

English Dharma talk
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Thirty seven practices of Bodhisattvas – Class 4

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

Let's begin by considering this statement by Nagarjuna, the Indian scholar. In his Letter to a Friend, he says this precious human rebirth is of great value. If having attained such a rebirth, we fail to make use of it, it would be a huge waste. We do need to reflect on the preciousness of human existence. I repeat this explanation so you retain this significance in your mind. Regardless of what kind of activities we engage in, to benefit this life or future lives, if we don't really appreciate the value of our human existence, then those activities won't turn out well.

Some people do take for granted their human existence. E.g. in my home land, we see people who drink a lot of alcohol. They can't function properly. When someone approaches such people and advise them not to indulge in alcohol, such people may not necessarily understand the significance of the advice, b/c they have this idea that if I can find something to drink and I don't drink it, I'll be making a loss. If I have something I can eat and I don't eat it, then I'm making a loss for myself. They're not really able to understand the value of their human existence. In our previous class, we've gone through the attributes of the precious human rebirth: the 8 freedoms and so on. If we don't make use of our precious human rebirth, it would be a huge waste.

Different people have different ideas regarding what's a good life. For certain people, it means indulging in whatever drinks and pleasures you can get your hands on. They think I'm living a very carefree life, happy that way. But we all know the consumption of alcohol harms our physical health. It harms our liver in particular. This overindulgence of alcohol will cause us to fall ill. It can cause us to get serious diseases, liver cancer and so on. We'd have to undergo treatment and so on. Some of these people who can't abstain from alcohol get up dying pretty young. Even though they think they are enjoying life, they are harming themselves in reality. Someone who knows how to enjoy life will take care of their diet. They'll only consume things that don't harm their health. They'll take care of their health. By understanding this value of human existence, we'll take care of it. We'll also work on our mind and reduce the disturbing emotions. In that way, we'll experience peace and happiness. Our minds will be relaxed and we'll enjoy a long happy life. If we don't understand the value of our human existence, it can go down the drain and go to waste.

In Nagarjuna's Letter to a Friend, someone who uses a golden vessel to collect his vomit is someone who performs negative deeds. He's saying that if someone who owns very

precious vessel, a container made of gold, adorned with diamonds and other precious stones, and he doesn't know how to make use of it. He's so foolish. With such a vessel, he can do many wonderful things, e.g. sell it and do many useful things with the money. Instead, he leaves it somewhere and use it to contain some filth. People would regard him as really stupid. In a worldly sense, he'll be regarded as someone who's really silly. So what this analogy illustrates is that if we have a precious human rebirth and we use it to perform negative actions, then we're really more foolish than this person who uses this golden vessel to collect filth, b/c with this precious human rebirth, we have huge potential to collect benefit for current and future lives. If we don't cherish it and do things that harm, and cause our life to be shortened, thinking this is a good way to enjoy my life, then we're making a big mistake. We're wasting a very precious human existence.

Since we have such a wonderful human rebirth, how should we use it? Many ways. E.g. we can train in good qualities that can benefit us in this life. We can learn skills and so on that can be very useful in this life and so on that can benefit others as well. In the longer term, this precious human rebirth can be used to create causes of happy future life. Our human existence has huge potential. Beyond that, we can even attain liberation with our precious human rebirth. We can get out of samsara completely. The highest goal is attaining highest enlightenment. With our precious human rebirth, we can attain highest omniscience, Buddhahood. Our human existence has so much potential. We have complete possibilities. If we fail to realize value of our human existence and not make good use of it and do causes that make us reborn in lower realms, this is a big shame. The main point of this discussion on precious human rebirth is we realize its value and cherish it and make good use of it.

We want to use our precious human existence well. How? It's not so easy. To understand the various ways we can use our human existence properly, we need to learn the proper techniques. So we learn the 37 practices – this text.

the following stanza: Rely on solitude

3. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take to solitary places,
Avoiding the unwholesome, so that destructive emotions gradually fade
away,
And, in the absence of distraction, virtuous practice naturally gains
strength;
Whilst, with awareness clearly focused, we gain conviction in the
teachings.

If you recall when we discussed stanza 2, we spoke about how there are 2 ways to read the stanza. Literal and figurative. Similarly, here, we can also read it in 2 ways. One, more literally, and the other, figuratively.

Here, when we say “take to solitary places”, this can refer to 2 types of solitude. One is physical solitude. One tries to avoid places that are disturbing. If you are in a place with lots of busy-ness, this can be physically disturbing. The second is mental solitude, in

which you are isolating yourself from mental disturbances. By these, we mean the various types of conceptualizations, like desire, hatred, pride, and jealousy and so on. This is the second kind of solitude where you rely in a state isolated from these states of conceptualizations.

Why is it important for us to take to solitary places, rely on solitude? In stanza 3, the 2nd line says “avoiding the unwholesome, so ...” isolating ourselves from places where there are lots of physical disturbances, where our parents, friends, relatives are, we can gradually reduce our attachment to them. Also, by being in a solitary place away from our enemies, gradually, we can reduce our hatred and anger toward them. When it says our destructive emotions gradually fade away, it also refers to mental worries. By isolating ourselves. In the next line, “in the absence of ...” if we free from distractions, we can focus on virtue. We are able to concentrate on virtuous practice and so it’ll automatically gain strength. In the next line “whilst with awareness ...”, so the fact that we’re able to reduce our attachment and anger will cause our mind to become clearer. With awareness we’ll be able to focus and realize reality, gain conviction in e.g. profound emptiness and be able to have a clear understanding of what it means. So for these reasons, it’s important for Bodhisattvas to take to solitary places.

What I’ve explained is the explicit meaning and literal reading. The more important reading is the implicit meaning. When the stanza says the Bodhisattvas avoid the unwholesome, this on an implicit level, refers to abandoning the self-grasping mind. Literal is leaving physical place. In the implicit meaning, we’re avoiding the self-grasping mind. That’s responsible for our various destructive emotions, e.g. pride, jealousy, attachment and so on. Due to the self-grasping mind, we have many conceptualizations and worries and disturbing thoughts. E.g. focus on our body, we have to think about all the clothes we want to wear. Focusing on our stomach, we think I need to eat this food. One focuses on parents, siblings and so on and attachment arises. When one thinks of “my” enemies, aversion arises. So you can see self-grasping is really behind the destructive emotions we experience. If we are able to avoid the unwholesome self-grasping mind, we’ll reduce our afflictions of attachment, hatred, pride, jealousy and the rest. In the next line “in the absence ...” we’re not just saying physical distraction, we’re also saying mental distraction. Our mind will become less distracted. In that way, our virtuous practice will become stronger. The fourth line says “with awareness clearly focused” because our mental distractions weaken. Mental distractions weaken: we’ll have a clearly focused mind and that’ll help us realize reality, take us closer to the realization of selflessness. In that way, we’ll “gain conviction in the teachings”.

Between the 2 types of isolation (physical and mental), the latter is more important. For those of you who are ordained monks and nuns, if you can achieve both, that’s perfect. But most of us are lay people. The first type of isolation isn’t so important. Leaving our homeland, family behind is really not so crucial, b/c we do need to take care of our family members. The crucial point here is to isolate ourselves from attachment, anger, pride, jealousy, and other disturbing emotions. If we can do that, keep our minds away from these harmful emotions, even if we live in a physically busy environment, we can keep our minds peaceful and well. So second isolation is more important.

If you are actually able to leave your homeland and go somewhere far away and stay in a deserted place, where hardly things for you to see and hear and so on, it may help reduce your conceptualizations. But if you don't engage in effort to change your mind, it may not be so beneficial. So literal meaning of leaving homeland isn't so important. It's important for you to leave behind attachment and so on.

Main point is subdue our mind. If you go to some new place away from home land, it doesn't mean you are free from attachment and anger. You can encounter new objects that make you attach, jealousy, pride and so on. If you don't subdue your mind, we're missing the point. But if we do subdue our mind, it doesn't matter where we are physically. We'll be able to experience peace and happiness.

4. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to renounce this life's concerns,
For friends and relatives, long acquainted, must all go their separate ways;
Wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left
behind;
And consciousness, the guest who lodges in the body, must in time
depart.

It talks about practice of all Bodhisattvas being renouncing this life's concerns. The first reason is "friends and relatives, long acquainted, must all go their separate ways". We make preparations for a long time. We assume we'll live for many years and for that purpose, engage in a lot of work and activities. But the reality is when we die, then we'll have to leave everything behind. Our friends, relatives, teachers, family all of them will be left behind. We have to go alone. The same goes for our possessions. Third line: wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left behind. Although you have wealth to live 1000 years, you have to leave everything behind. You can't take anything, not even a little needle. All must be discarded.

Third reason: consciousness, the guest who lodges in the body, must in time depart

This consciousness has been with us the time we were born. Consciousness and body were obtained together. However, consciousness won't always stay in this body – this hotel. At the time of death, consciousness will leave body, lodging behind and take rebirth. So we don't have power to take our body with us, when we leave this life. When we die. So this consciousness leaves body behind.

Here, the stanza is discussing this phenomenon where people tend to do things just for the purpose of this life. We can see clearly many people obtain wealth in order to benefit this life. They hope for good reputation, fame only for this life. Not only do they run up these properties just for this life, they do it just for themselves. Maybe they think about their children and loved ones, but their perspective is narrow and short term. So it's a practice of the Bodhisattvas to renounce this life's concerns. One shouldn't be gathering possessions, fame just for the purposes of this life.

If being attached to this life and gaining wealth, reputation just for this life is flawed, then what should we do? Nothing wrong with gaining good qualities, wealth. But we should think of others and think if I acquired this good quality, then may I use it to benefit many other people. Same with wealth. Nothing wrong with wealth, but it should not be just for me. Should think: how benefit many living beings. Many poor beings. People need food and so on. We can think of how our wealth can benefit them. As much as possible, we try to make our activities worthwhile by using our good qualities, possessions to benefit as many beings as possible. If we can have this altruistic intention in our activities to gain good qualities, then our efforts will be worthwhile. So in this stanza, when it says the practice of Bodhisattvas is to renounce this life's concerns. It doesn't mean we stop working. No! it means not do things just for self. If we think of others, then those activities would be worthwhile.

When we read life stories of Bodhisattvas, we see many accounts of them engaging in activities to benefit others. In many stories, Bodhisattvas engage in business. They are merchants. They go to oceans to find jewels and bring back wealth and benefit many beings. It's not often you read in these life stories, they just go to an isolated place and completely shut them out of society and contact from other living beings. So it all depends on your motivation. You have a very vast motivation, to benefit others. Then regardless what activity you engage in you, you'll bring about huge benefit. If you can benefit others, you yourself create a lot of merit. You have this rich accumulation of merit, you can attain state of full enlightenment more quickly to help living beings. So the intention is really important.

This stanza 4 relates to mindfulness of impermanence. There's an extensive way in which one can engage in contemplation of impermanence. I'm going to explain this a bit more. We'll do the discussion based on the lam rim outlines: stages of the path to enlightenment. This meditation contains 3 root reasons and 9 points. After that, there's a conclusion. We're going to go through this meditation on impermanence.

First, 3 root points.

1. Death is certain.
2. Time of death is uncertain.
3. Only Dharma helps at the time of death.

This third point relates with our discussion in stanza 4 in which we say the consciousness, which is the guest ..., will depart. At time of death, it'll leave hotel of body and go to take rebirth. This means really, we can't bring anything along with us. Everything needs to be left behind. What will benefit us at death? Only Dharma.

There are 9 points. 3 reasons for each root point.

1. Death is certain.

We can't avoid death. Medicine can't help us avoid death. Power can't make us not die, even if we have a lot of money, we can't avoid death.

First reason is no factor can stop death. Second reason is that one can't add time to life. One gets closer to death with time. A person has a certain amount of life span. A person can't say I want more. If I'm supposed to live to 100, I want to add 20 years. As 120 years draw close, one may think I want to live 20 more. One can't live indefinitely. One can't add time to one's life.

Third reason is even when we're alive, there's limited time to practice Dharma before one must die. If you look at typical human life, when we are very young, we can't engage in any kind of spiritual practice b/c when we're young up to 8 or 9 or 10, we really involve in playing. We don't really have the kind of focus to think about training our mind. When we get older, we go to school. There are many distracting activities. At a young age, we don't think about engaging in spiritual practice. As we get older, we have other engagements. Marriage. Kids. We have to take care of kids, family members. Again, mind is full of preoccupations regarding loved ones and so on. In this way, our life is really passes along and before you know it, we're 80 and 90. We may feel old and weak. If you look at the amount of time an average person is able to spend doing spiritual practice, you'll see it's very limited. B/c our life is full of all kinds of distractions and usually, we're involved in attachment, aversion and other disturbing emotions. In this way, the human existence becomes wasted.

Point 2: time of death is uncertain.

B/c people on earth have uncertain time. On God realms, fixed times. On Planet Earth, people die at different ages. Some die 70, 90; some 20; some 2; some babies die while in mother's womb. So the life span of people on this planet is non-certain. If that's the case in general, it's true too for our own lives. We don't have definite life spans.

Second reason is the conditions that keep us alive are few, compared to the conditions that can kill us. For that reason, our life span is very uncertain. When will we be alive? Die? Completely uncertain.

In this second reason, we can reflect on the conditions that keep us alive and those that make us die. There are many conditions that can cause our death. E.g. some take medicine to cure themselves if they are physical well. But if they don't take it properly, it can kill them. Same for things we do to sustain our lives, nourish our bodies. If not die appropriately, they can kill us. There are many conditions that can kill us. In comparison, conditions that can keep us alive are few.

Our body is extremely fragile. For that reason, our time of death is uncertain. We don't know when we'll die. Compared to phenomena such as mountains or forests or rivers. Our existence is really quite fragile. When you look at these phenomena, they seem to be quite stable. But that's not the case for our body. Let's say suddenly, an earthquake happens. In a few seconds, we can become nothing. Our bodies can be destroyed. Completely disintegrate. If there's a flood, heavy rain for a few hours, a whole region

can be flooded, and people killed. Our bodies aren't that strong. Death can ... time of death is uncertain.

Only Dharma can help at time of death.

Reason 1: family and friends can't help. Say you have a teacher in this life whom you take refuge in. If your mind is weak, little your teacher can do for you. Say very good friends. Reliable. Helpful in times of difficulty. What can they do for you at time of death? If you're weak, not much except cry. So in terms of what our friends and family can do at time of death, there's very little. How will they help us avoid a bad rebirth and obtain a good rebirth? Very difficult.

Reason 2: no money or possessions can help us at time of death. In this life, we regard money and other possessions as very important. We go everywhere and take money and make great effort to accumulate money and wealth. However, at time of death, it can't help us. We can't take any. Third line: "wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left behind".

Reason 3: not even our own body can help us at time of death. This body that has accompanied us the moment we left mom's womb can't help us. It'll be left behind. It can't benefit us at time of death.

It seems this kind of discussion of death, impermanence is something Dharma practitioners often do. However, for Western people not exposed to this, this can be stressful and stir up mental worries in our mind.

We've gone through the 3 root reasons and 9 points. In the lam rim text, there's discussion of benefits of remembering death; disadvantages of not remembering death. Let's go through latter and former.

One disadvantage of not remembering death: we assume we'll live for a very long time. When you assume that, you'll make corresponding preparations so you remain for a long time. E.g. let's say you buy a house and you think I'll save it for a long time, e.g. 10 years. Because you think you'll live there for a long time, you'll prep a lot. Ensure good environment, trees and so on. You make a lot of preparations. This usually involves attachment and you create negativities in the process. Of course, when you follow attachment, afflictions and you create negative actions, then those will lead you to suffering. In contrast, if you think it's not certain I'll live here for a long time. I'll stay some days / weeks and thus you won't be making all the preparations that you otherwise would be making in terms of making this habitat very comfortable. You'll be thinking about preparations after you leave instead of this place you're staying in now. We don't know when we'll die. If we bear that in mind, we'll live a life that's more meaningful b/c we'll make preparations that's more meaningful. We'll live our lives in a way that's more beneficial to others. When we engage in altruism, that leads us to create virtue, and happiness. So difference when one has awareness of impermanence. It drives us from

avoiding causes of suffering and creating the causes of happiness. In that way, mindfulness of death is beneficial.

We went through 3 main points. For each there's a conclusion you can draw. You can generate a resolution based on that main point.

First main point: we reflect on 'death is certain'. There's nothing beneficial at time of death besides death. First conclusion we should draw from contemplation of this point is that I must practice Dharma. One generates resolution: I must practice Dharma.

We generate this resolution I must practice Dharma. One may think I'll practice Dharma in 2 or 3 years. I'll do it when I'm older, when retired. However, the time of death is uncertain. So you need to think about this second main point. If you postpone the practice, you may not practice at all. The conclusion you should draw based on contemplation of this point is I must practice Dharma from now on and not postpone. That's the resolution you should generate.

Third main point is only Dharma can help at time of death. Based on that, we draw conclusion nothing else can help me, so I should devote myself to pure Dharma practice.

Three conclusions: I must practice Dharma, I must practice it, and I must devote myself to pure Dharma practice. Those of you who are still working may wonder how do I do this? What does that mean? I don't have the time to do that.

Recall in Buddhism: Dharma depends on your INTENTION. Does not depend on external. E.g. eating can become Dharma. Walking can become Dharma. Even sleeping can become Dharma.

The great yogi Milarepa said that when I eat, it becomes a meditation. This is b/c I have the instruction for transforming eating into a tsog offering. Similarly, when I'm sleeping, I engage in meditation, b/c I'm able to engage in the meditation of clear light that realizes emptiness. I have these instructions. I also practice them.

It all depends on your motivation. No matter what kind of activity you engage in, you can transform it into Dharma. Our usual tendency is to think of ourselves when we engage in daily activities. When we are hungry, we think satisfy our own desires. When we shop, we think have a good time. When we work, we think make money. We don't think of others. If we can expand our mind, generate more altruistic motivation for same activity. Just as I want happiness, others too, so may this activity I engage in benefit others. Think when I speak, I want to benefit others. So ensure it's not mixed with 4 nonvirtues: lying, harsh speech, slander, gossip. If we have this positive motivation throughout the day, then it's possible we are practicing Dharma 24 hours a day. So you should understand when we say practice Dharma, it doesn't mean stop usual work or change your physical conduct. It's not like that. Main point is we need to change our mind. We need to have this motivation so anyone can practice the Dharma.

It's possible to practice Dharma 24 hours a day. It includes when you sleep. You may wonder how do I create virtue when I sleep? When you go to bed tonight, as you set your head on the pillow, you can reflect: what did I do today that's positive / beneficial? Rejoice in whatever you've done that's good. Also ask yourself: what have I done today that's negative / harmful? You can go for refuge to the 3 jewels and think I don't want to do this action again in the future. It was a mistake I did today. I confess and I purified that mistake. When I wake up tomorrow, I'm going to continue to do good things, benefit others. Be a good person. So as you are falling asleep, you can do the following contemplation. If you have a virtuous motivation when you sleep, the entire period of your sleep becomes beneficial. You'll be continuously creating virtue.

When you wake up, you can think I can try to benefit others. When I work, I try to benefit others. You set this as your motivation for your entire day. During this day, you have this positive motivation. You avoid harming others. When you talk, perhaps you may be more relaxed in speech so you don't harm others, so you have better relations. At the same time, mentally you create virtue all the time.

A few days ago, I read "the best makeup is a smile". That is really useful advice.

This is true. If deep in your heart, you have this wanting to benefit others, you'll have a smile. This is 100% true. In that way, you become attractive. No matter how old you are, you may be very old, maybe not physically beautiful, but I you have this good motivation and correspondingly, this smiling expression, then everyone will like you, regard you as a friend. This is the best makeup. If you do not have this good motivation. Instead, you have these negative emotions in your mind, attachment, etc., then no matter how much make up you put, you won't be attractive. People will avoid you.

It really depends on what happens inside. When old, physical beauty gone.

Question: Friend – partner wants divorce. What can I do to tell her?

Answer: You can say that in Buddhism, this is said, without imposing it on her, you should do this b/c it'll help you. Perhaps offer what is available in the Dharma that you think will be helpful. But main thing is to console her so she doesn't feel so worried.

Question: Ask interpret stanza 3. In relation to the distractions that we are talking about, there are so many things that need to be managed, is there a set of practices or prayers or readings that Geshela could recommend to strengthen self-discipline to get through those distractions?

Main method to increase self-discipline is this practice in stanza 3. Developing mindfulness of impermanence. If you think about the 3 main points we discussed earlier on. That would be really helpful in increasing self-discipline. You'll realize I'm going to die. However, I don't know when. At time of death, nothing except Dharma will help. If you reflect on these points again and again, you get the sense I gotta practice Dharma

right away. It'll give self-discipline to engage in spiritual practice. So there are a few points given in the text regarding the advantages of being mindful of death. Mindfulness of death helps in the beginning, middle, and end. Why? In beginning, it causes you to embark on Dharma practice. Middle: urges. End: urge you not to give up. Pushes you to engage in Dharma right away. In this way, you'll be able to engage in pure Dharma practice. So this mindfulness of impermanence will be very helpful in increasing self-discipline. You think: I need to practice pure Dharma right away.

It may be scary to think of impermanence. Think: these years are made of months; made of days; hours, minutes, seconds. You can observe the clock. So the second hand is ticking away. You must realize with every ticking of the clock, you're moving closer to death. If you remember this point and reflect on it again and again, it's definite the mental distractions you face will diminish. Mindfulness of death will help induce self-discipline or less distraction.