

English Dharma talk  
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### **Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 7**

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

Let's begin by thinking about the meaning of a stanza from Lama Tsongkhapa's text "Songs of spiritual experience".

He says this life of leisure is even more precious than a wish-granting jewel. He's saying this precious human rebirth we have endowed with 8 freedoms and 10 privileges is very precious. It's more precious than 100s and 1000s of wish-granting jewels. This is because with this precious human rebirth, we can develop wonderful qualities: love, compassion, patience, joyous effort and so forth. These qualities can't be bought even with great wealth. Therefore, realizing the value of these wonderful qualities (love, compassion and so on), we should cherish this precious human rebirth we have.

Lama Tsongkhapa continues to say to find such an existence is only this once. He's saying this precious human rebirth is very rare. It's very difficult to find. We've explained this in previous classes. In order to obtain a precious human rebirth, you need many causes and conditions to come together. Is it possible we've obtained a precious human rebirth before? It is possible but it's certain we haven't obtained it frequently. In the future, will we obtain it again? It's possible but not easy, b/c many causes and conditions are needed for a precious human rebirth to occur. We should understand this precious human rebirth is extremely rare.

Lama Tsongkhapa goes on to say it's like a flash of lightning, so easy to vanish. We're precious to find the human rebirth, but it won't last forever. The conditions that allow it to remain are not easy to come by. Therefore, this precious human rebirth will be quickly lost.

Lama Tsongkhapa goes on to say contemplating the situation is vital to realize all mundane pursuits are like empty husks in wind and we must extract essence of human existence. He's urging us to extract essence of precious human rebirth. When we engage in activities throughout our lives, we should realize that if we engage in such activities simply with a very short-sighted attitude, wanting to just fulfill our own short-term purposes, then this is not the best way to spend our human existence. In all activities, we should have motivation to benefit others. If we develop this altruistic attitude in this life, we will extract essence of human existence. Else, danger human existence is wasted.

Lama Tsongkhapa says I, yogi, have practiced in this manner. You should aspire for this too. He says he engaged in various activities. Listening to Dharma, contemplation, etc. not for some short-term purpose to become a great scholar / famous. He engaged in these activities to benefit others. He's urging us that we too striving for liberation should also do likewise.

Bearing in mind this advice, what should we do? How should we lead our lives? In general, there are 4 kinds of perspectives with respect to how a person should live one's life. First, there's a short-term perspective in which one thinks I just want to have enough for this life – enough to drink, eat, wear, live on and so on. This is the shortest term kind of perspective. Second level: one's more concerned about what happens beyond this life. I want to have a good situation in next lives. If I end up in a good rebirth, great, but what if I end up in a bad rebirth? It would be frightening to suffer in lower realms. Based on that dread, one modifies one's activities in this life to avoid a suffering rebirth in the future.

On the third level, one's able to see even beyond a good rebirth. One understands that even if I'm to take a good rebirth, it's not as if I'm free from suffering. I still experience birth, aging, sickness and death. I still experience problems: not finding what I want etc. I'm plagued by various forms of suffering. To be liberated from cyclic existence.

Fourth: thinking not just of oneself, but also others. One understands I need to experience suffering; I'm vulnerable to pain, sickness, but I'm not the only person in this situation. Anyone who's a living being with feelings has this kind of problem. We are all the same in wanting happiness, not wanting suffering. So I want to be able to not just work for myself, but also benefit others.

For people who belong to this first level, they just want to have good experiences this life, they're just concerned with having food, drinks, clothes, reputation just for this life, they are seen by the spiritually developed beings like Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as being quite childish. If you think of a young child, 4 or 5 years old, this child is not very far-sighted likely. They're likely only aware of things happening in immediate surroundings. Whether there's food, toys and so on. This child is not worried about parents' welfare and if they have money in their pockets. A young child is short-sighted. The child is only aware of what he's able to play with – if there are new games to engage in and so on. If one only has concerns for this life and nothing beyond. Then from point of view of spiritual practice, this person is like a child.

If one has only this kind of outlook, concern for only this life, then no matter what kinds of practice one engages in, whether one meditates or recites prayers or makes prostrations, makes circumambulations and so on, these do not become Dharma practice. They may seem like it but if one only thinks of this life, they do not become Dharma.

How can one become a true Dharma practitioner? In order to become a true Dharma practitioner, one needs to have at least the second level of outlook. One should be concerned about what lies beyond this life. From point of Buddhism, that's the least kind

of motivation you should have if you want to be practitioner of Buddha Dharma. On second level, one's concerned with a good rebirth. What one wants to do in this life is to create virtues for one to take a good rebirth. This level of practice is called the small scope. We often discuss the three scopes or levels of three beings of different capacities. Small scope is when one's concerned with one's future life.

On third level, one's not satisfied with just a good rebirth. One may be born as a human being / god, but this is not freedom from suffering. b/c I'm not free from birth, aging, sickness and death simply b/c I'm born in an upper realm. I need to be free from suffering completely. I need to get out of samsara. If one has that aspiration, and one makes prayers and prostrations, then the Dharma practice one does is of medium scope. Beings of medium capacity.

On the fourth level, one is not just concerned with one's own happiness, b/c one understands I'm not the only one who wants to be free from suffering. All living beings are the same. But not everyone knows how to find happiness. Not everyone knows how to avoid suffering. With that kind of understanding, we think I want to develop myself to help living beings who are just like me. I'm going to become a Buddha, become fully enlightened, to have full capacities to help others and lead them to state beyond suffering. So any kind of Dharma practice done with that motivation becomes Dharma of great scope – being of great capacity.

You can see there are many possible levels of mental courage when it comes to living a human life. From the worldly point of view, this is also the case. People can have different levels of mental strength when it comes to existence. E.g. within a family, you can have family members of different attitudes. A member has a very selfish attitude; thinking only of their own welfare – will have difficulty getting along with others. Likely get into conflicts with others and experience lots of unhappiness. On the higher level in society, if a particular society is very self-centred, thinking I'm the only important society existing and no one else really matters. This becomes a source of friction with others. On a level of country, if a country is very self-centred, then it would be difficult for it to have good relations with others. If this country is strong, then it would look down upon weaker countries, and try to bully them. If it's very strong from the point of view of weapons and so on, they may fight wars with other countries and so on. It would be very competitive with other countries that seem equal or weaker. Out of jealousy, one may try to sabotage other countries and cause conflicts and try to make them powerless and so on. You can see lots of these problems on a small scale or large scale due to this kind of narrow mental attitude, very weak mental courage.

In our society, most of us are able to recognize that being narrow-minded, short-sighted is not desirable. It's not beneficial to the larger community, not beneficial in the long run. Similarly, from the view of spiritual practice, being short term, narrow-minded is not desirable. When Buddhas and Bodhisattvas see living beings behave with a very narrow-minded perspective, short-sighted, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas recognize these beings are childish. They are infantile. We're not talking about someone who's childish because physically they are not developed. Rather, the person is childish b/c of the

mental outlook of this person. This person has little mental strength. What do we need to do if we don't want to be childish spiritually. We need to expand our mind and develop the Mahayana attitude, which is concerned about others. Develop altruism in our heart.

We want the best, don't we? If you want the best, you need to create the best causes.

If you want to create best causes to get best results, what do we do? Among 4 levels, we try to develop the highest outlook. We try to develop mind of enlightenment and try to practice Mahayana Dharma.

We've arrived at this section on the great scope in our text of 37 practices of Bodhisattvas. Section 10 talks about how to practice Mahayana or universal vehicle:

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to arouse bodhicitta,  
So as to bring freedom to all sentient beings, infinite in number.  
For how can true happiness ever be found while our mothers,  
Who have cared for us throughout the ages, endure such pain?

If you are interested in this Mahayana Dharma, what should you do first? First, pay attention to living beings. You need to pay attention to others. Others have showed us great kindness. They've been our mothers. Just to consider the mother of this life, our mother has shown us infinite kindness. If you think of the number of acts of kindness your mom has shown you and you've received, you can't enumerate them. Just having a face that you can show to others, even that is something that came about by the kindness of your mother or parents. If as a young child, we don't receive care from our parents, nobody looking after us, easily we'll fall, hit our face on the floor, get wounds on the face, and even injure an eye, nose and so on. Even to have this face which we take for granted that we show to others on a daily basis, we've depended on our parents' kindness. But for their kindness, we would not have the face we have today.

How about our abilities to talk? Effortlessly we can communicate with others. But again, this was something we didn't have in the beginning. It was due to kindness of our parents that we are able to talk. Even eating food. Our parents taught us how to put food in our mouths and how to eat properly. If we think about the number of kindnesses we've received from our parents, it's impossible to enumerate them. When you go to school, you learn many things. Your parents are the ones who sent you to school. They want you to have the best education. They want you to do well in the world by giving you a good education when you were young, according to their financial abilities, they sent you to the best possible school. That determines how you become educated and possibly what happens to you later in life. You can see our parents are so kind to us. If you really think of every act you've received from them, it's impossible to exhaust all these activities. So we should remember we've received countless kindnesses from our parents.

Let me share with you a little story. There was this person who was probably European. He went to India and was helping with providing education in India. He probably had a bit of wealth and was trying to raise education standards in India. He spoke about his life when he was young. When he was 7 or 8, the second world war broke out. People experienced extreme hardship: no food. It was a terrible time. His mother was able to find a bit of rice. She cooked the rice and gave it to him. After the rice was emptied from the pot, she put some water in the pot and boiled it and drank it herself. So all the rice she gave to her child and what remained in the pot, maybe some starch from the rice, she boiled water and drank it. So you can see she clearly sacrificed herself so child can have food while she herself went hungry. His mother then told him we should never waste food, ever. Just from this episode, we can understand how kind parents are to their children. They would sacrifice themselves so the child won't go hungry, will do well. All parents are the same. We should remember kindness of parents of this life.

If we can remind ourselves again and again of the kindness we've received from parents of this life, that can help us appreciate them more. If we believe in past lives, then we can understand that in the past, we've had many mothers and those mothers, like mother in this life, has shown me great kindness. In that way, many living beings and possibly all living beings have shown me incredible kindness. If we reflected on kindness of our parents very thoroughly, as far as this life is concerned, then we can infer kindness of all other living beings in our past lives. In that way, we will be able to appreciate all living beings. We'll be able to have this recognition this person has shown me incredible kindness. In that way, we can generate love, compassion for them. We can give rise to this thought wanting to benefit them easily.

This motivation wanting to benefit others having love and compassion and concern for others is really the beginning of Mahayana practice. It's the best motivation we can have for any kind of spiritual practice that we do. By reflecting on kindness of our parents wanting to repay that kindness, then we really have the basis to initiate Mahayana practice.

It's important for us to try to bring to mind our relationship with our parents in this life and try to develop affection for them. If we fail to have any recognition of the kindness of our parents in this life and we try to make this leap to develop love and compassion for all sentient beings, then we will not really be able to cultivate true love and compassion. This is because the parents of this life are people who we have direct contact / experience with. If we can't generate positive feelings with them, how will we be able to for all living beings whom we don't directly contact. If you want to develop love and compassion for all living beings, you need to start by developing affection for your parents in this life.

One tries to develop affection for one's parents, but there's a danger in the process of doing so, one becomes attached to them so one becomes emotionally really attached to them such that if something bad happens to them, someone hurts them, we get angry. We have this clinging to them such that we want this for them, that for them, and this then becomes the undesirable side effects of trying to develop affection for our parents.

With this danger the affection becomes emotional attachment, then one needs to try to develop equanimity. This means one needs to not just focus on one's parents but also think of other living beings, beings who are like strangers, neutral and also beings with whom we have difficulty getting along, whom we label as enemies. If one focuses on strangers, or who feel neutral to, these beings are also like parents of this life. In past, they've shown me great kindness. People who we can't get along with, think these people were once my parents. Have even feelings for all beings. Toward those who has affection, indifference, aversion or even hatred.

In stanza 10, it's said "how can true happiness ever be found while our mothers, who have cared for us throughout the ages, endure such pain?" We need to think about our relationships with all living beings. We've had infinite lives, so infinite mothers. Given beginningless existence, all beings have been our mothers. We should infer we've received infinite kindness from each and every living being. Some of these living beings – our past mothers – are suffering, e.g. in lower realms. How can I just remain at ease? I'm in a good situation – food, drink, wealth. While my dear mothers are experiencing such pain? So what should I do? "the practice of all the bodhisattvas is to arouse bodhicitta", the mind of enlightenment. I need to cultivate it. Just as past bodhisattvas have, I myself will also generate bodhicitta.

So if we want to bring freedom to all living beings, we should try to cultivate bodhicitta. How do we do that? At this point, we're not simply able to generate bodhicitta, b/c we need to do it in a contrived way, b/c we don't have that spontaneous realization. We need to contrive it by actively thinking about the points. E.g. in the morning, after you wake up, you may wish to recite some prayers. Don't immediately jump into your recitations. At the beginning, spend a bit of time reflecting on bodhicitta. Think about kindness of your parents in this life. Think about the details. Really generate this sense appreciating the kindness of your parents. Think about other living beings. Think of parents of previous lives. Know you've received much kindness from parents of previous lives. Given your infinite existence, all living beings have shown you great kindness. They've taken care of you with great affection. After generating this sense of closeness with all living beings, think I'm going to engage in this practice for all living beings. That's the purpose of my engaging in these recitations this morning.

How then can you meditate on bodhicitta during your recitation? Visualize your father is on your right, your mother on your left, and all around you are rest of living beings. All sentient beings are in the form of human beings. Think I'm the chanting master. As doing recitations, think I'm leading all sentient beings in recitations. Then can accumulate extensive merit and purify negativities very quickly. This is a quick way for you to cultivate bodhicitta and incorporate it into your daily practice.

So with respect to developing bodhicitta, previously we discussed 2 methods: 7 fold cause and effect instruction and the other: equalizing and exchanging self and others. The text only talks about the latter. What we mean: equalizing – we're thinking all living beings are equal in not wanting suffering, wanting happiness. After that, we exchange

self and others. What it means is we usually think about our happiness alone; now we exchange that and think about others' happiness. Exchanging self and others – wish others be free from suffering and be happy. Briefly, that's equalizing and exchanging self and others.

This practice of equalizing and exchanging self and others is explained in stanza 11:

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to make a genuine exchange  
Of one's own happiness and wellbeing for all the sufferings of others.  
Since all misery comes from seeking happiness for oneself alone,  
Whilst perfect buddhahood is born from the wish for others' good.

If we're just concerned with our happiness alone, this becomes the cause of suffering. What we need to do is to exchange self and others and seek happiness for others. In that way, we'll receive the greatest benefit. "Whilst perfect buddhahood is born from the wish for others' good" then we'll achieve highest happiness ourselves. So bodhisattvas "make a genuine exchange of one's own happiness and wellbeing for all the sufferings of others". We learning from the Bodhisattvas do the same.

So in the coming stanzas, we're going to look at the practice of taking adverse conditions into the path. This idea has come up in previous texts: the 8 verses of thought transformation. When we encounter difficult circumstances in our life, how do we transform them to our advantage and use them to develop ourselves spiritually? In the next stanzas, we're looking at taking adverse conditions into the path.

To do this practice, you need to be fairly well prepared. You don't just spontaneously apply the practice when you meet problems without prior preparation or training. At the beginning, you need to have contemplated well the benefits of bodhicitta and developed a certain conviction in the mind of enlightenment. Having mentally prepared yourself well, when you encounter an obstacle, you're able to transform that adverse condition to your advantage. Else, that obstacle can be the cause for you to lose bodhicitta, or if you haven't generated bodhicitta, it can be the cause for you to not generate it. So one needs to be have practiced well in the preliminaries to prevent negative circumstances from damaging your practice.

There are many outlines to go through. We mentioned as we explained the stanza. The outline here is "taking what is undesirable into the path".

The next outline has to do with "taking into the path the conditions that are even more difficult to bear". In other words, as one engages in spiritual practice, one may encounter conditions that are particularly difficult to forbear. That's the second outline.

The third outline is "taking into the path privileges and deprivations". In certain situations, one feels very deprived and how does one transform that into a favourable condition? In another situation, one can become very privileged. But again, this can become an obstacle. How does one take this into the path?

Fourth outline is “taking into the path attachment and aversion”. When one experiences attachment / aversion, how does one take those into the path?

First of these in turn has 4 sub-outlines.

- A. “Taking loss into the path”
- B. “Taking suffering into the path”
- C. “Taking disrepute into the path” instead of getting stressed / upset, how does one transform that into a favourable condition?
- D. “taking criticism into the path”. When one’s being disparaged by others, how can one take this into the path and transform into a favourable condition?

Let’s read stanza 12

Even if others, in the grips of great desire, should steal,  
Or encourage others to take away, all the wealth that I possess,  
To dedicate to them entirely my body, possessions and all my merits  
From the past, present and future – this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

What it’s saying is let’s say someone wants to rob you of your home and your possessions. This person may do it directly or he may get someone to do it on his behalf. What should the Bodhisattvas do in such a situation? To “dedicate to them entirely my body, possessions and all my merits From the past, present and future”. They’d give them all their body, possessions, merits, virtues of the three times.

So to physically be able to give away one’s body, possessions and so on, is not something a beginner can do. Even among bodhisattvas only the most advanced can do such a practice. What’s being described is mainly a mental training. So one should train in giving up attachment. So one wishes to give one’s body, possessions and merits of the three times to others. Before one has the ability, one should not try to give. One should mainly train in reducing attachment. When one attains this ability to give, then one can do so. But one should be careful not to give before one’s able. Forget about being able. One may damage one’s bodhicitta, cause one’s mind of enlightenment to deteriorate, so one must be careful about when to do this practice. Reducing attachment is the main point.

This practice described here counteracts the mind that we possibly have, thinking how can I ever be able to do this? I’ll never able to dedicate my body, possessions and merits of 3 times to others. To counteract this mindset, we think: when I’m able to do it, I’ll do it. You train your mind and you counteract the miserliness or kind of cowardly attitude.

When do we get to do such a practice? In the West, you may have few opportunities b/c few robbers ha ha. But you may lose things sometimes. You may lose your possessions. Usually after we lose something, we will try to look for it. Let’s say after we’ve exhausted all avenues and still can’t recover our beloved possession, then we can engage

in the following mind training. Whoever finds this thing may they be able to use it well in the way that I would be able to use it well. May the object be useful for the person who found it. From my side, I GIVE this to this person. This is my mind of generosity and charity. This is beneficial to think this way: win-win. You accumulate virtue of having practiced generosity and this person gets a present. This is a win-win situation. If you're not able to think like that, then this situation can be very negative if you're still clinging to this object as yours. You'll be feeling quite miserable. You can't recover it. Your mind is still holding it as your possession and you as owner. The person who found this object then commits this karma of stealing, taking an object that belongs to others. This is a lose-lose situation b/c you're miserable and that person commits negative karma. So I think in a situation like that, when you lose an object, you can engage in this thought transformation practice and a win-win and not hold onto this object as yours and then also have this mind not wanting others to use it. Geshela was using this e.g. of an iphone: you can lock it remotely although you can't recover it.

Question: how do you get rid of entitlement?

Answer: we'll discuss next class :D

Question: when giving body, possessions and merit to others, do you actually visualize?

Answer: this practice is related to tong-len, in which you think I give all my happiness to others and take on their sufferings. So you can visualize you are experiencing others' sufferings. This is related to that giving and taking tonglen practice. The reason why this is a mental training is b/c one can't experience others' karma on their behalf. If they've created karma to experience suffering, there's no way to experience it for them. This is mainly mind training to experience it for them.

The practice that's described in stanza 11 is to switch this thought around. We usually have this thought: I want my happiness. I'm seeking happiness for myself. You need to switch this around: all misery comes from only wanting happiness for self alone. So you switch the thought and wish for happiness for others. This is what's meant when we say exchange self and others.

The reason why we want to do such a practice is in stanza 11. This thought: may I be happy leads to misery; this thought: may others be happy leads to perfect Buddhahood. Understanding this reason why we want to do this exchange – think may others have happiness. Then will be able to achieve highest happiness.