

English Dharma talk
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Thirty-seven practices of Bodhisattvas

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

The great Indian scholar Nagarjuna, in his composition, “Precious Garland”, said that as long as there is grasping to the aggregates, there is grasping to the “I”. As long as there is grasping to the “I” there is action or karma. From that also, there is rebirth. Here we are trying to identify the main cause of rebirth or suffering in samsara. According to this statement, the main source of our suffering is grasping to “I”. However, this may be difficult for us to recognize and identify. However if we look at our own experiences, we will be able to see that we have grasping to our body, and actions to body, speech and mind. There is this adherence to “I” in terms of our physical and mental activities. This is the sign that we have self-grasping to the “I”, which is the culprit that instigates us to cause all kinds of actions, some virtuous and others non-virtuous. As a result, we have to experience the karma. Due to our own confusion between virtue and non-virtue, we have to experience the respective results.

As a result of self-grasping, one creates karma. This karma causes one to take rebirth, projecting rebirth in samsara or cyclic existence. When we look at the nature of cyclic existence, we can see that the environment is in the nature of suffering. Sometimes it is too hot or too cold; sometimes there are catastrophes brought by the elements, such as floods, droughts, natural disasters. The environment itself is not completely satisfactory. Also in terms of the inhabitants, they must also experience the results of their karma. As a result of non-virtuous karma, people experience unhappiness. It is difficult for sentient beings to be completely at peace and at ease. The nature of samsara is that there are many types of suffering.

The experience of samsara is that the environment and the living beings are not satisfactory. Is there something we can do about this? If there’s a solution, then what is that solution? If there’s no solution, is there really nothing we can

do to fix the situation? We need to investigate where unhappiness and suffering comes from. We need to look at the conditions that bring unhappiness. If we check carefully, we can see clearly that unhappiness comes from mistaken states of mind or mistaken attitudes.

When we look at problems we experience, we can classify them into external and internal problems. It is possible we experience problems based on the environment, such as being too hot or too cold. Compared to internal problems, external problems do not seem as serious. When we experience mental suffering, the suffering is much more intense.

What causes our mental unhappiness? We say that afflictive emotions are the cause. Mainly, they are the three poisons: anger, attachment, and ignorance. When we get angry, we feel unhappy immediately. This anger disturbs our mind. After the incident is over, simply by recalling what happened in our mind, again we become mentally perturbed. Just by remembering, we become really unhappy again.

Similarly, when we mentally cling to forms, sounds, etc, our mind experiences a certain tension. Say we are attached to a certain movie, if we don't get to see it, then we are unhappy. Our attachment creates mental misery.

We need to examine how we perceive these objects when we experience disturbing emotions. When we get angry, how does the object of anger appear to you? When you feel attached to an object, how am I perceiving this object? If we check carefully, we will realize that when we are feeling attachment, the object appears 100% attractive to us. There is a complete desirability to it. When we are angry to a person or thing, that object seems completely repulsive and we feel complete aversion to that object or person in that moment. We have to check, are these ways of perceiving a person or object accurate – do they correlate with reality?

If these objects really exist the way we perceive them, 100% attractive or 100% unattractive, then there is no way for us to abandon attachment or anger, since that suggests the objects have an intrinsic attractiveness or repulsiveness. We need to examine – is this the way these objects really exist? Let's say you find an object 100% attractive, and there is an inherent desirability. Then think – is this the way everyone single person sees this object? No, not everyone finds the object equally 100% attractive. Similarly with anger, not everyone will see the same object as 100% repulsive. That there is disagreement in how

people perceive the same object shows that there is no inherent attractiveness or repulsiveness abiding in the object itself.

The objects of our attachment and anger do not exist on their own. They do not have intrinsic existence. What this really means is that the mind that projects desirability or repulsiveness on these objects are mistaken minds. They are minds that do not accord with reality. If we realize this point, then we realize there are minds that perceive these objects in the way they really exist. These objects exist in reality, not from intrinsically or independently. There is a mind that can see this reality. If we are able to familiarize with this mind, which can see objects in the way they really exist, then that will counteract our mistaken mind, which projects attractiveness and repulsiveness. We will be able to reduce our disturbing emotions. That is the method for removing the causes of unhappiness and achieving happiness.

Our disturbing emotions such as attachment and anger cause us to create action or karma. As a result of the action, we are projected into different kinds of suffering experiences in samsara. Where do our disturbing emotions come from? Where does my attachment come from? Anger? As in Nagarjuna's statement, when grasping to the "I" exists, there is also action. From that, there is also rebirth. Our attachment, anger and disturbing emotions are traced to our principle culprit, which is ignorance. Our self-grasping mind performs this function of seeing things as existing in a concrete manner. Various objects seem to exist from their own side, inherently. Because of the self-grasping mind, we generate attachment and create karma. Then karma causes us to take rebirth in samsara.

We don't want the slightest unhappiness. We have to accurately identify the culprit that causes our unhappiness. If we examine carefully, we can trace our unhappiness to the final culprit, which is self-grasping. The mind that clings to this "I" is a mind that causes us to conceive of an inherent "I". But the reality is that there is no such independent, concrete "I". This "I" is the result of many causes and conditions. There is no intrinsically existing "I" without depending on causes and conditions. Our concrete sense of "I" that makes us have a strong, egoistical sense, is really not there. We need to reflect on dependent origination again and again. This can be really helpful. When we experience problems, there is a lot of grasping and clinging due to our concrete sense of "I". We need to think that all phenomenon are really arising dependently. They are occurring because of various causes and conditions. In this way, the problem we are experiencing will not seem so solid, concrete and

daunting. It will not seem so difficult to overcome because it is actually dependently arising due to various causes and conditions.

It is very rewarding if you think about dependent arising carefully. The more you are able to reflect, you will be able to reduce the strength of your self-grasping mind. As that becomes weaker, naturally our disturbing emotions such as attachment, anger will become less powerful. If they do not disturb our mind, our minds became more spacious and relaxed. The elements in our body will be more balanced. We will be able to achieve wellbeing in body and mind.

In general there are many methods of finding happiness. Our ability to find happiness depends on our ability to work with problems and difficulties we experience in life. Here we are presenting methods that depend on the mind, that rely on our attitudes and way of thinking. The text we are looking at deals with precisely this topic – mind training. When we run into problems and adverse conditions, how should we think? Here we will look at stanza 20.

In terms of the outlines of the text, we are in the fourth section, which is “Taking anger and attachment into the path”. This is in turn divided into two parts: the first part is taking the object of aversion into the path, and the second part is taking the object of attachment into the path. Taking the object of aversion into the path corresponds to **stanza 20**, which has to do with preparing our minds and training our minds so that we are able to work with situations when we encounter enemies or adversaries.

*The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to subdue the mind,
With the forces of loving kindness and compassion.
For unless the real adversary—my own anger—is defeated,
Outer enemies, though I may conquer them, will continue to appear.*

The situation of having enemies is described. The nature of our mind is not one of anger. If you examine your mental experiences, you will see that anger is an adventitious experience. You are not always angry. Sometimes due to certain conditions anger arises in your mind. It is something that is adventitious. This anger that arises in our mind is the real enemy because outside enemies are such that they cannot be defeated in true physical means. You can defeat one enemy on the outside but you can easily make more enemies. You won't have an end to enemies unless you do something about the real enemy, which is anger in your mind.

Let's say out of anger we kill someone. This person is an enemy, and we wanted to get rid of this person. This starts more problems because this person is likely not alone and has friends and relatives. He probably has parents, siblings and a community. By killing one person, all his family members become your enemies. Let's say he has 10 family members. By killing one person, you've created 10 new enemies. His whole community could be outraged and seek revenge on you. On a bigger scale, the whole country could be angry or upset, say you killed an important figure. In history there are countries going to war because a single citizen has been killed. These examples illustrate by killing one enemy out of anger, you can get more enemies.

When we encounter an enemy, what should we do? With respect to this person with whom we can't get along with. There is a mind disliking this person. If we want to remove our enemy, we need to remove this mind that sees this person as an enemy. Instead of physically removing the enemy, we need to mentally remove the mind that sees the person as an enemy. We have to do that by working on our minds. We have the freedom to do that. We aren't trying to manipulate some kind of external forces. We are working on our own minds and have every freedom. Our main job is to counteract this mind that views this person as an enemy. It is by removing the mind that we remove the enemy. How do we do that? In the stanza it is stated, that we subdue the mind with the forces of loving kindness and compassion. If we want to have these built up armies that can counteract the enemy, we need to train in loving kindness and compassion. Bodhisattvas train in subduing their mind. They work on their anger and cultivate loving kindness and compassion. By counteracting the real enemy which is anger, all enemies can be removed. We should try to do the same and practice loving kindness and compassion to reduce our anger.

All of us are interested in the dharma and we have a certain level of confidence in the dharma. What do we do when we run into problems or feel unhappy? Some of us recite prayers or make prostrations to the Buddha. We circumambulate holy objects. Sometimes we direct requests to the Buddhas, requesting to remove our problems and eliminate our unhappiness. These methods can be effective in that one creates merit and purifies negativities. However, it is difficult for them to really eradicate the problems we experience. The direct method really is the one I have just described above. Instead of simply making prayers for something to be eliminated, we should harness the real armies of compassion and love that will cause our disturbing

emotions such as anger and hatred to be defeated. That way we will be able to experience happiness and eliminate unhappiness because the real culprits are removed. This is a method we need to cultivate.

In stanza 20 we discussed how we take objects like anger into the path. In **stanza 21**, we are looking at how to take objects of attachment into the path.

*The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to turn away immediately
From those things which bring desire and attachment.
For the pleasures of the senses are just like salty water:
The more we taste of them, the more our thirst increases.*

In stanza 21 the situation of encountering objects of desire and attachment are described. It is described that pleasures of the sense are just like salty water. Pleasures of the sense include forms, sounds, smells and so on. If there is a person feeling thirsty, that person will want to quench his thirst by drinking water. If the water is salty, the more that person drinks, the more he will become thirsty. So instead of quenching his thirst, he becomes more thirsty. So we will end up like this person if we don't know how to work with our attachment and desires. Instead of being satisfied or fulfilled we will feel more and more attached.

This stanza talks about how we are attached to the pleasures of the senses. How do we actually generate attachment to forms and sounds? Let's go through these five sensual objects and see how we relate to them. We see forms with our eyes – we like looking at beautiful and pleasant things. Let's say there is an object which appears beautiful. If you have to look at this object again and again, day after day, that pleasure becomes lost. The next day you might want to find a new attractive object to look at. But that object will also not sustain your interest forever. Soon you are again looking for another object to excite and stimulate your senses. So the same goes for sounds. Say there is a song you like and it gives you pleasure. You listen to it on repeat for a few days, but after a while you get sick of it. You find a new song, and this process is endless. The same for smell and attractive fragrances. Similarly with food. Let's say somebody is poor and cannot find food. He will be very happy if he is able to find any food at all. If his situation improves and he is able to meet his basic needs. His previous satisfaction will disappear. He will now think "I want to have food that is more delicious". As he becomes rich, he becomes more fussy about his food and particular about ingredients. The quest for delicious food becomes endless. Same for body sensations – we like

to have pleasant touch, such as comfortable clothes. We want clothes of a certain style.

As you can see, our relationship with these sensual objects are like a person's relationship with salty water. The more we drink, the more thirsty we become. By following our desires, we become like this and our thirst is never quenched. When we have more and more desires, we try harder and harder to satisfy them. In quest for our perfect objects of desire, we will encounter problems. In our constant hankering after objects of desire, we bring suffering to ourselves. We want better things over time. Better things are harder to obtain and find. We give ourselves more difficult in this quest for objects of desire. If we aren't able to do anything about our desires, then we will endlessly run into difficulties and create unhappiness for ourselves. We need to work on our attachment. We can examine our attachment and see where it is strongest. We try to reduce our attachment with respect to our strongest object of attachment. Because if we fail to do that and simply let loose our desires, then there is no end to our misery. The practice of the bodhisattvas is to turn away immediately from such things which bring desire and attachment. This is something we need to do as well if we want to have a relaxed mind that is free from the attention of attachment and desire.

With that let us move onto a new outline. In general, in order to train in bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, you need to train in the two types of minds of enlightenment: conventional and ultimate. We have completed our discussion on the convention mind of enlightenment. Now we are going to look at how to cultivate the ultimate mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta.

There are two sections under the ultimate mind of enlightenment. The first is how meditate on emptiness; this is discussed in **stanza 22**.

*The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to entertain concepts,
Which revolve around dualistic notions of perceiver and perceived,
In the knowledge that all these appearances are but the mind itself,
Whilst mind's own nature is forever beyond the limitations of ideas.*

In stanza 22, we say that the bodhisattvas do not entertain concepts which revolve around dualistic notions of perceiver and perceived. When we relate to things, for example forms and sounds, we have a sense that these things exist “out there” – that there is some kind of independent concrete intrinsic existence. Not only that, we have a sense that our own minds (that which are

perceiving things) have a concrete existence. Here we say the bodhisattvas never entertain such notions.

This is a bit difficult to understand in the beginning, so let us go through it slowly. Here we think that things exist from their own side. They do not have intrinsic existence; rather they are imputed and labeled by our own mind. However, they seem to appear to have inherent existence and don't appear to be imputed by our own mind. Saying that objects don't exist inherently can be an abstract concept, so let's describe an example. Look at this table in front of you. When you look at it, you get a sense that this table exists in and of itself, right there in a concrete way. There is something tangible about it in front of you, like its color or shape. Let's say you try to pinpoint this table that exists. Look at the parts of the table, the legs, the table top etc. You can see they are made from different materials such as wood, metal. This table is made of different materials. When it was being manufactured in the factory, many causes and conditions had to come together before the table could be made. If you try to trace the causes and conditions that eventually resulted in the table you see in front of you, you can see there are many causes and conditions. The table does not come into being from one cause. There is no concrete table that is there; rather it is the result of many parts and conditions being presents. It does not exist on its own independently. When you try to pinpoint this table and look for it, you will not be able to find it. When it appears, it seems like there is a concrete table identity. Apart from the various causes and conditions that brought the table, there is no identifiable table.

When you think "I am going to use the table", in your mind there is some kind of sense of a table existing out there in a concrete, identifiable way. Similarly, when you look with your eyes, you see a table existing independently and not as a the result of the interplay of causes and conditions. You do not see that the table is really a label you give. You grasp at a concretely existing table. We need to remind ourselves that all phenomenon out there is in the nature of dependent arising. When we see something, we should remember that this thing that I see is the result of dependent arising. It exists as a label from my mind; it does not exist from its own side independently. When we hear something, we should think that the sound exists from dependent arising, relying on causes and conditions. We should think similarly with smells and tastes. This way, regardless of what we eat, wear etc., we remind ourselves the way in which the objects truly exist and that they are labels by the mind.

Think back to stanza 22 where it says;...

*In the knowledge that all these appearances are but the mind itself,
Whilst mind's own nature is forever beyond the limitations of ideas.*

By reminding ourselves that things do not exist from their own side or independently, then we are able to reduce the mind that grasps them. If we reduce the self-grasping mind, then the attachment and anger will become weaker. That way, we will be able to experience more peace and happiness. This is exactly how the bodhisattvas train. They do not entertain dualistic notions of “the perceiver and the perceived”. They are able to realize that things are free or “empty” of inherent or true existence.

I thought of a better example for you. Think of the sand mandala. Don't you get the sense that there is a sand mandala or the quality of a sand mandala that exists on its own? But when you analyze and try to pinpoint the sand mandala, what is the identity of the sand mandala that seems to exist in a concrete, palpable manner? Look for the sand mandala within the sand mandala. You see many particles of coloured sand. Try to pinpoint exactly what the concrete identity of the sand mandala is. You look at the shape, and you can see certain shapes in the sand mandala. These are made from the particles of sand. Do these shapes exist from their own side? It is through a combination of laying the sands in a particular pattern that you get a shape. But if you were to try and point out where this shape is, there is nothing besides the loose particles of sands arranged. Where exactly this mandala? Look for it within its components. When you look at each particle of sand, you don't see a mandala in there. You get the idea of “a” sand mandala through labelling this combination of coloured sand. There really isn't a sand mandala that exists intrinsically in the particles of sand. Your mind labels it as a sand mandala. When you try to look for it and pinpoint in the particles of sand, you won't find it. It truly is the combination of causes and conditions, and the various particles arranged in certain formations, that there is this object with a certain capacity that performs a certain function. Based on that, you label a “sand mandala”.

Q + A

Q: Let's say you get angry at a group of people, not because they are your enemy or that they've hurt you personally, but because you see them harming others or animals on a large scale eg. human trafficking and ivory trade. What is the best way to eliminate this anger? Is this anger still arising out of ignorance?

A: In this case, we would still say the anger you experience comes from ignorance, even though you might feel it is justifiable anger. However, if you analyze whether the response is suitable, you will see that it has its root in ignorance. When you look at people who do terrible things such as human trafficking, ivory trade and so on, you should remind yourself that nobody wants suffering or to have any kind of problems. What these people are doing is creating suffering, harming elephants and human beings, creating terrible karma. As a result of the karma they create, they will experience terrible suffering themselves in the future. If you think about this, you will see they are deserving of our compassion, because they are creating the causes of suffering. If we understand that, we will generate compassion for them. This has been mentioned in previous stanzas. When we see people who do wrong or cause suffering, we should cultivate compassion for them. In that way, we will see that they are not able to see reality as it is. If you look at them and get angry at them instead of generating compassion, then we too are not understanding the reality of the situation, which is that they are creating terrible causes of suffering for themselves. They are deserving of our compassion rather than anger. It is possible that we think that “Oh great – they created terrible suffering, they deserve to suffer. Serves them right.” This is not appropriate because when we experience suffering ourselves, we don’t think “serves me right. I deserve this because I created negative karma in the past”. We don’t suffer, they don’t and nobody does. So when people are suffering, we should not think “Serves them right!”. Instead, we should generate compassion. Because if we generated causes of suffering and were suffering, we would want ourselves to be free from suffering too. They are just like us. If understanding that they have made a terrible mistake through their actions and we think “let them suffer”, then we too have made a terrible mistake. Instead of thinking I should be angry at these horrible people, we should generate compassion for them.

This practice I’m explaining is exactly as described in one stanza in Lama Chopa, during the section that talks about training in the stages of the path. It says “please bless me to be able to see that no one wants the slightest suffering and that we are never satisfied with happiness. Please bless me to realize that there is no difference between myself and others”. Nobody wants the slightest suffering – we should think carefully about this. We are never satisfied with happiness. No matter how much happiness we get, we still want more happiness. Understanding this is the case for everyone, we should rejoice when others have happiness and feel compassion when they don’t. When we

see others experiences problems, we should feel for them and think “this is a shame. May they be free from suffering”, generating compassion for them. We should realize that we ourselves and others are not that different.

Let’s say there is somebody who is about the jump off a cliff or building. What would be your response? Would you get angry at this person because you know they will create pain for himself and die horrible? You would not get angry at this person because they are doing a bad thing. You would understand that this person is about to create the causes of suffering and experience terrible suffering. You would also not think, “serves him right”. This applies to the scenario you described above, people engaging in terrible actions. You see they are creating suffering or causes of suffering and will experience pain in the future. You wouldn’t get angry at them just as you wouldn’t get angry at a person about to jump off a cliff. You would want to help, even if they are your enemy, because it is unbearable to watch. If you could, you would help. You wouldn’t bear to see him jump off. If we get angry at him, then this is occurring out of ignorance. Compassion is the suitable response.