need to necessarily refer to this physical homeland. If you think about what you really place your trust in when you wake up to when you sleep, there's this conception of a self during 24 hours of a day. We always rely on this conception of self like a homeland. You wake up in the morning, and decide shower, eat breakfast, and then work. You reach your workplace. You see your colleagues, talk to them and so on. If they say something disagreeable and get angry, generate aversion to them; or see attractive object, want it, take it, and generate attachment. You can see throughout the day, the basis of your activities is really this conception of self. This conception of self is like the homeland and basis for you to engage in your activities. The homeland can be interpreted as the self-grasping mind.

So behind all our actions, we find this grasping to self. Whether we think need something to eat / drink / sleep / walk about and so on. This self-grasping mind is like a commander of our body. Our body is some servant or even slave of the self-grasping

mind. When we are under the influence of the self-grasping mind, then attachment / aversion arises towards parents, siblings, friends, enemies, and so on. When it talks about faults of one's homeland, where one experiences strong attachments / delusion, what's really being pointed out here is the fault of the self-grasping mind.

So in fact, the latter significance is far more important than the former one. In other words, it's far more important for you to work on this homeland that's self-grasping than to physically leave behind your homeland to work on attachment, aversion and delusion. For ordained people – monks and nuns – it may not be too much a trouble to leave one's homeland physically. But for most of us, householders like you, it's really not necessary for you to discard your family, friends, and children, spouse and so on. It's not important either. The whole point here is to work on the self-grasping mind that give rise to negative emotions of attachment, aversion and so on. Let's say someone leaves physical homeland but does nothing about self-grasping mind, then one can be preoccupied with attachment to family and friends in one's mind. One can be filled with spite for one's enemies in homeland and so on and missing the point. It doesn't matter where you live physically if you want to work on your attachment and aversion. What's most important is you work on your self-grasping mind, to reduce it, to eliminate it. Your ignorance will be reduced. What's important is not the first literal meaning to leave one's homeland physically but to counteract one's self-grasping mind.

I mentioned just now one of the causes of obtaining precious human rebirth in future is practice of ethics. This is discarding 10 nonvirtues, avoiding creating them. I assume all of you know what they are? Does anyone not know? I can explain them now. Let us stop reading the text for today and then go on to Q/A.

Q1: What is the best way of staying at ease and peace? Let's say I'm nervous / anxious. I try to use meditation, even when I go to shopping. What's his (Geshela's) way of staying at ease and peace at all time?

Translator clarifying: how to keep mind peaceful, best method, and prevent it from feeling anxious / nervous and so on?

A: how to find this mental peace and let the mind be at ease? This is very much related to what I've been talking about regarding self-grasping. Stronger the self-grasping mind, the higher the tendency there is for anxiety / worry / nervousness. As much as we are able to reduce the self-grasping mind, that much more peaceful we will feel. E.g. when you encounter a difficulty / problem, it can make the mind very anxious. So what you can do is to look around you and think there are actually people with similar problems and many people with much bigger problems (e.g. no place to live in / no food / sick and no access to medical treatment and so on). If you can expand your mind to think about others, this has the effect of making your mind more spacious. With a mind that is more spacious, your own problem will appear smaller. It doesn't seem so overwhelming / troubling anymore. Comes through the power of reducing the self-grasping mind.

Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm eating some kind of food. I put some into my mouth and it's not very tasty. Immediately the thought arises in the mind I don't want to eat this food. It's possible to make the mind more relaxed and spacious here through reflection. E.g. it's not harmful to my health; I put some food in my mouth and it doesn't taste good; but it's just a very short instance of time. I chew and swallow. Once it gets into the throat, whether delicious / not, not a question anymore. Then it goes to the stomach. Then the process of it getting transformed into excrement has begun. There's no more relevance talking about whether or not it's delicious or not. In certain countries, they have great problems with finding food, even drinking water for the people. I've seen on the internet certain photographs and so on. People drinking muddied water b/c that's all they have. If they don't drink that, there's nothing else. So of course it's not relevant to talk about whether it's delicious or not. By expanding your mind, this mental nervousness of the mind will dissipate. You can make your mind more relaxed, less uptight, less upset. This is a way to think when you face some kind of problem and your mind is getting upset. By expanding your mind this can be really beneficial in dissipating that tightness and making the mind more relaxed.

Question 2: Follow up – so I think it as gratitude, loving something, e.g. we don't like the job, but many people don't have it, fine. But I didn't hear anything about meditation? Should we meditate or just throw it away?

Translator clarifying: should we engage in meditation to make the mind more peaceful?

A2: meditation is very very beneficial. There are many types of meditation. One meditation you can do is that of watching your breath, e.g. when the mind is very agitated, then you can count your inhalation and exhalation. If the mind is angry, this is another practice that can help, by watching your breath and counting your breath. As you count your breath, that anger / agitation will be diminished and eventually disappear.

You can use this method to reduce your mental agitation. However, this kind of meditation only has temporal benefit in the sense that it can't guarantee you won't get agitated again in the future. In fact, very likely you will become agitated again. If you want to eliminate these mental disturbances for good, then the way to go is to use analytic meditation. This is the kind of meditation that is thinking about reasons to establish certain conclusions. To do that effectively, need to study, read books, getting advice and so on. It can eradicate the disturbing emotions, anger and so on. Just by doing a concentration meditation (place mind on breath) won't get rid mental afflictions from root. Placement meditation (just concentrate on something) doesn't have ability to remove negativity from its root. To rid from root, need analytic meditation as well.

Q3: Other day I was watching this documentary on a monk who lives in Myanmar. I just want to know if Geshela's heard of this monk. This monk talked negatively of a community there and talks hatred. Has Geshela heard about it? What's Geshela's opinion of this monk? This monk: he's also on the cover of Times magazine. He also has a following. Why are people following this other monk?

A: His Holiness the Dalai Lama has talked about religious harmony on many occasions. He says that it's actually good that many religions exist in the world. This is because if there is just one religion, then not everyone will be satisfied because people have different mentalities and dispositions. Just one religion won't satisfy all human beings. If it's just 1 religion, just a small portion will adopt that religion. Thus that religion won't benefit many many human beings. The fact is all religions have the function of helping people lead more virtuous lives and reduce hatred and negative emotion. A genuine practitioner should be able to recognize the essence of their religion through practice. It's not their job to go about telling people this religion is good / bad. Doing so does more harm than good. If someone is a genuine practitioner, that person should be really putting into practice the essence of that religion: cultivating ethics, virtue, reducing hatred, rather than stirring up hatred / discord. There's no need for a genuine spiritual practitioner to get involved in discrimination with other religions.

Q4: Do we know how many weeks this course will be?

A: when we first publicized this course, we didn't set an end date b/c if we set like a definite date, then we have to fit all the stanzas in that time period and we have to perhaps decide every class, we have to discuss a certain number of stanzas. That may restrict the amount of explanation I can give and make the course not so detailed. There are some new students. If we read through slowly, we can give more background information, commentary and be more beneficial for the students. So for that reason I didn't decide an end date. However, if it's necessary for us to state clearly moving forward, we can do that as well.