

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 6

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

When the Buddha attained enlightenment, his first teaching was the Four Noble Truths. These consist of 2 sets of 2 truths. First, the two pure truths: these true sufferings and origins of sufferings. Second set of pure truths consist of true cessations of sufferings and true paths. These are the 4 truths taught by the Buddha.

At the beginning it's important for us to understand reality regarding suffering. If we don't understand what is suffering, it's possible for us to mistake suffering for happiness and confuse methods for achieving happiness and means for eliminating suffering. There's great purpose for understanding what suffering is. After that, we need to examine where sufferings come from. Do they have a cause? Or do they arise without causes? This investigation allows us to look into the means for eliminating suffering.

So if we have recognized suffering as it is, but there is nothing we can do about it, then there's not much point for thinking about suffering. But if there is indeed a method that can completely eliminate suffering and we don't contemplate suffering, then we'll be at a disadvantage.

So regarding the causes of suffering, where does suffering come from? Does it come from outside? Is suffering something that arises without causes and conditions? Indeed it's possible to identify certain forms of suffering as being external. But the main kind of suffering that afflict us is inner suffering. Inner suffering that's created by our own mind. And the culprits that cause suffering mainly are attachment, anger, ignorance, pride, and jealousy.

There are these mental factors that cause suffering: attachment, pride, and so on. Can we do something about them? If not, then we're doomed to continue to suffer. We need to check: can we do something about these disturbing emotions? E.g. if one has a lot of attachment, desire for objects, then we should check the nature of this mind. What is the nature of this mind? How does attachment relate to this object? Does this object exist the way it's observed by attachment? Attachment doesn't have an accurate view of the object. Through these kinds of investigation and contemplations, we'll be able to gradually reduce our attachment. So this is an introduction to the methods of Buddhism.

e.g. when we generate attachment for an object, we have this appearance of the object as completely attractive. This is due to the unrealistic projection of attachment onto this

object. This is precisely the function of attachment. It projects something that is greater than the object really is and causes us to generate desire for the object. Let's take this flower on the table as an example. If I have attachment for this flower, then it appears to me as completely desirable: 100% attractive. But is this the reality? Is the flower really completely desirable from its own side? If that is the case, then everyone should have the perception: everyone should think this flower is fantastic. But some may think the flower is just average; others think it's not good at all. What's the point of putting it there at all? This is a sign that it's not attractive from its own side. When I think it's desirable, it's b/c my attachment projects unrealistic qualities onto it.

e.g. Anger. When you are really angry at someone. This person appears completely horrible. This is the most horrible person in the whole world. When you have this negative emotion, the improper mental attention causes this person to appear 100% undesirable. 100% repulsive. But is that really the way the person is? If the person is completely negative, would this person have any friends / companions? If we investigate, we'll properly see they have friends. Maybe even 100s or 1000s of friends. Reality is not how appearances seem to us. Person doesn't appear 100% negative in the way they appear to us. By engaging in this kind of analysis, we get closer to reality and reduce our negative emotions.

In the text called the Offering to the Spiritual Guide (Lama Chopa) by **Losang Chökyi Gyaltsän**, he talks about how in reality, samsara is like a prison. Cyclic existence is like a prison. If we don't think about it, we may think samsara is a very pleasurable place. b/c food to eat, what we want to drink we drink, clothes to wear, if we have money, many sources of enjoyment. We may think samsara / cyclic existence is like a beautiful park filled with flowers. But in reality, samsara's filled with various problems and sufferings.

Lama Tsongkhapa in Three Principal Aspects of the Path talks about how in samsara, we are afflicted by the 3 kinds of sufferings. We are carried by 4 currents, chained by karma, smothered in darkness. In that way, we are afflicted by various kinds of problems in cyclic existence.

So in this statement by Lama Tsongkhapa he talks about how beings who are in samsara, cyclic existence, are swept by the current of the 4 powerful rivers. These 4 kinds of rivers are the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death. After we are born, then we go through a process of growing up. When we are young, we may play; quite ignorant. But as we grow older, we have different kinds of responsibilities. Eventually, we become old. We might be afflicted by sicknesses and our companions, people we love, die. And so on. We can see in cyclic existence, it's filled with different kinds of undesirable experiences. We undergo such existences powerlessly. As though we are caught up by these currents and bound in a tiny space without much freedom.

Lama Tsongkhapa says the living beings in cyclic existence are tied by the strong bonds of karma, which are so hard to undo. In samsara, beings have all kinds of desires. Some people want to be rich. Others want to be healthy; fame; powerful and so on. However,

they don't necessarily achieve their goals. The reason they don't achieve their goals is b/c they are bound by karma. If they are bound by a certain kind of karma, that karma would prevent them from achieving that. If they want to become wealthy, they may not be able to become wealthy.

Lama Tsongkhapa says beings in cyclic existence are caught in this iron net of self-grasping. They are imprisoned in this cage. Just imagine a person is in a prison self. Then everything he does will be performed within the confines of this cell, whether eating, drinking, walking, whatever. Here, beings are caught in this self-grasping egoism. As a result, their actions, whether or body, speech or mind are created within the confines of the self-grasping mind. b/c of that, they create this karma, which bound them to the various kinds of sufferings.

So in the next line of this stanza, Lama Tsongkhapa talks about how beings are enveloped by darkness of ignorance. In reality, happiness that we experience comes about by depending on other living beings. If we are very self-centred, caught in this iron net of self-grasping egoism, then it's not possible for us to experience true happiness. It is a state that is filled with the darkness of ignorance as is stated here.

For how long do the beings in samsara experience sufferings? It's stated in Lama Tsongkhapa's text, they are born and reborn in cyclic existence, unceasingly tormented by the 3 miseries. Living beings who are stuck in samsara experience suffering for a long time. If they can't reduce their self-grasping mind, to have more compassion for others, to have a more spacious mind regarding others' welfare, then they'll keep suffering. As long as they circle in cyclic existence, they'll experience suffering.

Beings in samsara are tormented by 3 kinds of sufferings: suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and pervasive compounded suffering. Suffering of suffering refers to obvious feelings of pain, discomfort, such as feelings of being ill or feeling too warm and so on. Suffering of change refers to the fact that pleasant feelings can transform into unpleasant feelings. E.g. if one is eating some delicious food, one experiences pleasure. However, if that food doesn't suit oneself, then eventually one may be ill, have a stomach ache and so on. That initial pleasure has transformed into misery. Third kind of suffering, pervasive compounded suffering refers to as long as we are trapped in cyclic existence, we are vulnerable to various kinds of suffering: old age, etc.

So we have discussed how in samsara, we experience suffering and the causes of those sufferings. By understanding the reality regarding our existence, we generate wish to be free from suffering. This is what the Buddha explained in the third and fourth of the Four Noble Truths. This state of happiness is possible for us to attain (True Cessations) and there is a path that leads us to there – a method that enables us to be free from suffering. In this way, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths.

The purpose of us coming together to attend class, read texts together is so that we are able to achieve this state of freedom that's taught by the Buddha. Let's turn to the text we've been studying.

Stanza 7

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take refuge in the Three Jewels,
Since they will never fail to provide protection for all who call upon them,
For whom are the ordinary gods of this world ever capable of helping,
As long as they themselves are trapped within samsara's vicious cycle?

You don't have to follow it.

e.g. if you see someone singing / dancing, if you are interested in being able to sing / dance yourself, then when you watch this performance, then you are doing so b/c you want to adopt the techniques that are displayed and you want to sing and dance as the performers. However, it's possible to also view the performance as a mere spectator. You can simply watch it without feeling obliged that you need to learn the techniques involved. It's like this here. If you are not a Buddhist, then it's fine for you to attend these explanations and not feel obliged that you have adopted any kind of Buddhist practice.

Stanza 7:

The meaning of this stanza is that when we want to look for a refuge object, we should look for someone who's free from fears. This person should be free from all the sufferings and fears of cyclic existence. If we take refuge in a worldly god, e.g. Ishvara / Brahma / ..., then they're not capable of helping us to be free from cyclic existence. For Buddhists, the qualified object of refuge is mainly the Buddha, the teacher of Buddhism.

Under this topic of refuge, there are 5 sections for us to go through. First, the causes for taking refuge. This means we need to have a certain mindset in order to go for refuge in the three jewels. What are the causes for going for refuge? Second, who are objects of refuge? Third, how to go for refuge? Fourth, advice of refuge. Fifth, benefits of refuge.

There are 2 causes of refuge. First cause is the dread of suffering. If we think about the situation in samsara, we'll see that there is no end to undesirable experiences. If we understand there is so much dissatisfaction in this situation of samsara, then we will generate a sense of dread. We are born, and every instant we are moving closer to death. At time of death, we need to take rebirth. We'll take rebirth either in upper realm or lower realm. In cyclic existence, we'll keep encountering suffering. So generating dread for lower realm and cyclic existence is first cause of refuge.

The second cause of the 2 causes of taking refuge is the understanding that the 3 jewels have the ability to protect us from suffering. In Buddhism, we say the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), Sangha (his followers) have ability to protect us from suffering. We don't want suffering. We have this fear of not experiencing suffering within cyclic existence. We also understand the 3 jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) have power to protect us.

The second section concerns the objects of refuge. The objects of refuge are the 3 jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. These 3 objects are like Doctor, Medicine, and the Nurses. First, if we are sick, we need a Doctor to tell us what our sickness is. The doctor should identify exactly why we are unwell. After that, we should take medicine to recover from sickness. If we don't eat medicine, we won't be able to recover. After the Buddha has explained to us why we are suffering, we need to eat medicine (practice of Buddha's teachings). By engaging in Dharma practice, we can be free from sickness. However, in course of our recovery, we may need support. We need nurses who can tell us how the medicine should be consumed, how we should take care of our health, and so on. So the nurses who help us recover from sickness are analogous to Sangha: followers of Buddha. They support us on spiritual path. If all 3 are complete, it's sure we can free ourselves from suffering.

The third section concerns how we should go for refuge. We should go for refuge with a heartfelt conviction. This means that no matter what happens in our lives, whether happy or unhappy, we should rely on the 3 jewels. We shouldn't do so in a half-hearted way. Some are fair-weather practitioners. When things go well, they don't remember the 3 refuges. But if they have problems, they quickly pray: oh please protect me. That's not the correct way to go for refuge. We should have heartfelt conviction in them in all circumstances.

Advice of refuge. 2 types of refuge. Prescriptive and proscriptive.

In terms of the proscriptive advice, when we've taken refuge in the Buddha, we should not take refuge in worldly gods. Not place hopes on mundane gods after have gone for refuge.

Sometimes people engage in practices to appreciate the wealth deities and different kinds of worldly gods. One makes offering to wealth deities and requests help. If one doesn't treat this wealth deity as a final object of refuge, then one doesn't contradict this advice. When one prays to world god and requests help in a temporal sense, without thinking this is my final object of refuge, then one doesn't break this commitment of refuge, in which one's advised not to take refuge in worldly gods. Sometimes there are debates regarding such practices. Some say if you take refuge in Buddha, you shouldn't make offerings to wealth deities. However, I think a distinction should be made. If one doesn't treat worldly deity for final refuge, there's no fault in asking them for help.

When you've taken refuge in Dharma, you should avoid harming other living beings.

Third advice is when you've taken refuge in Sangha jewel, you shouldn't let yourself be influenced negatively by friends who are harmful. Don't keep company of negative companions.

Now prescriptive: what you should do (above were not do)

After taking refuge in Buddha, have equal respect for all images of Buddha. So we can't directly see Buddha himself, but through images, we are reminded. Some are made of wood, stone. Others are made of more valuable: e.g. gold / etc. If one thinks those images that are made from cheap substances aren't so valuable, and you showed disrespect for them – unclean places and so on, this is incorrect. We should regard all images of Buddha equally, as if they are the Buddha, not think this is made of gold, and that is made of wood / stone. That image is not so holy.

Next we have advice with respect to Dharma. After having gone for refuge to Dharma, we should generate equal respect for all types of Dharma. All kinds of teachings of Buddha. We should not discriminate among teachings of Buddha, saying this is a good teaching, this is a lousy teaching. Don't say the Dharma practiced by this group of people is good / that one is bad.

Third advice with respect to refuge has to do with generating respect for the Sangha: monks and nuns. Should not discriminate among them. Not treat them with disdain. Think these people are worthy of respect; respect even robes they wear, thinking these are robes of Sangha community, followers of Buddha.

Fifth section has to do with benefits of refuge. Having gone for refuge. It's said by going for refuge to 3 jewels, one creates vast amounts of merit. Merit that can fill billionfold world systems. Indeed, by going to refuge to 3 jewels, eventually we'll be free from suffering. By becoming a Buddhist, one creates the basis for taking Buddhist vows.

We've completed first 7 stanzas. This closes preliminary section of text. Now we do actual section: paths of beings of 3 capacities. Path of small scope or being of small capacity.

Stanza 8

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to commit a harmful act,
Even though not to do so might put one's very life at risk,
For the Sage himself has taught how negative actions will ripen
Into the manifold miseries of the lower realms, so difficult to endure.

In this stanza, the Buddha explained negative actions will ripen into the manifold miseries of the lower realms, so difficult to endure. In cyclic existence, there are 6 realms. As long as one's trapped in cyclic existence, one will experience suffering. Some are small. Some are intense. These sufferings may last possibly for a long time. Negative actions will ripen into miseries of lower realms. Where sufferings are intense and difficult to bear. So Buddha explained the cause of such sufferings is negative karma / actions.

It's said negative actions will ripen into miseries. What this means is our own actions will bring about their corresponding results. If we commit a negative action, and we

experience suffering, that suffering isn't created by others. It's by our own actions. 3 types: actions of body, speech, and mind. If we take lying e.g., we know it brings about negative consequences. Someone who's always telling lies. A person who newly meets this person may not realize they are dishonest. But over time, this person may realize this guy is really unreliable. He tells lies all the time. He's deceptive. Will not trust this person; as a result, distance from this person. The person who lies will experience the negative consequences of his lying. Such results are not caused by others, not b/c others distrust him. Rather, it's caused by his own actions of lying. This is a simple example to illustrate how one's own misery is created by one's own negative actions.

If you think about this carefully, we are really responsible for our own experiences. In the example of a liar, this person may have many good qualities. But if this person tells lies, people will find out and he'll get into trouble. He may get fired. He may end up penniless, no work, no money, no food and so on. If they are in a wealthy country, may get aid from government, some welfare assistance and so on. But if not, then this person will be in a very difficult situation – no money, food and so on. What caused his difficulty? Is his financial problems caused by people who fired him? Not really. It's his negative actions of telling lots of lies. In Buddhism, we say that the negative actions are of 10 main types: 10 nonvirtues of body, speech, and mind. By creating these negative actions, one will end up suffering. So it's a Buddhist practice to avoid these negative actions.

If we don't wish for suffering, unhappiness, problems, then we need to avoid harmful actions. Even though not to do so might put one's very life at risk as said in stanza 8. So Bodhisattvas never create negative actions.

We've explained 10 nonvirtues before. Probably all of you understand what they are.

Let's move on to the next section of text. Now we are concerned with path of beings of medium capacity / path of medium scope.

Stanza 9

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to strive towards the goal,
Which is the supreme state of changeless, everlasting liberation,
Since all the happiness of the three realms lasts but a moment,
And then is quickly gone, just like dewdrops on blades of grass.

Second half of this stanza talks about how happiness of three realms lasts but a moment. Desire realm, form realm, and formless realm. Happiness in these 3 realms does exist. But they are very transitory. Last short instant. Quickly gone like dewdrops on blades of grass. Sometimes you see dewdrops on blades of grass. If you try to gather these dewdrops, you will encounter great difficulty b/c they disappear very easily. So this way, the happiness within samsara is very transitory and quickly vanishes.

Imagine you go to a store and see a beautiful piece of clothing. You buy it. Wear it. First, pleasure, happiness. But in time, that pleasure will disappear. E.g. that piece of clothing can become stained, old. Or even before that, it's possible for you to experience stress b/c you're so attached to this beautiful piece of clothing. If something gets to the cloth and stains it you, you may become very worried the seat is unclean and dirty your clothing. Though happiness involved in process, it's very unstable.

Happiness within cyclic existence is very transitory. We should aim for a better kind of happiness. We say happiness of liberation exists. If we attain state of complete liberation from cyclic existence, then we'll experience highest happiness (mental bliss, ease, peace), regardless what food, clothes are available. The practice of Bodhisattvas is to strive toward this goal toward "changeless, everlasting liberation". For the same reasons the Bodhisattvas have, we should strive for everlasting liberation from samsara.

We've completed explanation for medium scope. Stanzas following this will be on the great scope. Leave that for next class.

Now spend time on 8 questions. Local filmmaker wants these answered.

[Explanation: A local filmmaker contacted us. She wanted to interview various faiths and ask them the same set of questions. The questions may assume a certain kind of way of thinking that the faith follows. The language used and the things assumed may not be the order Buddhism would want to voluntarily present it]

1. Who do you praise?

We praise the founder, Gautama Buddha, or Shakayamuni Buddha.

2. What is the story of your teacher, the teacher of Buddhism?

The teacher, Shakayamuni Buddha, was born about 2500 years ago in India. There were many auspicious signs associated with his birth. Some occurred even before he was born. He was born into a royal family as a prince.

From a young age, he displayed great exceptional qualities: such as intelligence, compassion, and loving-kindness.

He engaged in various fields of study. When he arrived at a suitable age, at the urging of his father, the king, he got married.

In time, he developed a wish to see what lies beyond the palace grounds. So with his charioteer, he left the palace. The palace had 4 gates. He left first through the eastern gate.

When he left through the eastern palace, he saw an old man. This man was completely shriveled in terms of appearance. He looked very weak, struggling along, to move about with a walking stick.

Until then, the prince hadn't witnessed anyone who was suffering from old age within the palace grounds. He asked his charioteer what's this situation that's displayed here by this man? The charioteer explained a person who is born will gradually become old and experience various signs of old age. So what you are seeing here are the sufferings of old age.

Returning to the palace, afterwards, he left through the southern door. There, he saw someone lying on the ground, groaning in pain. He was completely neglected. No one was taking care of him. The prince asked the charioteer, why are they lying there in pain? He's sick. He's suffering b/c he's unwell. No one is taking care of him.

Returning to the palace, he once again left. This time, through the western gate, there he saw a funeral procession. People carrying a corpse and walking along the road. He asked his charioteer what is this? The charioteer explained anyone born will have to die. Here someone's died. His corpse is being carried away.

Returning to the palace, he afterwards left through the northern gate. There, he saw an ascetic with a very pleasing appearance. His 3 doors of body, speech, and mind are completely subdued. He has a kind way about him. Upon seeing this ascetic, the prince was filled with faith. He asked his charioteer who's this person? The charioteer explained this is someone who's renounced the worldly life and he's begging for alms. He's given up the discrimination between self and others.

Having seen the previous scenes of suffering, upon witnessing this very peaceful ascetic, the prince became inspired. I also want to be like this ascetic.

The prince got married at 17 or 18. At age of 29, he decided to renounce his royal status. He left his wife, son, and his father. He left the palace to pursue a spiritual path.

Over a period of 6 years, he undertook austere practices. He lived on very little food and cultivated concentration practice. Eventually, he attained the state of full enlightenment in Bodhgaya in India.

After attaining full enlightenment, the Buddha didn't teach for 49 days. After that, he turned the first wheel of Dharma, by teaching the Four Noble Truths. Subsequently, he turned the second wheel of Dharma, and third wheel. His teachings are contained in various texts. In the Tibetan tradition, there are over 100 texts.

3. Where do we come from?

According to Buddhism, living beings circle in cyclic existence, rebirth after rebirth. So is it possible to pinpoint an absolute beginning for living beings? The answer is no. Even after the Buddhas can't observe an absolute origin of living beings.

However, just in terms of this particular world system of ours, at the beginning of this world system, human beings were miraculously born and over many years, changes took place. These days, human beings are born from the womb.

4. What is the purpose of living?

I see this as a very important question. As human beings, we have exceptional intelligence. With this exceptional intelligence comes very special opportunities. Because human beings have exceptional intelligence and special opportunities, it's very important for them to make good use of these special opportunities and abilities.

If we live our lives being just concerned with our own welfare, then we'd be no different from animals, who eat and drink and engage in all kinds of activities for their welfare. As human beings with exceptional intelligence, we should develop vaster perspective and goals.

Similarly, even though living beings have a natural ability to cause harm, as human beings, we should refrain from causing harm. If we look at animals, such as tigers and bears, they have this very natural ability to kill other beings. Human beings should be able to do better than these animals because of their exceptional intelligence.

Since human beings are so much more intelligent than other forms of life such as animals, how should they behave? With special intelligence, human beings can protect their environment. They can use their power and available conditions to take care of other living beings. So human beings should use their intelligence in a responsible way. That is also a way of understanding the purpose of living.

5. What is the most sinful action(s) in Buddhism?

An action becomes very powerful if four conditions are present. These are 1) the presence of the basis, 2) one's attitude, 3) the execution, and 4) the conclusion. If all 4 are complete, then an action becomes very powerful. The action is a negative action. That becomes very heavy.

An example is action causing schism in Sangha. If the 4 factors are present, then action of schism in Sangha is created in a very heavy manner. This action of schism in Sangha is one of the 5 actions of immediate retribution.

6. How does the Buddha regard "sinners"? [We likely won't use this language; we would say people who've committed sins]

Buddhism: there's no judging like God. There's no stipulation as to how someone who's created a negative action should be treated.

7. What happens when we die?

One's experience is determined by one's karma or actions. If one's done positive actions, beneficial actions, then one will have good results. If one's done negative actions, then one will experience unpleasant results. If one's done good actions, one can expect good rebirth. However, if one's done bad things, one can expect an unfortunate rebirth.

8. How is Buddhism different from other religions?

This is an important question. When teachings of Buddhism are summarized, they can be subsumed into 2 aspects: view and conduct. Buddhism adopts dependent arising (view) and conduct (nonviolence).

What do we mean by conduct of nonviolence? In Buddhism, the most ideal conduct is conduct that benefits others. If can't do that, at least avoid causing harm to others.

I haven't studied extensively what others have taught in other religions. What I've heard is in certain other religions, it's taught that one should not harm others because the teacher of the religion says so. It's like some kind of commandment given by the teacher. This advice of not harming others is common in various religions. But perhaps the reason for avoiding harmful behaviour is different.

Rationale behind conduct not harm others is based on our view of dependent arising. While in Buddhism, the Buddha advises us to engage in nonviolent conduct, there's also logic supporting such behaviour. This is because our happiness depends on other living beings. If we want to achieve our own happiness, we should treat others with friendliness, compassion, etc. So rationale for conduct in Buddhism is based on view of dependent arising in Buddhism. So it seems an uncommon feature in Buddhism.

I believe my answers to these questions have been transcribed, so please edit and rearrange as you deem fit. With remaining time, any questions?

[Some students want to suggest edits].

