

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>

Let us begin by thinking about the meaning of a stanza from a sutra in which the Buddha says...

“I cannot wash the misdeeds of sentient beings with water. I cannot extract the suffering of sentient beings with my hands. I cannot transfer my realizations to others. I liberate sentient beings by teaching them reality.”

We all understand we experience unhappiness to some degree in our lives. We also have a wish to be free from unhappiness and eliminate misery from our lives. But how are we going to achieve that?

It is possible that we think somebody can help us become free from suffering, taking our problems away or solving our problems. This is difficult because although we believe someone can take our problems away from us, the Buddha explained clearly this is not possible. The Buddha himself has completely eliminated suffering in his own continuum. He has achieved the highest happiness possible, yet is not able to remove the suffering of sentient beings for them. In the first line of the stanza we mentioned, the Buddha proclaimed that he cannot take away the misdeeds or negative actions, which are the causes of suffering, from sentient beings.

In the second line, the Buddha said that he cannot remove the suffering of living beings with his hands. Generally we talk about two types of suffering, physical and mental. Sometimes when we fall sick and there is physical pain, then we can use physical means to remove suffering. External means can be effective in removing physical suffering. Mental suffering is the main form of suffering. It would be difficult for any kind of physical means to reduce the suffering. The Buddha said “Even though I do not have any suffering, I have completely eliminated suffering in my continuum, there is no physical means I can employ to remove your suffering for you”.

In the third line, the Buddha said “I cannot transfer my realizations to you”. The Buddha has attained the ultimate state of well-being; however, he is not able to give or transfer his attainments to any of us.

In the fourth line the Buddha said “I liberate beings by showing them reality.” We have to analyze why we encounter problems in our lives. Why is it that we experience unhappiness. The Buddha explained that it is because of not seeing reality that we make unwise choices in our lives. By making unwise choices we run into difficulties. The Buddha said that “I will explain to you what unwise choices are and what skillful paths are. If you follow these paths, you will be able to understand reality correctly and thus free yourself from suffering.”

To answer that question, let us look at stanza 11. Why do we have suffering and encounter problems?

*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.*

What this stanza is saying is that the cause of our unhappiness is the tendency to be self-preoccupied. We are obsessed with our own happiness and eliminating our own suffering. As a result of this self-grasping mind, we are led towards misery and problems.

To give an example, let's say there is a family of 6 people. Most of the members are very relaxed in the sense that they are concerned about others when they speak to each other. They are respectful and considerate of others. But if one of these people are very self-preoccupied and closeminded, not wanting to listen to what other people say and is not considerate of others. He is completely self-centered, wanting the best food, living conditions, and clothes for himself. In such a situation, there is a huge potential for conflict. If the remaining five family members are very generous, it is possible for the family to live harmoniously together. However, if the rest of the family is unable to tolerate his self-centeredness and inconsiderateness, in no time they will start fighting with each other. They can be hostile and enemies. This situation can occur just because one person is self-centered.

Similarly, at our workplace if we tend to be self-centered, it becomes difficult to have good working relationships with our colleagues. If you have an attitude that you are above other people, conflicts arise very easily. One will get into states where one is very disturbed. It is also possible that we get into stressful situations and have difficult relationships with other people due to the negative emotions we generated in the past. For example, in the past we are accustomed to attachment and aversion (not just in this life, but the lives before that). As a result of our negative thoughts and behavior, we are experiencing the results, which are difficult relationships and conflicts. But in either case, the conflicts we experience are due to our self-cherishing mind. If we have a very self-centered mind, then that mind will be the source of difficulties.

In stanza 11, “perfect Buddhahood” is mentioned. This refers to the highest form of happiness, supreme happiness. It is the happiness of full enlightenment. To obtain this state, we need to counteract our self-cherishing mind. In the example I’ve given earlier of the family of 6, if all are able to practice kindness and treat others with affection, then they have the basis for experiencing great happiness. This means being respectful of each other when communicating, sharing good food etc. If anyone has a problems, other members are ready to lend a helping hand. This creates a relaxed and spacious atmosphere where everyone’s mind is happy. Similarly if one is able to be kind and considerate of others at one’s workplace, then going to work will be pleasant because everyone is a friend. Instead of a battleground, it is a playground. When you speak, you speak in a way to foster good relationships. If you have an environment where everyone is friends, then your mind will be relaxed and happy.

If we experience unhappiness, the root cause can be traced to our self-cherishing mind. If we have a tendency to be always thinking of our happiness alone, then this becomes the cause of our unhappiness. Instead of thinking “may I be happy”, we should expand our mind to think about others (“may everyone be happy”). Cherishing others is the true cause for true happiness. If we can do this exchange of our self-cherishing mind for an altruistic mind, then we can create the true causes of happiness and experience a genuine sense of wellbeing.

The Buddha said that he liberates beings by teaching them about reality. Indeed, in the teachings we find all kinds of instructions about how we should conduct ourselves so that we can be free from suffering and reach happiness.

There is advice on how to sleep, eat, walk etc. We cannot explain in a single session all the advice given by the Buddha. However, in each class I will share some of these instructions. In that way we will be able to understand what these methods for achieving happiness are.

In essence, we should not place our hopes in others, thinking that they will be able to remove our unhappiness or cause us happiness. We should understand the Buddha is like a doctor. When we are sick, we go see a doctor who tells us how we can recover. We, having heard these instructions from the Buddha, should try to put them into practice. Putting the buddha's advice into practice is like taking medicine from the doctor. Then we will be able to adjust our behaviour and modify our daily activities accordingly so we become free from suffering and problems.

If a person who is unwell and receives instructions and medicine from the doctor, but fails to follow instructions or eat the medicine, then he is not going to recover. If he simply ignores the medicine and consumes junk food, he won't get better. If we learn the instructions of the Buddha but do not put them into practice or try to follow the advice, then it will be difficult for us to find a solution to unhappiness. We experience difficulties because of having made some unwise choices. It is important to identify where the sources of error are. If we are able to do that, we can correct the mistakes that are made. By correcting one mistake, we are free from one problem. Step by step we can correct errors of our mind. In that way, we can experience more and more happiness and well-being. Please keep this advice in mind.

So let us now turn to the text and we will keep reading it from stanza 35.

*The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to slay attachment
And the rest—mind's afflictions—at once, the very moment they arise,
Taking as weapons the remedies held with mindfulness and vigilance.
For once the kleshas have become familiar, they'll be harder to avert.*

In stanza 25 we are looking at how to destroy afflictions and negative emotions. So in this stanza it is stated that when the afflictions (“kleshas” are another word for afflictions or negative emotions) become very familiar, it is very difficult to turn them away. If we have a small affliction and become habituated to it, we have difficulty reversing it.

There are many types of afflictions. There are 6 root afflictions and finer divisions called the 20 secondary afflictions. It is important for us to be aware that there are various types of negative emotions to educate ourselves regarding how they can cause harm to us, how they are produced, and what kinds of drawbacks there are if we indulge in these afflictions.

Once we have understood the presentation of the afflictions (ie. we know the various types of afflictions and know they cause harm), then we have to use these two mental factors, “mindfulness” and “vigilance” as weapons to apply antidotes to these negative emotions. If we know about these afflictions but lack mindfulness and vigilance, we won’t be able to do anything about the afflictions. We won’t be aware that an affliction or negative emotion has arisen in our mind, taken over our mind. These negative emotions are not easy to deal with. We in our many lifetimes have become very familiar with these mental emotions. For this reason it is necessary for us to be mindful and vigilant so we can apply antidotes to negative emotions. Mindfulness and vigilance are guards for the mind. Let’s say there is an important person like a President, who has bodyguard who checks the identity of people before they see the President, deciding if they are allowed to do so. Similarly, we have to have mindfulness and vigilance.

Let me give you an example. Let’s say you want to buy something so you can quench your thirst. There are many drinks available to choose from: beer, tea, soda, juice etc. If you choose to drink a particular beverage and like it, drinking it again and again. It is possible you become addicted to the taste with time. It will be difficult for you not to drink it. Attachment develops with respect to the drink, and you are not able to free yourself from the desire to consume the drink. It is the same with afflictions. When we generate an unhealthy mental state and fail to do anything about it, such as exercising mindfulness or vigilance, and allow it to arise again and again, in time, its like we become addicted to that mental state. It becomes hard for us to avert it. We need to, in the best scenario, prevent the negative emotion from arising. Or if it has arisen, we should try to nip it in the bud to prevent it from becoming full blown.

If we become very habituated with some kind of affliction, then we need to apply a strong antidote to stop it in its tracks. If we don’t have the means to apply a powerful antidote, then we risk becoming overtaken by the negative emotion. Eg. we are habituated to talking, especially when we meet people. If we do not have mindfulness or vigilance, then it is easy to create non-virtuous

speech, such as saying things not completely truthful or make mindless jokes or gossip about others or indulge in slander or harsh speech. These unskillful forms of speech still occur because we don't have sufficient mindfulness or vigilance. We should try to have mindfulness and vigilance in all daily activities.

Another example – we talk on our phones a lot. Sometimes we use our phones out of habit but don't have anything meaningful to say eg. I'm waking up, I'm going to bed etc. There is not much substance in much of our conversations yet we continue to indulge in them out of habit. We are willingly wasting our time in meaningless activities, which is a sign we lack mindfulness, vigilance and introspection.

In the next stanza, 36, we have instructions on how to train in others welfare.

*In short, no matter what one might be doing,
By examining always the status of one's mind,
With continuous mindfulness and alertness,
To bring about the good of others—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

This is a summary of the instructions above. In short we must examine the status of the mind and with continuous mindfulness and alertness to bring about the good of others. We are constantly using body, speech and mind. If we have good motivation, our activities of body, speech and mind will turn out positive.

The lamas usually say that we are controlled by our minds, but our minds are controlled by afflictions. If we allow ourselves to come under influence of disturbing emotions, then the emotions actually guide us and lead us towards problems and difficulties. It's important for us to not come under the influence of disturbing emotions. We have many instructions on what to do and how to practice. It may be difficult to digest and put this into practice, but the essential advice is that we should examine our minds constantly. If we have stable mindfulness and alertness, then we will be in a good state, preventing our afflictions from arising and causing us problems.

We say we have to practice mindfulness and alertness, but how do we do that? Our activities are of three types, through body, speech and mind. For physical activities, we use mindfulness, introspection, and alertness to refrain from

engaging in non-virtues of the body such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct.

Then we have the non-virtues of speech. With mindfulness and vigilance we have to try to avoid creating the four types of unskillful speech: lying, divisive speech, harsh speech.

There are many forms of lies. There are white lies which are said with purpose and good motivation. The types of lies we should prevent are those that don't bring any benefit. This kind of practice is useful because if you constantly watch yourself and not engage in non-truthful speech, then it becomes a habit. You will be able to easily prevent yourself from telling all sorts of lies. The next non-virtue of speech is divisive speech or slander, which causes disharmony among people. Again, if you have mindfulness and introspection you can stop yourself from engaging in slander or divisive talk.

The third is harsh speech. We tend to believe whatever we say is correct and justified, the truth and appropriate. However, we need to check before we utter those words. If you plan to say something, you should check...how would I feel if someone were to say that to me? Would I regard that as appropriate? If you would feel uncomfortable if someone said that to you, then you shouldn't say it to somebody else. You need to make some adjustments. By doing this kind of examination, we can reduce our harsh speech.

The fourth non-virtue of speech is idle gossip or saying meaningless things. We tend to say whatever comes to mind although it serves no purpose. We should try to engage in as little idle gossip as possible so when we become more stable in our mindfulness or vigilance, we can catch ourselves before we say something meaningless.

We also need mindfulness and vigilance so we do not engage in the three non-virtues of the mind, which are covetousness, malice and wrong views.

Covetousness and malice do not necessarily harm others directly. When it arises in our minds, it may not cause immediate harm but they act as instigators, leading to actions. Having covetousness and malice can lead you to engage in stealing or killing. The third non-virtue is wrong views, such as holding to the view that there is no karma or that the three jewels are not real. By becoming aware of these non-virtues, we can apply antidotes.

So back to stanza 36: “In short, no matter what one might be doing,” refers to all the activities of body, speech and mind. “By examining always the status of one’s mind,
With continuous mindfulness and alertness,
To bring about the good of others — this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.”

If you want to bring about the good of others, you do need to have mindfulness and alertness. These qualities are indispensable to achieve the welfare of others. Bodhisattvas practice in this way, and we should also train like them, examining our minds and acting for others’ good.

We have to watch our body, speech and mind. If we can avoid the ten non-virtues, we will achieve many benefits. In this life, we will be happy and relaxed, which will be good for our physical health, experiencing less sickness and achieving a long happy life. If we practice ethics in this life, then we can be sure to achieve a good rebirth in the next life. We should practice in this way to achieve these various levels of happiness.

The final stanza in the 37 practices are about the dedication of virtues.

*The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to dedicate towards enlightenment
All the virtue to be gained through making effort in these ways,
With wisdom that is purified entirely of the three conceptual spheres,
So as to dispel the sufferings of the infinity of beings.*

The owner of this text is a bodhisattva by the name of He composed this text with the intention to help others engage in contemplation and practice. He himself has engaged in these practices. He composed the text not to earn reputation or praise, nor to impress other people who would give him offerings, food, and wealth.

The purpose of him writing the text is to dispel the suffering of the infinity of beings, as state in the last line. He was inspired to compose the text because he wants many living beings to study the text and hear explanations, contemplate its meaning, and meditate on it. Through doing so, he hoped sentient beings would be able to eliminate their sufferings. In that way, may the sufferings of samsara be dispelled. He hoped to achieve that goal through writing this text.

Here all the virtues that have been gained are dedicated to dispel the suffering of living beings. This dedication is conjoined with the wisdom that is purified

entirely of the three conceptual spheres. The three conceptual spheres refer to the three aspects of the dedication. There is the substance being dedicated (virtues), the object of the dedication (virtues dedicated towards enlightenment), and the dedicator (agents performing the dedication). These three are free from inherent existence. While dedicating virtue towards enlightenment, the bodhisattva has wisdom understanding that these three aspects (the virtue dedicated, the goal, the one who is dedicating) are all empty of independent existence. The bodhisattvas perform dedication in this way, and we should follow their example. With that, we have finished the actual part of the text, the 37 practices. But there are still some remaining stanzas to go through, so we will save those for next week. We will use the remaining time for question and answers.

Q: When we talk about desire and wanting to get rid of it as attachment, you run into the problem that you are desiring to get rid of your desire. What do you think about that, and how to approach that trap or way of thinking?

A: I must admit, this can be confusing. Let us try to differentiate between desire and attachment. Desire is of various types, positive and negative. I don't know whether the word "desire" carries negative connotations naturally in certain cultures. If you feel that desire is a loaded word, maybe use the word "wish" instead. Wishes are either positive or negative. Attachment is used in Buddhism to refer to something that is negative. Attachment is negative but desires or wishes can be positive.

It is possible that you identify a positive goal and think, it would be good if I am able to achieve this. This is a desire or wish, but it is not attachment. Let's try to identify clearly what we mean by attachment, a term in Buddhism. It refers to a kind of mind that focuses on an attractive object and exaggerates that attractiveness. There is a factor of exaggeration or superimposition in this mental factor. If you simply generate some kind of desire for attaining a certain goal. That is not attachment because attachment necessarily involves exaggeration and unrealistic projection.

I want to say a bit about Buddha nature since there is some time left. Buddha nature is a kind of a quality that all living beings have. There are a few aspects

we can discuss with respect to Buddha nature. First of all, the nature of the mind is pure. The examples usually given to illustrate are the sky and water. You may see clouds in the sky on a certain day, but those clouds are not the nature of the sky. The nature of the sky is clear. When you have water, in certain circumstances it can appear cloudy or filthy, but the nature of the water is purity. The dirt and pollution is not the nature of the water. The nature of the mind is pure. There is another aspect of Buddha nature. It has to do with the fact that the mind can acquire good qualities. We have all the potential to learn that can improve our mind. For example, when a child is born, they don't know anything. Slowly through teaching from the parents, the child learns to talk and walk etc. The mind has the ability to acquire skills and knowledge and to improve. It has the potential for development. The mind is able to do so because its fundamental nature is clear. Like a piece of white fabric, it can be dyed to many colours. This is called the "developmental Buddha nature". This means that when appropriate conditions are met, the mind is able to develop in a positive way. These are the two aspects of Buddha nature 1) the purity of the mind (naturally abiding) 2) the developmental lineage (the mind's ability to improve when meeting certain conditions).

We have this potential to learn new things and acquire more and more qualities. This is something that is a quality of ours which has no limit if we have not reached full enlightenment. Until we achieve Buddhahood, we can't say that we have learned everything we needed to learn. If you think about it, our education system embodies that attribute. We start with kindergarten, then elementary, secondary school, university, postgraduate etc. Although you can be highly educated and have impressive degrees, you can never say that you've learned everything. Until we attain enlightenment, there is always something we need to develop further. The quality of the mind is such that we can continually learn.

The nature of the mind is such that it can acquire infinite qualities. In contrast, if you think of a vessel containing water, the volume is fixed. If you try to put more in, the water will overflow and be lost. The mind is not like that in the sense that there is no limit to what it can contain. There are more and more skills that can be acquired.