

English Dharma talk  
November 26, 2016  
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<http://compassionbuddha.ca>  
Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas

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

Let's reflect on Stanza 11, which we discussed on previous sessions:

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.

The unhappiness that we experience is due to desire to achieve one's own happiness, this preoccupation with one's own wellbeing. How can we achieve the highest or final happiness? In order to achieve the state of full awakening, one needs to generate the wish for others' good. One has to train in the altruist intention.

The reasons for the practice explained in Stanza 11 has been given. If we want happiness and not suffering, we need to generate a wish for others. The practice of bodhisattvas is to make an exchange of one's happiness for other's suffering. If one has concern for others, one will find the highest happiness, the perfect of which is Buddhahood. One is a single person whereas others are many. It makes sense to do an exchange for one's own happiness for that of others.

This stanza talks about exchange. What are we really exchanging? In ordinary times, we have a strong sense of "I", which holds ourselves as more important than others. I need to eat food, drink, have a good reputation, have happiness etc. This motivation is very strong. If one is very self-centered, then this motivation leads to actions of body, speech and mind that can potentially harm others. To achieve one's own goals, one ignores others. Actions that cause injury and harm to others will in turn cause us suffering.

Whatever we need for our own happiness, we obtain by depending on others, for instance the food we eat and the house we live in. Understanding this, we should know that others are extremely important. If we can remind ourselves

over and over that just as we want happiness, so do others, then we will hold others above ourselves. Instead of thinking of our needs all the time, we will start to be concerned about others' needs. With that kind of concern for others, then we will be able to do this exchange. Instead of just wishing for ourselves to be happy, we will extend to wish to others. Instead of regarding ourselves as most important, we see others as most important. This is the way to do this exchange. This explanation is in relation to a question asked at the end of class last week, about what we are exchanging – one's own happiness for the suffering of others.

To give an example, when we have this obsession with 'I', we have many desires to fulfill. If a businessman were to increase his wealth and business, then he needs more customers, which will enable him to make more money and improve his life.

During the process to obtain more customers and generate wealth, the businessman may produce a wider variety of goods, more goods to keep up with supply, and to improve his products. Production of goods ultimately contributes to worsening global warming. We face the problem where the earth's temperature is rising, which can lead to weather disasters and fear. If businesses in the world are all motivated by a self-centered attitude to generate wealth, then the environment can be harmed in the process. This can have consequences that affect all people. The origin of environmental changes and global warming is a selfish motivation. Business people are generating profit and consumers want more and better products. This leads to long-term problems.

If we are able to understand what we are exchanging clearly in stanza 11. Usually we have a strong desire to serve ourselves. To exchange our clinging to ourselves, we need to generate a concern for others' wellbeing, understanding that others are more important than "me", one person.

Generating a mental attitude in which you think that others are more important than me does not just arise through telling ourselves that this is how we should think. We need to prepare and train our mind in other preliminaries before such a thought arises naturally. We have talked about the 7-fold generation of bodhicitta as well as instruction on equalizing and exchanging self for others. It is through careful reflection that we generate this insight that others are truly more important than me. This thought comes through a gradual process. This type of mind training occurs in a graduated manner. For those who are not trained in Buddhism or exposed to Buddhist teachings, this thought about being more concerned about others can seem crazy. You should understand that in Buddhism, the training occurs in a gradual manner, like climbing a

ladder, step by step. Naturally, you begin to realize that others are more important than me.

Today we will look at stanza 13, which describes how to take pain into the path.

*Even if others should seek to cut off my head,  
Though I've done them not the slightest wrong,  
To take upon myself, out of compassion,  
All the harms they have amassed—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

Here we are talking about being given terrible suffering when we have not done the slightest wrong, yet others seek to make us suffer. You can imagine that this situation would be quite unbearable.

One is made to suffer by others even though one has not done any wrong. This then becomes a cause for bodhisattvas to generate compassion. When others harm me, they are creating very grave negative karma. As a result of the negative karma, this person will possibly fall into the negative realms such as the hell realms. Bodhisattvas look upon these people with great compassion. They take upon themselves the future suffering of these people and the harms that they have amassed.

Stanza 14 explains how to take this repute into the path. In a situation when people declare unpleasant things about oneself. How should one take that situation into the path.

*Even if others should declare before the world  
All manner of unpleasant things about me,  
To speak only of their qualities in return,  
With a mind that's filled with love—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

In Stanza 14 it is said that if others declare before the world all types of unpleasant things about me. In the past it may be difficult for the whole world to know all these things about me, but these days with modern technology and social media, internet, it is possible for someone to declare some unpleasant thing about somewhere, with the whole world knowing! Bodhisattvas generate love for these people who spread unpleasant rumors. A bodhisattva thinks, 'may these people experience happiness'. On top of that, to speak about their good qualities, even though such people have said bad things about me, they still have good qualities. A bodhisattva only speaks about their good qualities in return.

The practice described in this stanza is similar to the one previously described in the eight verses of thought transformation: *When, out of envy, others mistreat me with abuse, insults, or the like, I shall accept defeat and offer the victory to others.*

This basically means that when others treat me in a negative way, I shall retaliate because I'm angry or upset. Rather, I concentrate on the good qualities they have. One should think that these people are deserving of happiness and generate love for them.

Let's move on to stanza 15, which explains how to take criticism into the path.

*Even if others should expose my hidden faults or deride me  
When speaking amidst great gatherings of many people,  
To conceive of them as spiritual friends and to bow  
Before them in respect—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

The situation of others exposing our faults and criticizing us is described as well. You can imagine if there is a gathering of many people and others were to expose your faults saying that "you behaved badly or made a mistake", then we would feel quite bad. Say in the center of a group, somebody says "you conducted yourself very poorly. When you executed this task badly' or at workplace someone says "You made a mistake...you did your work wrong etc." This is a difficult situation. Some people may speak to your face and tell you "you're stupid. You don't know anything at all etc.". What do bodhisattvas do in these situations? In a difficult situation like this, if it's possible, then immediately we think "I don't have all these faults. I didn't make all these mistakes", and become quite defensive. A bodhisattva would not react in this way, instead thinking, "perhaps I do have all these faults others are talking about. Perhaps I did make these mistakes others criticize me for. These people are actually helping me to understand my own mistakes and flaws. They are pointing out the shortcomings of my body, speech and mind. Bodhisattvas would consider this a possibility instead of getting angry, spiteful and resentful. They would consider this as advice and help to improve their behavior. So the situation described in this stanza and in fact some previous stanzas are quite similar: What do bodhisattvas think when they run into a difficult situation? If I were to retaliate or hit back, what profit is there? Do I lose anything if I retaliate? What do I gain? Bodhisattvas think about this question.

In a difficult situation, if I were to retaliate, what will happen is that the other person will also retaliate. There is no reason why the other person wouldn't if I respond with aggressive speech and so on. This means the two sides will get into a fight, verbally saying nasty things, physically displaying mean

expressions, and mentally generating anger. The result of that is both sides create negative karma.

So what's wrong with getting angry? It is said that even an instant of anger destroys the virtue created over many lifetimes and many eons. All your good virtues can be annihilated. If an instant of anger is able to destroy all the virtue you have created, the result will be falling into a lower realm.

What's wrong with using harsh words when quarreling with others? The result is that in the future, one will receive many unpleasant words, hearing scolding from many people, get into arguments, and receive nasty comments frequently.

If one cannot put up with little difficulties in this life and reacts with an angry mind and speaks harshly, and one displays aggression, then in future rebirth one will experience negative consequences of those actions. For example, one could be reborn in a place where resources for living are scarce, where one cannot find enough food or water, one will find oneself in great misery. The point is to weigh the pros and cons. If you are not able to bear some unpleasant words and react angrily or act negatively with body, speech and mind, then the negative consequences are long lasting. It is better to practice patience in this life and keep the mind unperturbed than to react to unpleasant words spoken by others.

Chankrakirti in his text, Supplement to the Middle Way, has said:

If you get angry with someone who has done you harm, is the harm stopped because of your resentment to him? Is it because you resent the harm that you become free?

He says that resentment here is senseless. If you generate resentment to the harmer, the experience in future lives will be far worse as a result of getting angry and retaliating. In the future, you will experience suffering that lasts far longer. It is senseless to get angry because it is unfavorable for your future lives. Your wish to avoid suffering is contradictory to your behavior of getting angry. You should not get angry. There is no reason for you to retaliate.

Whether you suffer in this life or suffer in future life, the suffering is yours. So then, you can choose to undergo slight suffering in this life or intense suffering for a long time in the future. So what will you choose?

So analyzing in this way, you will arrive at a theoretical situation in how to best behave in a situation where you could get angry and retaliate to harm others. This practice does not come spontaneously. It has to be practiced. It is not something that will just arise easily. For that reason, when you look at our text,

it is sad that it's the practice of all bodhisattvas. This is because it is not a practice that any untrained person can do; it is the practice of bodhisattvas who have reached advanced levels of their training.

What should we do having learned these practices? We have to train our mind mentally until our mind becomes strong. Eventually we will be able to put it into practice. A soldier first trains in the technique of war in a safe environment; the various ways of fighting are first practiced in a situation where there is no actual war. After training has happened, the soldiers are prepared to actually enter into war. There is a process of first training and then being able to actually put the techniques we learned into practice.

It is definitely not the case that someone can become a soldier today and be expected to enter war tomorrow. Similarly, when it comes to dharma practice, we have to build a proper foundation. Our mind becomes familiarized with the techniques. Eventually one day, we will be able to put the techniques into practice in a perfect manner.

So the past four stanzas we have discussed are discussing the four qualities that are indeed undesirable and how to take these qualities into the path. The next section is taking into the path two qualities that are in particular more difficult to bear. This has two subsections. The first is taking ungratefulness into the path. It is talking about situations where you have been nice to somebody and benefitted them, but that person harms you instead of being nice to you back. When such ungratefulness is displayed, what should one do? How should one take ungratefulness into the path.

*Even if others whom I have cared for like children of my own,  
Should turn upon me and treat me as an enemy,  
To regard them only with special fondness and affection,  
As a mother would her ailing child—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

Imagine a situation where someone whom you do not know very well behaves very negatively towards you. You probably wouldn't get too upset. This person doesn't know me very well, and I don't know this person. You can basically ignore it and forget about the negative thing that this person does to you. Here in stanza 16, we are talking about someone whom you've treated always with kindness and showered love upon. And this person treats you like an enemy, turning on you. What should you do in such a situation?

Of course this is a difficult situation. What would bodhisattvas do? The answer is in the second half of stanza 16: *To regard them only with special fondness and affection,*

*As a mother would her ailing child—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.* In other words, if a child has consumed poison and becomes really ill, the mother will be very concerned and act with affection and love towards the child. If the child is really ill, he may say nasty things to his mother and behave in a destructive or negative way. Instead of getting angry, the mother thinks about how to help her child recover and become well. Bodhisattvas will regard those who display ungratefulness with a special fondness and affection, as would a mother to her child.

How do we apply the reasoning based on this example?

In this example of a sick child behaving poorly to his mother, one would ask, 'why is this child behaving badly and display atrocious behavior'? The child is sick and has been poisoned, thus he is acting harshly and in an aggressive manner. In real life, when someone is ungrateful to you although you show great kindness, you have to ask 'why is this person behaving in a negative answer'. The answer is the person has been poisoned, by anger, hatred and ignorance. Under the influence of those poisons, this person is unable to control him or herself. Just as a mother would treat her ailing child with fondness and affection, I should also treat this person will love and affection. Bodhisattvas would be able to see this and treat someone who is ungrateful with special fondness and affection.

Let's say someone is drunk, talking nonsense and completely out of his mind. Another person is not drunk and completely conscious would be in a different mental state. Let's say the sober person takes the drunk person seriously and tries to make sense of what the drunk person is saying, then the situation is strange. Other people would be confused by the situation. Why is the sober person talking to the drunk person as though he was in a normal state of mind? Similarly if someone is overwhelmed by afflictions of anger, ignorance and attachment, and we are trying to talk to this person and make sense of what they are saying and trying to argue. It doesn't make sense for us to try and do so. Other people will look upon the two people and think, "one person is completely under the influence of mental poisons. The other person isn't, but he is taking the first person so seriously and trying to carry on a conversation. The person not under the influence of afflictions is not behaving very cleverly or better in terms of his behavior, trying to argue with the person who is under the influence of afflictions.

So in the examples I've given of a person who has been poisoned or drunk, you can see that the person is not his right senses or in control of his mind. Similarly, a person who is under the influence of afflictions such as the three poisons (attachment, anger, and ignorance) is a person who is not in his right senses. Such a person is not really in control of his mind. When others look upon such a person, they can see this person is behaving in a negative way. In our interactions with a person with strong afflictions, we behave similarly, taking this person seriously, getting angry and retaliating. Others will look upon the situation thinking that both sides are behaving poorly. This is how people will clarity will see the situation.

Sometimes we use this expression "childish beings" or "infantile beings". If we have children who are three or four years old, they are children and exhibit childish behavior. Spiritually speaking, all beings exhibit childish behavior. You can observe the behavior of young children. They just see what is right in front of them. When they see delicious food, they just want to eat it. When they see toys, they want to play. When they see nice clothes, they want to wear them. They don't have any long-term considerations. They don't worry about their parents' finances, about what will happen tomorrow or if their parents are suffering. They don't have far sighted considerations. When bodhisattvas look at us, ordinary beings, we are like children to them.

So if we realize that we are like children from a spiritual point of view, then we will want to develop ourselves by reading books and listening to explanations. We will train our minds as we have the potential to transform our mind and develop spiritually. It is through a gradual process that we can improve ourselves spiritually. It is not something that can happen all of a sudden or overnight. The practices taught in this text are the practices of all bodhisattvas.

Let us move onto the next stanza. Recall this section is about taking into the path two qualities, which are in particular more difficult to bear. We've gone through the first subsection, which is taking ungratefulness into the path. The second subsection is taking disparagement into the path, which is explained in stanza 17:

*Even if others, equal or inferior to me in status,  
Should, out of arrogance, disparage me,  
To honour them, as I would my teacher,  
By bowing down my head before them—this is the practice of all the  
bodhisattvas.*



In stanza 17 it says "*Even if others, equal or inferior to me in status*". Here we are talking about people who can be equal to us in status, for example in terms of caste in olden India. The caste was very significant in the past, perhaps less these days. It can also refer to others equal or inferior to me in appearance, wealth or social class. When others disparage me out of pride, I should honor them or treat them as my teacher.

In a situation where somebody disparages us because of pride, how should we react? If we then become upset and retaliate with pride, thinking "I'm actually better than you. Don't think that you're better than me", then we are really no better than the person who is disparaging us out of pride. It doesn't make sense to behave in the same sense by being proud and upset. Bodhisattvas treat this person with respect and honor this person as though they are their teacher. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

What is there for us to gain for not acting out of pride – for being humble? It is said that water cannot remain on top of a mountain. This means that water or our good qualities collect in one who is humble. If we are able to be humble and listen carefully to what others say, then this can become an opportunity to develop ourselves. Thus, one should treat someone who is disparaging us out of pride, with respect.

Water is the nature of being wet and cannot remain on an outwardly curved surface. Any water that falls on a sphere will just fall away. This is an example to show that pride is as such. We are unable to learn or collect anything information when we are full of ourselves.

Perhaps we can stop reading the text at this point. Does anyone have a question?

**Q: You are a soldier and it's time of war. In self-defense, you harm another soldier on the opposite side because you think it's for the greater good of your country. You are trying to protect your country. Is this still a negative action and will it still result in negative karma for the soldier?**

A: So there are a few possible scenarios. 1) The soldier thinks that the other country is bad and that they are my enemies, thus I need to kill them. There is no other reason or motive behind thinking the opposing country is bad and that he must kill them. In this case, if one kills, then one creates very negative karma. 2) One is dealing with an enemy who is extremely harmful. Indeed, these days there are terrorists who cause a lot of harm. This enemy is going to kill 100 people. By killing the enemy, one protects 100 people. One will still create negative karma by killing the enemy, but it will be very slight negative

karma. 3) In the third scenario, one does not have a wish to kill others. However, one is under the command of superiors and is forced into a situation to kill the enemy. However, one did not have the intention to kill. In this case, a very small negative karma will be created.

In the classification of karma, there are four types: 1) karma that is created but not accumulated 2) karma that is not created but accumulated 3) karma that is both created and accumulated and 4) karma that is neither created nor accumulated

Let us talk about the situation of creating karma and accumulating karma. This is the most serious case. One has the motivation to kill someone and actually kills someone. In this case, one created the karma and also accumulated it.

The next type of karma is accumulated but not created. For instance, person A asks person B to go and kill person A's enemy. Say person B kills the enemy and reports that the enemy has been killed. When person A hears the person has been killed, person A accumulates the karma of killing, even though he did not actually kill the person or create the karma. Person A still accumulates the karma.

What is an example of karma created but not accumulated? Person A commands person B to kill the enemy. Person B has choice but to kill the enemy. He does not want to but is forced to. The karma of killing is created but not accumulated.

The case is karma, which is neither created nor created. For example, when one is dreaming, one dreams of killing a person. In this case, the karma of killing is neither created nor accumulated. The thought of killing in a dream does not create any negative karma. Of course if you wake up and you think "I've just killed a person", then perhaps there is negative karma. Otherwise, there is no negative karma. If one wakes up from a dream and thinks "It was just a dream", then likely no negative karma is created or accumulated. But if one wakes up and has conceptualizations of killing, then it is possible one will create negative karma.