

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 5

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

Let's begin by thinking about the meaning of this stanza from Maitreya's Sublime Continuum. He begins by giving an analogy. He says that if you are sick, you need to first understand what kind of sickness you are suffering from. In other words, you need to first identify accurately what sickness is afflicting you. Then because you want to recover from this sickness, you need to identify the cause of the sickness. So it's by identifying the cause that you'll be able to abandon this undesirable situation of being sick. Once you've identified the cause, then you have to go about getting rid of the cause of this sickness. By relying on the medicine or treatment as is appropriate, you'll be able to abandon the sickness.

We don't want any suffering. Similar to this analogy, we need to discard causes and recover from our sickness. First, we need to understand that suffering is. We need to learn about all types of suffering. Next, identify causes of suffering. Once we've identified accurately causes of suffering, then we need to discard causes of suffering. In that way, we'll be able to destroy suffering itself and become free from suffering.

The meaning illustrated by this analogy is that if you want to abandon suffering, we need to understand suffering, identify its causes, and give up the causes of suffering. In this context, we shouldn't think the Buddha wants us to accept everything he's said, because the Buddha actually wants us to investigate for ourselves whether or not his teachings are beneficial. So he doesn't expect us to accept 100% whatever he said. In fact, in this stanza, the Buddha said monks and learned ones don't accept my teachings simply out of faith. Rather, investigate my teachings as a gold trader would check gold by burning it, cutting it and rubbing it. Accept my teachings only after investigating them. This means when we're interested in exploring Buddha's teachings, we need to first learn by hearing teachings, contemplating its meaning and so on. We shouldn't just accept them. Only after finding Buddha's teachings beneficial do we accept it.

How do we check whether Buddha's teachings are valid? There are 4 tests we can conduct. First is to not look at the person but check the Dharma. Don't just adopt a certain teaching b/c the person is supposed to be a Holy person.

Second test concerns the kind of Dharma we should adopt, because there are many teachings the Buddha gave. Here is the criterion that are definitive in meaning rather

than interpretable in meaning. We should accept those Dharmas that are literally acceptable.

Third test is to apply the mental consciousness. When we are investigating the validity of the Buddha's teachings, we shouldn't be using our sense consciousnesses – eye, nose and so on. Rather, use the mental consciousness.

Fourth criterion to consider is to practice what's relevant for you at your stage of development. It's not the case that all the teachings of the Buddha are to be practiced at one single time, b/c there are so many teachings. Not mean a person must practice every single thing. One must look at one's own situation and extract what's relevant based on understanding derived from study.

Why is it said that we should not practice every single thing that's taught by Buddha in his teachings? When we encounter the Buddha's teachings, we will see there are many kinds of extractions for different kinds of trainees. He has advice for lay people. Those instructions may not be suitable for ordained monks and nuns. Conversely, instructions for latter may not need to be adopted by lay people. Also many different stages on the path. If you are at a certain point on the path, you should practice the instructions relevant to that stage on the path. If you are at the lower stages of the path, you shouldn't try to practice the advice of the higher stages. At higher stages, a certain advice on the lower stages may not be relevant depending on the occasion. So one should examine the Buddha's teachings and adopt what's beneficial for one's context.

As we mentioned in the analogy spoken about previously, if we are not well, we need to understand what we are suffering from. And go on to identify the cause and counteract the cause of our suffering. We all wish for happiness; not suffering. We need to understand clearly the nature of suffering. We need to examine the causes of suffering. The cause of our unhappiness is our disturbing emotions. Namely, they are the 3 poisons of attachment, aversion and ignorance. These disturbing states of mind are rooted in the self-grasping mind, which clings to "I". This egoistic mind induces afflictions such as attachment and aversion. We need to investigate this explanation and understand what causes suffering. Once we've identified clearly the causes of suffering, we can adopt measures to counteract these afflictive states of mind. When we do that, we'll be able to reduce our unhappiness, our pain, suffering and increase our happiness and sense of wellbeing.

In the analogy of a person who's trying to recover from a sickness, once he's understood his sickness and identified the causes of suffering, then he should eat the appropriate medicine so he can recover from the sickness. In the case of this patient, the action that will help him recover is the eating of the medicine. If he's interested in other kinds of information such as how the medicine is made, who make the medicine and so on, those kinds of intellectual pursuits will not help him recover from the sickness. If we want to reduce unhappiness, we should pay attention to the crucial question of how to reduce our suffering. How to increase our happiness. So we should focus on what's most relevant.

If a medicine is beneficial and help one recover from sickness, then the maker of this medicine, which pharmacy made it and so on isn't really relevant. This knowledge of what chemicals, substances went into the making of the medicine isn't too crucial. If it's beneficial even though the substance isn't the most desirable to consume, you'd still rely on that medicine. So point is to focus on what's most relevant.

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Stanza 5: avoid destructive friends

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid destructive friends,
In whose company the three poisons of the mind grow stronger,
And we engage less and less in study, reflection and meditation,
So that love and compassion fade away until they are no more.

All of us are social animals in the sense that we can't dwell alone in society. We need to rely on other people. Friends, relatives and so on. For that reason, the people we associate with are very important. Advice here is to avoid destructive friends: people who can cause our 3 poisons to grow stronger. They cause our ignorance, attachment and aversion to become stronger. When we look at how a person develops, we understand there are 2 factors: nature and nurture. A person can be born a particular way. Indeed, certain people as soon as they are born exhibit certain negative traits. Also, what happens afterwards the environment they grow up in affects the character of the child. If the environment is very rough, full of violence, fighting and so on, this can affect the child adversely. If the child is born in an environment that's very peaceful and loving and grows up in those circumstances, then it's likely the child will have a very loving, peaceful temperament. So companions we have is very important. We want to keep company with people who affect us positively. With destructive friends, we want to keep them at a distance.

Imagine situation where you hang out with people with lots of attachment, people who constantly indulge in desires – I want this, I want that. If we stay with these people a lot, then it's likely we're influenced by them and thinking wanting this and that and so on. Similarly, if we keep the company of people who are very angry, bad tempered and constantly in dispute with some people, arguing, quarreling, fighting and so on. Based on those behaviours, engaging in negative harmful actions, then we can be influenced and become like that as well.

A child after being born from mother's womb is taken care of by parents. At young age, no one will actively encourage this person to engage in harmful behaviour, antisocial conduct and so on. But as child grows up, they go to school. Age 8, 9, 10, exposed to education system and nobody in their school will tell them to engage in negative behaviour. What happens as they grow older, is exposure to negative friends becomes a real possibility. So keeping company with destructive friends – who assert negative influence on person – that person can become very negative and develop in a very detrimental manner. E.g. if meet people who encourage him to drink – if you take some

alcohol will help you relax, great for you, this child may start experimenting with alcohol. This person may drink more and more. In time become an addict. So this is how association with negative friends can lead to destruction.

In this stanza, it's said in company of destructive friends, our mental poisons can become strengthened. We also engage less in study, reflection and meditation. Negative friends can cause us to engage less and less in spiritual practice. We do less of study, reflection and meditation of Dharma. Also, our love and compassion can fade away. They can be damaged by associating with negative friends, so our good behaviour decreases, bad behaviour increases, we create less virtue, affection for parents, siblings, friends, relatives becomes damaged. These are disadvantages of associating with negative friends. Through their behaviour and comportment, they cause us to degenerate.

Negative friends we discuss are of 2 types. 1 type is a negative friend in the context of spiritual practice. They may give you advice on what you should do if you want to be happy and so on. But that advice is erroneous. So instead of benefiting you, that advice actually harms you. Second kind of destructive friend is in the worldly sense as described above. By spending time with them, your good behaviour is lost and you engage in negative actions.

We're talking about these harmful effects of keeping company with destructive friends, but how do we know who they are? Gung tang Rinpoche wrote in the great monasteries says: these negative friends they do not appear with horns on their head and bad fangs. Rather, they come to you with a big smile on their face and display great affection for you. Perhaps, they'll invite you for tea and drink tea with you, go for walks with you. But through associating with them, your virtue becomes weakened and reduced.

Stanza 6:

The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cherish spiritual friends,
By regarding them as even more precious than one's own body,
Since they are the ones who will help to rid us of all our faults,
And make our virtues grow even greater just like the waxing moon.

We've seen it's practice of bodhisattvas to avoid destructive friends. Stanza 6 says bodhisattvas also cherish spiritual or good friends. What do we mean by good friends? They'll help us rid us of all our faults and make our virtues grow even greater just like the waxing moon. They help us get rid of negative qualities and help grow positive qualities. These are the ones who affect us in a positive manner. As above, there are 2 kinds of good friends. One type is the sense of spiritual friend. Other is the kind in the worldly sense. When you have a good spiritual friend, that person will help you progress on the spiritual path. Worldly good friend will influence you in a positive way in daily life and so on. Here, it's said that if we find a good friend, a spiritual friend, a positive companion, we should regard them as even more precious than our own body, our own life. So these people are very beneficial to us. So it's the practice of Bodhisattva to cherish good friends.

Now specifically if we are talking about a good spiritual friend, then we should make sure such a person has certain qualifications so we can rely upon this person for spiritual advice and instructions. If such a certain person doesn't have certain prerequisites, then we should not place our trust in this person.

So relying upon a spiritual friend is like trying to paint a piece of white cloth. If you rely on someone who knows what he's doing, then you'll be able to put good colours on this piece of white cloth. But if you rely on a negative spiritual friend, it's like they don't know what they're doing and if you try to paint on this cloth, he ends up ruining this cloth, messing it up b/c he doesn't know how to apply the colours and so on. Once that damage is done, it's very hard to undo it and get clean white cloth. So it's important for us to make sure that we don't end up in company of negative spiritual friend, who can mislead us and lead us on the wrong path and ruin our spiritual development. For that reason, it's important to check and trust a proper spiritual friend.

In sutras of the Buddha, he mentioned 5 faults of negative spiritual friends. The first fault is the teacher doesn't know the teachings. They're not familiar with teachings. One may think he's like a reincarnated lama and he has many eminent past lives or you may think father of this teacher is a very holy teacher. Therefore, this son must also be a holy teacher and so on. If the teacher in fact is not familiar with the teachings, then these qualities of being a reincarnated lama or having eminent relatives isn't relevant.

Second fault is dishonesty. It can be possible someone pretends to be a spiritual accomplished practitioner when in fact he doesn't have any good qualities. He can claim I'm able to display magical emanations. I remember my past lives. I have clairvoyance seeing the future when in fact he doesn't have any of these qualities.

Third fault is craving for honour and wealth. This person doesn't have good qualities but he wants to pretend to have certain good qualities so he can have a good reputation so people revere him and so on.

To say a bit more about this point, what's wrong with a teacher who is really interested in wealth and reputation? If this teacher doesn't meet a student who's wealthy (rich sponsor), then teacher will refuse to teach. If giving a particular teaching doesn't make him more famous, then he'll refuse to teach. That's a problem with a teacher who's after fame and money.

Fourth fault is pride. You may have a teacher who has certain good qualities, who's not after fame and money and so on. But b/c of his arrogance, he won't have a positive effect on you. He thinks: I know everything. Not good to place 100% trust in such a person.

Fifth fault is having anger and lacking compassion. If this teacher is very hateful and not very loving, don't rely on this person. Next we'll look at good qualities a spiritual friend should have. Someone who's a spiritual guide. 10 qualities enumerated in this text

called the Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras. 10 qualities are important for you to understand, so we'll go through 1 by 1.

First of 10 qualities is being subdued. This teacher has subdued his mind using the training in ethics. So the mind is subdued.

First, the teacher's subdued their behaviour and refrain from negative body and speech.

Second, teacher's pacified. This means teacher's trained in concentration. This means teacher has pacified the attachment, version, ignorance in his mental continuum.

Third quality is that of being greatly pacified. This refers to fact teacher has trained in wisdom and b/c of training in wisdom, teachers are able to counteract the self-grasping mind, so as much as the self-grasping mind is pacified, activities of one's 3 doors are pacified.

Fourth good quality is teacher has higher qualities than the student. If one relies upon a teacher whose qualities are poorer than one's own, one won't be able to learn much from the teacher. In fact, by staying with such a teacher, student might degenerate. So teacher should have higher qualities. If teacher has same amount of qualities as student, so student is equal to teacher, then student will not be able to increase his or her positive qualities. So fourth good quality is teacher should have higher good qualities than student.

Fifth good quality is teacher has joyous effort. When teaching students, teacher is happy to teach again and again if necessary. If students are intelligent, then they can understand what teacher teaches very quickly. If students aren't very intelligent, and teacher doesn't put in effort, teacher can't improve their understanding. So teacher should be willing to check if students understood what was taught properly. If they didn't get it, teacher should have joyous effort to teach them again and again until they get the teaching.

Sixth good quality has to do with teacher's learning. You may have a teacher who's very hard working. However, if teacher isn't very learned, there's a severe limit to what he can teach students. He should be rich in learning so when he teaches, he can provide many logical reasonings and examples to illustrate what he's teaching.

Seventh good quality is realizing reality. This teacher should ideally have realized emptiness, selflessness. But if he hasn't realized emptiness or selflessness directly, at least he should be able to give accurate explanations of what emptiness is. He should be able to explain what emptiness is, free from mistakes.

Eighth quality is eloquence. If student doesn't understand explanations, teacher should be able to explain it in other ways, e.g. paraphrase / use other techniques so student can understand what they're teaching.

Ninth quality is being compassionate, so teacher should be compassionate and want to teach out of that compassion. Ideal have great compassion; if not, at least should positive motivation: not fame / wealth when teach. If teacher is just interested in money / good reputation, then he may not teach if he thinks he won't achieve good wealth / reputation.

Tenth quality is not being weary, in the sense teacher doesn't get tired of teaching. He can put up with hardships of teaching. One is physical hardship. He's willing to put up with any physical hardship, e.g. travel to teach. Second is inner weariness, where he's willing to go through whatever needs to be done to teach a subject properly. So tenth good quality is teacher should be willing to put up with hardships.

Those are the 10 qualities a qualified spiritual guide should have. It's crucial for us to check if a person has these qualities. If you're interested in getting into this relationship of disciple-teacher. You really need to examine this person – what flaws they have, what good qualities do they have? This kind of investigation before you enter into a teacher-disciple relationship is emphasized greatly in sutra or tantra. In tantra, e.g. before one receives initiation / oral transmission / instructions from teacher, one should have checked a teacher for 12 years! If one hasn't checked, then there's actually a great danger that one might be harmed by this relationship. So tantra says check teacher for 12 years before entering relationship.

This doesn't mean in order to participate in some spiritual activity like attending class, then you need to enter into this relationship. When you come to attend a Dharma class, you can treat this as a discussion. You're just interested in methods for happiness, to avoid suffering. There's no harm by attending just a class and treating as a discussion. One can benefit from participating in such discussion. However, when serious teacher-disciple relationship, if you don't check, then can be dangerous.

Let's say you're interested in checking Geshela's good qualities. Last thing you should do is avoid attending class. If you really want to check his qualities, you should ask many questions.

So in the text under section "relying on the spiritual guide", there's actually many details. E.g. this section talking about faults of not relying on the spiritual guide; benefits and faults of relying on spiritual guide. But we don't need to go through all those details here. In the future, we can read through these explanations in Lamrim chenmo: Lama Tsongkhapa's "The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment".

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?

The meaning of this stanza is refuge in the 3 jewels. We all want happiness, not suffering. How will we achieve this? Who can we rely upon to help us? Where should we place our hopes? Here, we should place our hopes in objects who can really help us to get rid of suffering. Help us achieve happiness. So we should not rely on beings who are themselves afflicted by sufferings of samsara. If these beings cycling within cyclic existence are bound by karma and afflictions themselves, they can't help us. We rely on the 3 jewels to protect us.

e.g. Let's say you go to the beach. You want to learn how to swim. You're in the water and trying to learn how to swim. If your companion is going to help you they should have certain qualifications. Let's say you try to swim and you're struggling and you sink and you're screaming for help, help pull me out of water, and your companion is about the same level as you. They're unlikely to save you. If we want to be saved, we need to make sure we rely on someone stronger than us, who has the skills and power to protect us and help us. This is the point of the stanza here.

We want to free ourselves from suffering of cyclic existence. Main sufferings are birth, aging, sickness and death. To be free from these sufferings, we need to rely on someone who's actually able to help us. If we rely on beings who are not free from these sufferings, who are still bound by birth, aging, sickness and death, we won't be able to free ourselves from these. So we need to rely on those who aren't bound by birth, aging, sickness and death. Who are these objects of refuge? Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. According to 3 jewels, these are the final objects of refuge. Buddha is teacher, like doctor. Dharma is like medicine we need to take to recover. Sangha are like nurses who help us recover.

There's actually many details we can go through under this topic of refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. b/c we lack time, we can save those details for future. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said Buddhism can be divided into 3 aspects: Buddhist science, Buddhist view, and Buddhist practice. For those who are not religiously oriented, they can just explore Buddhist science and Buddhist view. Third is actually the religious aspect. This practice that we are discussing in stanza 7, taking refuge in the 3 jewels, falls into the 3rd category of Buddhist practice.

In Buddhist science, we are concerned about e.g. the classifications of the material world, the categories of minds and so on. These are beneficial regardless if you are interested in Buddhism as a religion. E.g. in the presentation of the mind, there is investigation into what kinds of mental attitudes are harmful, which are beneficial. And how do we reduce harmful states of mind. How do we strengthen beneficial states of mind. These are relevant regardless of whether you are interested in religion or not.

In the second category of view, one is interested in applying logical reasonings to prove the nature of attachment, pride, jealousy and so on. One investigates the nature of attachment, pride, jealousy, and other negative emotions. One checks what kinds of objects ... observe and how do they function? As a result of such analysis, one can

reduce strength of afflictive emotions and increase positive qualities. This is helpful to everyone. Regardless interest in religion, this kind of analysis is beneficial.

Chandrakirti said in the Supplement to the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara), by adhering to a self and I, and generating attachment to things, this is mine, and so on, what he's saying is that we first have this grasping to a self. We have this clinging to an I, me. b/c of this, we generate attachment and aversion. E.g. we want happiness, food, drinks, and one generates lots of attachment b/c attachment to self. If someone speaks nastily to you, you get angry. All these negative emotions arise b/c grasping to I. in this category of Buddhist view, then one checks the nature of this self-grasping I. what kind of mental state is this? By engaging in this kind of analysis, one is able to automatically reduce the power of the self-grasping mind. And reduce one's attachment, anger and so on. This kind of analysis is very important. A lot can be said about this, but perhaps we can be satisfied with this for the moment for Q/A.

We all experience unhappiness of some type, anxiety, worries and so on. Very rarely are these caused by the elements in our environment: water, fire and so on. Most of the time, we are unhappy b/c of disturbing emotions in our mind. 4 main ones are particularly troublesome: desire, anger, pride and jealousy. These are the main culprits that disturb our mind. If we are able to understand the nature of these, we're in a very good place to counteract unhappiness and anxiety and feel happier and greater sense of wellbeing.

Question: Why do you think negative emotions are so powerful in life? In certain people's lives, it's more powerful than others. Why are so they powerful? And they can take a hold of your life I guess?

Answer: main reason why they're so powerful is b/c we're very familiar with them. They've accompanied us for a very long time. For that reason, they are very strong and forceful.

Answer: e.g. when one gives rise to desire, one has attachment for a certain object. The explanations in the text say at the point of time, one perceives the object as 100% attractive. Completely desirable from its own side. You should think about if this is the case.

Translator: I'm thinking your question is not just why are destructive negative emotions powerful, but also why more powerful in certain people's lives?

Answer: The deciding factor is actually the self-grasping mind. If a person clings to the I very tightly, then this person will experience very strong negative emotions: attachment, anger, jealousy, pride and so on. But if they are more considerate of others, altruistic, then that person's negative emotions will be weaker. That person won't experience strong attachment, aversion, jealousy and so on.

The influence of this self-grasping mind is actually very easy to understand. Imagine a person has very strong clinging to the I. very self-centred. And then someone comes along and says something nasty to this person. A person who's very self-obsessed will get angry immediately. Conversely, someone who's less self-centred. Not cling to the I so tightly. This person is compassionate, caring towards others. If this person hears the same nasty words directed at them, they won't get so upset like other case, b/c they're not so focused on self, they're focused on other – wow, they're in a bad mood – must be something in their life so they're feeling miserable. b/c of this person's outlook, not self-centred, focusing on just oneself, this person won't blame that person for saying nasty things and will not get upset as in first case. Someone who's very obsessed with self.

Imagine the following scenario. 2 people in a store. They see an object they want to buy but it's the last item available on the shelf. Both need it and want to buy it. If one has a very self-centred attitude, very strong clinging to the I, they won't want to give up that object. If other says I saw it and I want it. They may get into dispute. If this person is very considerate of others, he'll understand just as I want this object, he wants to too. If he gets it, he'll be happy. So it's fine for them to get it rather than me, so this person doesn't get upset. Root of all negative emotions is self-grasping mind. Stronger the self-grasping, the more the destructive emotions will have opportunities to arise.