

English Dharma talk
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By Geshe Pema Tshering
Land of Compassion Buddha Edmonton
<http://compassionbuddha.ca>
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 text, Treatise on the Middle Way, wrote a stanza of homage to the Buddha. The purpose of the stanza is to remember the kindness of the Buddha.

He says that he pays homage to Gautama Buddha, who teaches the excellent dharma. It is due to his compassion and having abandoned wrong views that the Buddha turned the three wheels of dharma. He gave many teachings to suit the various types of trainees.

The Buddha is said to have abandoned all wrong views, including the conception of self, which is explained in the text by Indian scholar Chandrakirti, 'Supplement to the Middle Way'. He explains that sentient beings have an adherence to a 'self' and 'I', through which they generate various types of attachment. Afflictions can be traced to the conception of the self. What is this 'I' that we adhere to? How does this 'I' exist? If we examine the way this 'I' clings to things, we understand that it is actually a faulty state of mind. By understanding this, we can reduce our afflictions, which are induced by the conception of 'self'. Eventually we will be able to completely eliminate the afflictions.

In our world, there are many religions and accordingly, many different doctrines taught. These various doctrines benefit many types of people. Is there anything different in Buddhism from the various religions? Buddhist teachings present a way to work with and eliminate the root of suffering and disturbing emotions. In this way, Buddhism is considered unique. Nagarjuna understands this and thus constructs a stanza in the Treatise to the Middle Way, paying homage to the Buddha and remembering his kindness.

He points out the Buddha taught the excellent dharma out of great compassion, helping us get rid of negative views. In Buddhism there are these two main aspects: the aspect of conduct and the aspect of view. In terms of the aspect of great compassion that we spoke about earlier, we have to understand that we all have great compassion in our minds. However, our compassion at this point in time is limited. It may cover our parents, siblings, relatives and relatives. Motivated by

compassion, we help the objects of our compassion, giving them food, drinks, housing and so on. The benefit we extend through this compassion is probably external, through providing material assistance.

The way in which we apply our compassion can bring benefit to those around us. There is immediate benefit such as food and clothing, but these forms of benefit are not long lasting, deep or eternal. External forms of help cannot address the root of suffering or reduce disturbing emotions. This type of assistance is not about to transform the mind so that long-term types of happiness are created. Our limited compassion can only benefit our loved ones and those who are close to us.

Nagarjuna, recognizing that the Buddha's compassion is quite extraordinary, in that it extends to all living beings, including friends, enemies. The methods taught by the Buddha can be trained in by anyone. Those who practice the Buddha's teachings can eradicate suffering eventually. This view of selflessness taught is an unusual and extraordinary teaching from the Buddha.

The Buddha's teachings apply to everyone without discrimination in terms of race, caste, etc. He taught dharma to benefit all living beings without exception. We are looking at some of the mind training techniques taught by the Buddha.

We've come to **stanza 18** in our root text.

*Even though I may be destitute and despised by all,
Beset with terrible illness and plagued by evil spirits,
Still to take upon myself all beings' ills and harmful actions,
Without ever losing heart—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

We've arrived at the 3rd subsection, which looks at accepting difficulties in the path. When we run into problems in life, how do we use those circumstances to practice dharma and train our minds?

This stanza explains the practice called “Tonglen”, which means giving and taking in Tibetan.

‘Destitute’ refers to the state when one is destitute of resources, such as money, food, etc. ‘Despised by all’ refers to a situation when others look down on oneself and treats one with disdain. ‘Beset with terrible illness’ can refer to incurable illnesses. ‘Plagued by evil spirits’ can refer to being haunted by evil beings.

Naturally one will feel worried, upset in these situations. How do we transform the situation in our minds? I am not the only person – there are many people afflicted by terrible suffering. As a result of me experiencing these difficulties, may beings else be free from these difficulties. May I take upon myself all beings misdeeds and

sufferings. May I do so without losing heart. If one is able to think like this, one will be able to increase one's virtue and positive energy. One's negativities will be reduced. Achieving this practice without losing courage is the practice of the bodhisattvas.

Mind training can be rewarding in times of difficulty. If one can't think in a positive way, one will spiral into worse situations. Misery and unhappiness increases if one has negative thinking, such as "why am I in this situation, I don't deserve this". Some people may become crazy or resort to other means such as alcohol to deal with their troubles. It is of great benefit to engage in this type of mind transformation, creating positive energy, creating virtue and purifying negative thinking.

I would like to explain how to do Tonglen practice. If you only think about finding a solution when you encounter a problem, you may not be in the best mental state to learn this method. It is best to learn about Tonglen and become familiar with it now, or when you are doing ok, so that when you run into troubles later on, you can recall this practice and apply it.

Here's a quick story about Milerepa, a great yogi. One day, Milerepa was carrying a pot, slipped and fell. The pot broke into two pieces upon hitting the ground. He was able to generate delight and positivity, thinking 'before I fell I had one pot. Due to the blessing of the Lama, now I have two pots!'

He had this one pot that he used for cooking food. It was also the vessel he uses to make offering to the three jewels. You can see how strong his mind is. Without mental strength, it can be impossible for one to generate a joyful state of mind in an adverse situation.

At the outset, if you find difficulty thinking about all living beings in Tonglen, the practice of giving and taking, you can do a simplified version. This simplified version involves thinking about your future suffering, such as your problems later this evening. Dedicate your current sense of wellbeing to your evening self so you will later feel relaxed.

When you are familiar with the process of giving happiness and taking on suffering with yourself later in the day, extend this practice to the self of tomorrow. Then extend this practice of exchange to the self of next month, next year, in your old age etc. For example, think about taking on the problems you may experience in your old age and give your future self your current health, vitality and youth.

This practice only involves one person, is more immediate and does not have a long-term perspective. Start in this manner if you find it difficult to extend your mind to

think about other and all living beings. You may skip this practice if you are comfortable practicing exchange with other or all living beings.

You may sit in meditation, the 7 point vairochana posture, which is said to have many benefits. It can make your mind stable and help with concentration. However, you do not have to sit in this posture to practice tonglen.

In front of you, imagine a figure who is kind to you, like your parent, who is experiencing suffering. When you breathe out, imagine breathing out white light from your right nostril, which reaches this figure. The white light enters his/left nostril and fills his/her entire body, eliminating all their suffering. The suffering leaves the person's right nostril in the form of black light, which enters your left nostril. When you breathe this black light, it becomes absorbed in the self-grasping mind at the center of your chest, destroying the self-grasping mind. Through this process, the figure in front of you is experiencing physical and mental bliss and happiness.

One cycle was described. Continue doing cycles until your mind is stabilized with the visualizations of giving and taking. If you find your mind becomes scattered or tired, take a break before continuing the practice. In time, you will be able to do 40 and 50+ cycles when you are familiar, sustaining the practice for longer periods.

Once familiar with this visualization, expand your mind to include all living beings. This can be thought of as the next step. White light leaves from your right nostril and enters the left nostrils of all these beings, eliminating all their unhappiness and misery. An example of how to visualize this process is the imagery of dark hair being shaved off a person's head, falling away. Their suffering and negativities leave from their right nostril and black light enters your left nostril, going to a dark area of self-grasping in the center of your heart. This self-grasping center becomes destroyed with your breathing in of others' suffering, in the form of black light.

Cultivate joy at having performed this practice of Tonglen, as the practitioner accumulates much virtue.

We've discussed the practice of giving and taking in relation to living beings. You can also do this practice with the environment. There are faults of the environment, such as places prone to earthquakes. You can imagine releasing white light pervading the environment and black light representing environmental problems/disasters which is eliminated once it enters the center of your body.

So by training your mind in this way, your mental strength will increase. This is a form of preparation so that you can apply this practice when encountering difficulties. Instead of getting upset, you can think about this practice. When you

experience sickness, imagine that you are experiences all beings sicknesses for them, eliminating it.

Buddhisattvas take delight in the opportunity to practice taking the suffering of others. Milarepa was able to generate joy in circumstances that are usually labeled as adverse conditions. Ultimately it is about training the mind. When you encounter a difficulty, think that now have you an opportunity to take on others' suffering and bring them happiness. Bodhisattvas are able to engage in these practices. When we actually encounter problems, our minds can get upset easily. We become overwhelmed by our difficulties. We should prepare ourselves with Tonglen meditation.

What kind of a mental attitude should we have as dharma practitioners? A merchant who goes out to trade may have to leave home and travel for many days. During summer, if it rains, then it rains. In winter, if it snows, then it snows. He has the mental strength to accept whatever adverse condition occurs. We should have a similar mentality when practicing the dharma.

How do we think positively about rain? Since it's raining so heavily, thieves and robbers will not come. During winter, if it snows, then the footprints of wild animals will be seen in the snow, posing an advantage. The main point is that we must focus on the big picture in dharma practice. The smaller difficulties that I have to encounter to achieve the big purpose are not so bad.

Stanza 19 talks about quite an opposite situation, a state in which one enjoys great privilege. In this situation, how does one practice dharma?

*Even though I may be famous and revered by all,
And as rich as Vaiśravaṇa, the god of wealth himself,
To see the futility of all the glory and riches of this world,
And to remain without conceit—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.*

You have a very good reputation and people think well of you. On top of that, you are the richest person in the world! How should one train one's mind in such circumstances?

If one has great reputation, glory or riches, one should think: I will not have these forever. Perhaps I will lose the riches in a few years. One can think, 'how does fame benefit me?' Train in humility. What is the point of being famous if I don't have good qualities?

The third line discusses the futility of the glory and riches of this world. One should think: "when I leave this world, I leave behind all the glory and riches". I can't take

them along with me. Forget about all these possessions, I can't even take my own body! In this way, you train in humility.

What's wrong with pride? A person who is very proud will have many negative states of mind. Meeting someone who is regarded highly, he will feel jealous of them. When he meets someone who is equal in status, he will feel competitive. When he meets someone of lower status, he will look down on this person. An arrogant and proud person can easily destroy virtues created in the past and not create future virtues. Pride is a huge hindrance in collecting virtues. Thus, we should not let pride take advantage of our minds.

Pride prevents us from acquiring new qualities or learning new things. Good qualities must be accumulated little by little, like water accumulated drop by drop. Water cannot remain on a round surface; as soon as it hits the sphere, it will fall away. We have to do something about our pride if we want to learn new qualities. If we are proud, when other people give us advice or teach us things, nothing enters our mind. The leader, Sakya Pandita said that we can learn and benefit from anyone, even children. If we are proud people, we won't be able to learn from others. Without counteracting pride, we create huge hindrances for us to improve ourselves. Thus, stanza 19 discusses the importance of removing conceit.

Question 1:

What is the importance of breathing out from the right nostril and breathing in from the left nostril for Tonglen practice?

Answer: The texts have not explained specifically the significance of exhaling from the right and inhaling from the left. I've not yet seen any text that talks about the purpose or the reason for doing so.

Question 2:

Now we are facing an environmental crisis. Sometimes humans do harmful things to the environment, but sometimes I think the environment can reflect the human mind. Does the human mind have a relationship with the environmental crisis? For example the environment in Beijing is seriously polluted. People are hurried and seeking material benefits.

Answer: It is very much the case that environmental issues are caused by the human mind. There is a strong relationship between how we think and our experience of the environment. What is there a cause and effect relationship? The direct cause is attachment and greed. The indirect cause is the self-grasping mind, which is the source of attachment. No matter where you go in the world, when you look at the merchandise, most of it is made in china. Let me tell you what happened to me last year in India. Someone walked into a store and wanted a certain computer

component. The store owner showed him the product. The buyer states, “Oh! It is made in China. I’ve used this product made in China before, and the quality wasn’t good.” The seller stated that 80% of the products are made in China, no matter where you go. If you don’t want something made in China, then you are left with nothing. Why do factories manufacture so many kinds of products in huge quantities? It is because of consumer demand. We consumers are not satisfied with having one thing to use. We feel discounted, wanting something better and more. There’s an explosion of consumer demand, thus there is a supply. People want to make more money and push products. There is a strain on raw materials and resources required to produce. Whose fault is it then that the environment becomes damaged? Is it the fault of the factories or a certain country? Everyone in the world has a part to play. People have self-grasping, and many desires, greed and discontentment arise. This situation is not the responsibility of a group of people – everyone has responsibility. For example, we need clothes for all four seasons. Realistically speaking, say you had several outfits for each of the seasons, which could last for many years. We are not satisfied and keep buying clothes when the old clothes are still fine. We need to rein in our desires and rein in our consumption, which will reduce supply and reduce demand in the resources in the world. By reducing greed, we do our part in protecting the environment. With our desires, the environment becomes damaged. The natural materials are not limitless - they will run out one day. What will happen to the next generation? Products are made so they can last a long time. Let’s say the raw materials may run out in 40-50 years, how will future people live and what will they eat? This is a scary thought. We have reserves but they won’t last a long time.

Question 3: What would happen if somebody chose not to cause suffering for others but at the same time not take on the suffering of others. A neutral person.

Answer: It is improbable that such a person exists! A person who neither harms nor benefits other people. We all talk to people, do actions that affect people in one way or another. It is very unlikely that we affect people in no way at all, not benefitting them or causing harm. Supposing there is such a person, they will have a similar kind of behavior and outcome in a future life. Here’s a tiny example. We sometimes have to leave our house. When you walk on the ground, sometimes there are bugs. You can unknowingly step on them and kill them, and there is a degree of harm created.