



The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

The text *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* was composed by the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo and translated into English by Ruth Sonam.

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Please pass this book around should you feel that you do not need it anymore. As the Buddha taught, the gift of Truth excels all other gifts! May all have the chance to know the Dharma.

It is very, very rare for one to have a precious human life and still be able to encounter the Buddha-Dharma, therefore please handle this book with utmost respect and care.



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Introduction

Before beginning the *Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, it's important to understand a little about the situation we're in, which is called "cyclic existence" or "samsara" in Sanskrit. Unless we have a general understanding about cyclic existence, its causes, nirvana as alternative, and the path to peace, these 37 ways in which bodhisattvas practise won't necessarily make a lot of sense to us.

There are two reasons to teach these practices: the first is so people can solve their current problems and have more happiness in this life. The second is so they can attain liberation and enlightenment. I'm going to teach the text in both ways, giving you tools to help you in this life, but showing that the long term purpose of these tools is to free ourselves and others from cyclic existence.

If you aspire for liberation and enlightenment, you need to know from what you want to be liberated. That means you should understand the present situation you're in and what causes it. This is crucial for any deep spiritual practice. Otherwise, it is very easy for our spiritual practice to be defiled by the eight worldly concerns:

attachments to 1) material possessions and money, 2) approval, praise and love, 3) reputation and image, 4) sense pleasure. The other four worldly concerns are not getting the previous four and experiencing their opposites—dejection because of lacking material possessions and money, receiving blame or disapproval, having a bad reputation or image, and experiencing unpleasant sights, sounds, odours, tastes, or tactile sensations. But, when we're aware of what cyclic existence is and have a sincere wish to be free from it—that is, to renounce suffering and its causes—then the motivation for our spiritual practice becomes quite pure.

Cyclic Existence

What is samsara or cyclic existence? It is being in this situation where, again and again, we take rebirth under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and karma. Due to ignorance, afflictions and karma, our mind is propelled into another body again and again. Samsara is also the five psycho-physical aggregates that we live with right now, that is, our 1) body; 2) feelings of happiness, unhappiness and indifference; 3) discriminations of this and that; 4) emotions, attitudes and other mental factors, and 5) consciousnesses which include the five sense consciousnesses which know sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations, and the mental consciousness which thinks, meditates and so forth.

In short, the basis upon which we label “I”—our body and mind—is cyclic existence. Cyclic existence doesn't mean this world. This is important because some people think, “Oh, you renounce cyclic existence. You want to escape from the world. You want to

go to never-never land”. That is not it. Renunciation is about renouncing suffering, or unsatisfactory circumstances and their causes. In other words, we want to relinquish attachment to this body and mind produced under the influence of ignorance, mental afflictions and karma.

Our Body

We all have a body. Did you ever stop to wonder why we have a body? Have you ever wondered if there are alternatives to having a body that gets old, sick and dies? We live in the midst of our consumer society where body is seen as beautiful and we are encouraged to spend as much money as possible to satisfy the wants, needs and pleasures of this body. What exactly is this body that we spend so much time taking care of?

We are socialised to regard our body in certain ways. So much of our identity depends on the colour of the skin of this body, the reproductive organs of this body, the age of this body. So much of our identity is bound up with this body. So much of what we do on a day-to-day basis is about giving pleasure to this body and beautifying this body. How much time do we spend making this body look good? Men and women alike can spend a long time looking in the mirror and worrying about how we look—Are we too fat? Too thin? Do we have pimples? Does our body bulge where we want it to bulge and not bulge where we don’t want it to bulge? Should we dye our hair or pierce our body to make it more attractive?

We’re concerned about how we look, and whether other people will find us attractive. We don’t want to look like a slob. We’re

concerned about our weight, so we watch what we eat. We're concerned about how we appear, so we think about the clothes we wear. We think about what portions of our body to hide and what parts to show off or reveal. We're concerned about having grey hair, so we dye it. Or even if we are young and our hair isn't grey yet, we want our hair to be another colour—sometimes even pink or blue! We're concerned about having wrinkles, so we use anti-ageing skincare or receive Botox treatments. We want to make sure that our glasses are the stylish type of glasses that everyone is wearing and our clothes are the right kind of clothes that are in fashion now. We go to the gym, not only to make our body healthy, but to sculpt it into what we think other people think our body should look like. We mull over restaurant menus when we dine out, pondering which dish is going to give us the most pleasure. But then we worry that it's too fattening.

We are so focused on giving this body pleasure. So we have to get a mattress that is not too hard and not too soft. We want our house or our work place at the right temperature. If it's too cold, we complain. If it's too hot, we complain. The sofas must feel right; they can't be too hard or too soft. Even our car seats have to be exactly as we like them. Nowadays in some cars the driver's seat and the passenger's seat have different heating elements so the person sitting next to you can be at 20°C, and you can be at 22°C. Once I was in a car where I experienced a strange feeling of heat below me and wondered if something was wrong with the car. I asked my friend who explained that heating in each seat was the latest feature so that we could be comfortable. That shows how much we seek even the tiniest pleasure.

Have you ever thought about how much time people spend talking about food? When we go to a restaurant, we spend time pondering the menu, asking our friend what he or she will have, and questioning the waitress or waiter about the ingredients and which dish he or she thinks is better. When the food arrives, we're talking with our friend about other things so we don't taste each bite, but after we finish eating we talk about whether the meal was good or bad, too spicy or not spicy enough, too hot or too cold.

We put so much time and energy into trying to make our body comfortable all the time. And yet, what is this body actually? It's nothing but an accumulation of atoms and molecules. That's all it is. It's a combination of elements on the periodic chart. That's all our body is.

The Reality of Our Body

First the body is born, which can be a rather difficult process. Parents look forward to having the baby. But, they call it labour for some reason—having a baby is hard work. Being born is hard on the baby too: he or she is squeezed out and then welcomed into the world with a whack on the bottom and drops in the eyes. The baby wails even though the doctor and nurse do this out of compassion.

After birth, ageing immediately begins. The moment we are conceived in our mother's wombs, we are in the process of ageing. Even though our society idolises youth, nobody is staying young. Everybody is ageing. How do we view ageing? How do we treat old people? That's going to be indicative of how people will treat us when we're old. How do you treat your parents? That sets an

example for your children, showing them how they should treat you when you're old.

We can't stop the ageing process. Do we know how to age gracefully? Do we have the skill to work with our mind as it finds itself in an ageing body? The Dharma can help us have a happy mind as we age, but we're often too busy enjoying sense pleasures to practise it. Then when our body is old and cannot enjoy sense pleasures so much, our mind becomes depressed and the life seems purposeless. How sad it is that so many people feel that way!

Our body also gets sick. That, too, is a natural process. Nobody likes it, but our body falls ill anyway. Despite all our efforts to give this body a lot of pleasure, it is never content. All you have to do is sit still and try to do breathing meditation for twenty minutes and you see how discontent the body is. The knee hurts, the back hurts, and the neck hurts. "I have too much restless energy. I've got to shift this. I've got to wiggle. I itch. I twitch." Our bodies are not at all peaceful. We can't sit quietly. The body is continuously experiencing some kind of discomfort.

Our body is basically an excretion factory. We do so much to clean our body. Why? Because our body is dirty all the time. What does it make? It makes faeces, urine, sweat, bad breath, ear wax, mucus and so forth. Our body doesn't emanate perfume, does it? This is the body we adore and treasure, the body we try so hard in making it looks good.

After birth, ageing and illness, what happens? Death. This is not something we look forward to. But, it is the natural result of having a body. There's no way to avoid death.

This is the situation we're in. It's uncomfortable to think about this so we try to avoid looking at this reality. Nobody likes to go to cemeteries, so we make them incredibly beautiful in the U.S. They are landscaped with green grass and beautiful flowers. In one such cemetery in California, there is even an art museum and park, so you can go to the cemetery for a picnic on Sunday afternoon and look at art. In that way, we avoid remembering that cemeteries are where we put dead bodies.

When people die, we put makeup on them, so they look better than when they were alive. When I was still in university, my friend's mother died and I went to her funeral. She had been ill for a long time with cancer and was emaciated. But they did such a good job of embalming her that people at the funeral commented that that was the best they had seen her look in a long time! We ignore death so much that we tell our children that their dead relatives went to sleep for a long time, because we don't understand what death is and death is too scary for us to think about.

We do not enjoy these natural processes that our bodies go through, so we do our best to avoid thinking about them or having them happen. Yet, they're definite once we have a body. Think about this: Do I want to continue living in this state—a state where I am born with this type of body? We may say, "Well, if I'm not born with this kind of body, I won't be alive." That leads to another can of worms: Is our life completely satisfactory? What kind of life do we want? What does it mean to be alive? Who's this "I" who thinks it's alive?

The unsatisfactory nature of the mind and our existence

We have a body and a confused mind that are unsatisfactory in nature. That's the meaning of *dukkha*. Sometimes we translate *dukkha* as suffering, but, it really means unsatisfactory in nature.

Although our body does bring us some pleasure, the situation of having a body under the influence of ignorance and karma is unsatisfactory. Why? Because there is no lasting or secure happiness or peace. Similarly, an ignorant mind is unsatisfactory in nature.

Our mind has the Buddha nature, but right now that Buddha nature is obscured and our mind is confused by ignorance, attachment, anger, and other disturbing emotions and distorted views. For example, we try to think clearly and we fall asleep. We get confused when we try to make decisions; we aren't clear what criteria to use to make wise choices. We're not clear regarding what are constructive actions and what are destructive actions. We sit down to meditate and our mind bounces all over the place. We can't take two or three breaths without the mind getting distracted or drowsy. What is our mind distracted by? By-and-large, we're running after objects that we're attached to. Or, we planned how to destroy or get away from things we don't like. We sit to meditate and plan the future instead—where we'll go on holiday, what movie we want to watch with our friend. Or, we are distracted by the past and rerunning events from our life again and again. Sometimes we try to re-write our own history and sometimes we just get stuck in the past and feel hopeless or resentful. None of this makes us happy, does it?

Do we want to be born again and again, under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and karma which make us take a body and mind which are unsatisfactory in nature? Or, do we want to see if there is a way to free ourselves from this situation so that we can find a type of existence where we aren't attached to a body and mind like these that are under the influence of afflictions and karma? Is it possible to have a pure body and pure mind that are free of ignorance, mental afflictions and the karma that causes rebirth? If so, what is that state and how can we attain it?

Spend some time thinking about this. Look at your current situation and ask yourself whether you want this to continue. If you don't want it to continue, is it possible to change? And, if it's possible to change, how do you do it?

Although we haven't used this term above, this is the topic of the Buddha's first teaching—the Four Noble Truths.

The Ignorance: The Root of All Suffering

Having realised the situation of cyclic existence is unsatisfactory, we seek its causes. These are ignorance, mental afflictions and the karma they produce. Ignorance is the mental factor that misunderstands how things exist. It's not simply obscuration about the ultimate nature; rather it's the ignorance which actively misapprehends the ultimate mode of existence. Whereas things exist dependently, ignorance grasps them as having their own inherent essence. Ignorance holds persons and phenomena to exist from their own side, by their own power, with their own essence. Due to beginningless latencies of ignorance, persons and phenomena

appear inherently existent to us, and then ignorance actively grasps what appears as true.

In relation to ourselves, what we call “I”, there appears to be a very solid and real person, self, or “I” there. That view grasping a solid, inherently real “I” is a type of ignorance. While such a truly existent “I” does not exist at all, ignorance grasps it as existent.

Does that mean there is no “I”? No. There is an “I” that exists. It exists by merely being labelled in dependence upon the body and mind. But ignorance doesn’t understand that this “I” is just a dependently existent thing and instead constructs this big *Me* that exists independent of everything. This independent “I” seems so real to us even though the “I” doesn’t exist in that way at all. This big *Me* is the centre of our universe and we do everything to give it what it desires, protect it, and take care of it. The fears that something bad will happen to *Me* fill our mind, and cravings for what will give *Me* pleasure blind us.

The way we think we exist, or who the “I” is, is total hallucination. We think and feel there’s this big *Me* there. “*I* want to be happy. *I* am the centre of the universe. *I, I, I*”. But what is this “I” or self that we predicate everything on? Does it exist the way it appears to us? When we start to investigate and scratch the surface, we see it doesn’t. A real Self or Soul appears to exist, but when we search for what exactly it is, instead of becoming clear, it becomes more nebulous. Finally, when we have searched for this seemingly solid “I” everywhere in our body and mind and even as something separate from our body and mind, we can’t find it anywhere. The only conclusion at that point, is to acknowledge it doesn’t exist.

We have to be careful here. The inherently existent “I” that we grasp as existent does not exist but the conventional “I” does. The “I” that exists nominally, by being merely designated in dependence upon the body and mind—the conventional and relative “I”—does exist. It appears and it functions, but it is not an independent entity that stands on its own under its own power.

By seeing that there is no inherent existence in either persons or phenomena, and by repeated familiarisation with this understanding, we eliminate the ignorance that grasps at inherent existence. When we generate the wisdom that understands reality, the ignorance that sees the opposite of reality automatically is overpowered, because that ignorance apprehends a hallucination. When we understand things as they are, then the minds that misapprehend them get left by the wayside.

In this way ignorance is eliminated from the root so that it can never reappear. When ignorance is ceased, the mental afflictions which are born from it also are cut off, just as the branches of a tree are cut down when the tree is uprooted. In this way, the karma produced by the afflictions ceases to be generated and as a result, the dukkha of samsara stops. In brief, cutting off ignorance extinguishes afflictions. That stops the creation and ripening of karma that bring rebirth in cyclic existence. When rebirth ceases, dukkha does as well. Therefore, the wisdom of realising emptiness is the true path that leads us out of dukkha.

To generate the energy to practise the path that leads to nirvana, we must first be acutely aware of the unsatisfactoriness of cyclic existence. Here it becomes obvious that the Buddha did not talk about suffering so that we would become depressed. Feeling depressed is

useless. The reason for thinking about our situation and its causes is so we will do something constructive to free ourselves from it. It's very important to think about and understand this. If we're not aware of what it means to be under the influence of afflictions and karma, if we don't understand the ramifications of having a body and mind that are based on ignorance and afflictions, then we will simply be blasé and do nothing to improve our situation. The tragedy of such indifference and unknowing is that suffering does not stop at death. Cyclic existence continues with our future lives. So this is very serious and we need to pay attention to what the Buddha said so that we don't find ourselves in a really horrible rebirth next life, a life in which there's no opportunity to learn and practise the Dharma.

If we just ignore the fact that we're in samsara and immerse ourselves in trying to be happy in this life by receiving money and possessions; praise and approval; good reputation and sense pleasure and by avoiding their opposites, what will happen when we die? We'll be reborn. And after that we'll take another life and another and another, all under the control of ignorance, afflictions, and karma. We've been doing this since beginningless time. That's why it is said we've done everything and been everything in cyclic existence. We've been born in the realms of highest pleasure and realms of great torment and everything in between. We've done this countless times, but for what purpose? Where has it gotten us? Do we want to continue living like this endlessly in the future?

When we see the reality about samsara, something inside us shakes, and we become afraid. This is a wisdom fear. It is not a panicked, freaked-out fear. It's a wisdom fear because it sees clearly what our situation is. In addition, this wisdom knows there

is an alternative to the continued misery of samsara. We want genuine happiness, peace that won't disappear with changing conditions. This wisdom fear isn't looking to just put a band-aid on our dukkha and make our body and mind comfortable again so that we can continue ignoring the situation. This wisdom fear says, "Unless I do something really serious, I'm never actually going to be completely satisfied and content. I will never make the best use of my human potential, or be genuinely happy. I don't want to waste my life, so I'm going to practise the path to cease dukkha and find secure peace, peace that will enable me to work for the benefit of sentient beings without being encumbered by my own limitations.

Rebirth

Implicit in this explanation is the idea of rebirth. In other words, there isn't just this life. If there were just this life only, when we died samsara would be over. In that case, there's no need to practise the path. But, it's not like that.

How did we get here? Our mind had to have had a cause. It didn't arise out of nothing. We say it came as a continuation of the mind of the previous life. What happens when we die? The body and mind separate. The body is made of matter. It has its continuum and becomes a corpse. The mind is clear and aware. It isn't the brain—the brain is part of the body and is matter. The mind, on the other hand, is formless. It is not material in nature. It, too, has its continuum. The continuum of clarity and awareness goes on to another life.

The mind is the conscious aspect of ourselves. The presence or absence of consciousness is what differentiates a corpse from a living being. The continuity of our mind has existed beginninglessly and will continue to exist endlessly. Thus it is something we need to be concerned about. Our happiness depends on what's going on in our mind. If our mind is contaminated by ignorance, the result is cyclic existence. If the mind is imbued with wisdom and compassion, the result is enlightenment.

Thus it's crucial to think about our situation in cyclic existence. One of the things that makes it so difficult for us to see our situation is that the appearance of this life is so strong. What appears to our senses seems so real, so urgent and concrete that we can't imagine anything else. Yet everything that appears to exist with its own, true and inherent nature does not exist in the way it appears. Things appear unchanging whereas they are in continual flux. What is dukkha in nature seems to be happiness, but it isn't. Things appear as independent entities, whereas they are dependent. Our mind is tricked and deceived by appearances and this obscures us from seeing what samsara really is and from cultivating the wisdom that frees us from it.

Socialisation and Conformity

Although we feel like independent entities who think for ourselves and are in control, in fact we are dependently arisen. We are the result of many causes and conditions and we continue to be conditioned by other factors. For example, we have been conditioned by years of socialisation by our family, school system,

work place, and friends. Society—this collection of human beings of which we are a part—has conditioned what we do, how we think, and who we are. We seldom stop to question this conditioning, but just take it on and follow it.

For example, have we stopped to contemplate our priorities in life? Or have we just gone along with the flow, in which case our top priority is usually doing what we think other people think we should do. We try to be what we think other people think we should be, and we want to have what we think other people think we should have. Without stopping to consider what is of value in life and our priorities, we live in chaos from day to day: running here, running there, doing this, doing that. Never finding any actual peace of mind, we keep ourselves extraordinarily busy doing many things without considering why we are doing them. Like little mice that scamper around on treadmills or the turkeys that run around the Abbey, we flutter around feeling that what we're doing is important and essential. But is it? We say, "I *have to* do this and that". Do we have to or do we choose to? It's as if we were on a merry-go-round that we never get off of because we're afraid to get off. We don't know what it's like to stand still and thinking of it makes us edgy. Even though circling on the merry-go-round makes us sick to our stomach, it's familiar and so we stay with it. It's not getting us anywhere, but we've never stopped to question where we are and where we could be.

If we aren't willing to challenge some fundamental views that we have about life, instead of liberation and enlightenment being the important things we want to accomplish, paying the bills and having a good social life become the most important things we do. To pay the bills, we have to go to work. To go to work, we have to

buy particular clothes and drive a certain car because we have to portray a certain image to get that kind of job. To get those clothes and that car, we have more bills to pay, so we have to go to work to pay the bills to get the things so that we can go to work. Does doing this make any sense?

You are busy running around, taking your kids here and there. What are you trying to teach your kids? To live a chaotic life like mum and dad? To continually be so busy that you never have time to look your dear ones in the eyes and appreciate their presence? Are you teaching your children to explore the world and love the people and environment? Or are you teaching them, through your behaviour, to be too busy and constantly stressed?

I watch children, and they are shuffled from one lesson to another lesson, from one activity to the next. Everything is planned and they have the pressure to succeed at all these lessons and activities. So instead of learning to enjoy being with other people and enjoy the various activities for what they are, children feel pressured to be successful, to be the best, to be better than someone else. Forget about having fun doing the activity, forget about being creative, forget about enjoying being with people—children are taught to compete and come out on top. Only then will they be valued and loved. Something is wrong with this picture, don't you think? When I was a child, we used to play in the dirt in the back yard. We didn't need to have lots of colourful toys. We used sticks and stones and built things and had fun without our parents spending \$1000 to clutter the house with toys that we got bored with.

So, what exactly are you teaching your kids? Are you letting them access their own creativity? Or, are you encouraging them to

be conscious of what they wear so that they look like all the other kids with their designer clothes? Then, since they want to be like everyone else, they want to have body piercings and tattoos. Are you teaching your children to conform to what society thinks they should be at this moment? Or, are you teaching your children how to be happy individuals? Those are two different things. Is conforming to what we think society thinks we should be actual happiness?

We have an idea that if we conform enough, but are individual enough, then we'll be happy. So, we all try to be individual in a conforming way. Or, we all try to conform in our own individual way. This is crazy-making, don't you think? Where's the balance? "I'm too much like people; I've got to be more of an individual." Or, "I'm too much of an individual. I don't fit in with everybody else. I want to fit in with them, but, I don't like who I am when I try to fit in. But that doesn't matter, because it's too scary not to fit in with them." This is what goes on in our minds about conformity and individuality, and that's what we teach kids. So from the time they're in kindergarten, they're trying to look like everybody else, have the same toys as everybody else, watch the same TV programmes as everybody else, and yet be an individual in a conforming way.

I don't know who this "everybody else" is, but we all seem to want to be like them, and we never feel that we are enough like them. We never seem to feel like we fit in. When we talk to the people who seem to fit in, we'll discover that they, too, don't feel like they fit in. So, I think we need to question how we live our lives and what behaviour we are modelling for children. Looking at how you live your life, do your children understand what happiness is? Do they learn how to resolve conflicts? Do

they learn to be kind? Children learn by example, so we have to investigate what kind of examples we are.

Happiness

What does happiness mean to you? Are you really living in a way that brings you happiness and peace? Or, are you trying to live an image of what you think you should be happy doing? Does that bring fulfilment? What kind of an example are you for others?

In our contradictory American culture we're supposed to be overwhelmingly happy because we've got the right kind of toothpaste and the best laundry soap. We have a car and a mortgage; we have almost everything that we've been conditioned to think we should have to be happy. But we're not happy, and we don't know what to do because we've done everything we're supposed to do to be happy. It's not very "in" to say you're miserable.

On the other hand, what do we talk about when we get together with our friends? "I'm not happy about this. My kids do this, my spouse does that, the government... the politicians..." We complain to our friends all the time about what isn't going right in our lives. So, we're quite contradictory.

We want to say, "I'm a happy person," but when other people look at our life, what do they see? This is an interesting topic to reflect on. What do your kids see when they look at your life? What do your friends see when they look at your life? Are we moving through life in a calm and pleasant way? Or, are we constantly anxious, frenzied, irritated, complaining, and trying to do too many things in an attempt to be happy?

Do your kids ever see you being peaceful? Or, are you always busy, running around doing something? When you say you're relaxed, what do your friends and our kids see you doing for relaxation? This is really interesting. Are you sitting in front of the TV, surfing the web, sleeping fourteen hours a day, watching horror movies or sci-fi flicks? Are you drinking or drugging? What are you doing when you say you are relaxing? What message are you giving to people who watch when you're supposedly relaxing? If you never take time to relax, what are you doing? Are you in front of the computer constantly sending emails or pounding out a report on the keyboard? When you're relaxing, are you focused single-pointedly on your blackberry screen or exercising your thumbs by sending text messages? Is that the image of happiness you teach your children?

Are we living life? We say we want to be peaceful and happy. Are we doing what we need to do to be peaceful and happy? Or do we say, "Oh yes, I'm doing things to be happy. I'm working overtime so that I can buy the car that I want, because that car's going to make me happy". Does that car really make you happy?

One day, while visiting Harvard, I talked to Dr. Dan Gilbert, who does research on happiness. He observes how much happiness people expect to have from a material object, say the car versus how much happiness they actually obtain from it. He found that there is a big discrepancy between how much happiness we think we're going to get from something and how much happiness we actually receive from it. But somehow, we never learn and we keep working very hard to get those things we've been socialised to think give happiness. But when we get them, they don't really

make us happy. Because if they did, we wouldn't have gone out and bought another thing.

What is happiness, really? How do you know when you're happy? Are we peaceful? Or, are we just living on automatic mode, doing what we think we should do? Do we worry that the world will fall apart if we don't do what we think others think we should do?

Observing how we live our life and the assumptions that lie behind relates to the larger topic of samsara. On a deeper level, what does it mean to be trapped in cyclic existence? How does that relate to our daily life and the choices we make? Why are we doing what we are doing? Is it to make our body happy? If so, what's the nature of this body? Is it possible for this body ever to be happy? If the answer is "No," then what am I going to do? What are the alternatives to having a body like this and to living a life which is focused on running around trying to bring pleasure to this body?

The Alternative Path

Here is where the Noble Eightfold Path comes in. Here is where the thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva have something to offer. These are the alternatives to a frenzied life and a life lived on automatic mode. These are the antidotes to this cycle of constantly recurring problems in which we are born again and again under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and karma.

Even though we desperately want to be happy, we harbour fear of changing. We're so familiar with our habits, that it's scary to try and change. We fear, "Who am I going to be?" We worry, "If I don't answer every email that's written to me, and people get upset with

me, who am I going to be? If I don't run around and keep myself the busiest of the busy, who am I going to be? If I'm not feeling overwhelmed by my life, I might have to sit down and meditate. If I sit down and meditate, I'll have to look at how berserk my mind is. I don't want to do that. I'm too busy to do that!" This is the cycle we get ourselves into. Even though it's uncomfortable, it's familiar and so change seems threatening.

It's important to take some time and think about this situation. Gaining clarity on what is truly of importance in life is essential. We need to be courageous enough to question what we do and to shine light into the corner of our mind that is afraid of changing. This is an area to research in your meditation: What would I like to change about myself and how I'm living? Does change prompt anxiety? How do I respond to feelings of anxiety? Maybe we become anxious about being anxious. Maybe we become anxious about not being anxious. "If I take steps to remedy my anxiety and stop being such an anxious person, who am I going to be?" Our self-preoccupied mind is so creative in the ways it gets caught up in its own thoughts.

We really have to laugh at ourselves sometimes. The mind that is under the influence of ignorance and afflictions thinks in hilarious ways. For example, we may worry about not being worried: "If I don't worry about this person, it means I don't love them. What's wrong with me that I'm not worried?" Is that true? If you love someone, is it imperative that you worry about them? If you don't worry about them does it mean that you're hard-hearted and don't love them? Is that true?

We believe it's true, but it's not true at all. But we still believe it and are scared to question, "Who will I be if I don't worry about this person and that? Who am I going to be if I don't try to save everybody? I've got to fix everyone's lives and make sure they're okay." Then we wonder, "Maybe I'm meddling in their business," but we quickly counteract that with, "It's not meddling in their business. I just know what's best for them. Since they can't manage their lives, I'd better do it for them." Do you see why the self-preoccupied mind is said to be our enemy? It will twist anything around to make itself the centre of attention, to make itself important.

Can we laugh at our mind when it does this? I hope so. Taking ourselves too seriously will only make it worse. When you think about it, it's pretty funny that we think being a "people pleaser" or everyone's "saviour" or the "One in Control" or "Mr. or Ms. Popularity" will make us happy.

It's very helpful to examine the behaviours we're hooked on and see if they create the causes for peace and happiness. Let's just look at our own experiences and investigate if they bring good results either now or in the future. If they don't, then let's abandon them.

Sit quietly and do some reflection to uncover the assumptions that your life is based upon. Think about what is meaningful in life considering that one day we will die. Try to get a sense of your great human potential and how it can be developed.



Paying Homage

Homage to Lokeshwara

*I pay constant homage through my three doors,
To my supreme teacher and protector Chenrezig,
Who while seeing all phenomena lack coming and going,
Makes single-minded effort for the good of living beings.*

*Perfect Buddhas, source of all well-being and happiness,
Arise from accomplishing the excellent teachings,
And this depends on knowing the practices.
So I will explain the practices of bodhisattvas.*

These are the words of a Tibetan monk named Gyelsay (Bodhisattva) Togmay Zangpo, who lived several centuries ago. The text starts out by paying homage to Avalokiteshvara (Lokeshwara), the Buddha of Compassion. Avalokiteshvara is called Chenrezig in Tibetan, Kuan Yin in Chinese, and Kannon in Japanese. “Paying homage through three doors” means showing respect physically, verbally, and mentally. Chenrezig simultaneously sees that “all phenomena lack coming and

going”—that is, that they are empty of inherent existence in that they do not inherently arise or inherently cease—and “makes single-minded effort for the good of sentient beings”—that is, he acts with love, compassion and bodhicitta to liberate all sentient beings and lead them to full enlightenment.

A Buddha is someone who has completely eliminated all defilements from the mind and developed all good qualities limitlessly. Buddhas are sources of all well-being and happiness because they teach us the Dharma and by practising that, we will eliminate all misery and create the causes for all happiness and peace. To accomplish the final goal of the teachings, we have to know what to practise, and thus the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo will explain the practice of bodhisattvas—those beings who have a strong motivation to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. By doing these bodhisattva practices, we will become bodhisattvas, advance on the bodhisattva path, and eventually become fully enlightened Buddhas, like Chenrezig.



VERSE

1

Precious Human Life

*Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune,
Hear, think and meditate unwaveringly night and day
In order to free yourself and others
From the ocean of cyclic existence—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

An Amazing Opportunity

Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo will now explain how to engage in these bodhisattvas' practice so that we will be able to become Buddhas. The first step is to recognise the unique opportunity we have this life to learn, think about and meditate on the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings. Our precious human life is called a "rare ship of freedom and fortune". It is rare because it is not

common to attain it or easy to create the causes to receive it. It acts like a ship, because by using this life properly we can cross the ocean of cyclic existence and arrive at the lasting peace of liberation and enlightenment. It is a life of freedom because we are unhindered by certain obstacles that impede learning and practising the Dharma, and it is a life of fortune because it has conducive circumstances to do just that.

Our current lives are free in the sense that we are free from being born in the realms of great suffering or realms of too much happiness. If we are born in realms of great suffering—the hellish realm, the hungry ghost realm, the animal realm—the mind is too distracted by either ignorance or physical suffering to be able to do spiritual practice. If we are born in the god realms where the beings have incredible sense pleasure or mental pleasure, we're too distracted by the pleasure to actually focus on freeing ourselves or practising the path.

A precious human life has exactly the right combination of suffering and happiness. It is considered a good rebirth in samsara because it has the right combination of pleasant circumstances so that we are not constantly overwhelmed by pain, and enough suffering to remind us that we're not liberated yet so we need to make effort to practise.

Not every human life is a precious human life. In addition to having human aggregates—the body and mind—we must be healthy, have interest in the Dharma and have access to Dharma teachers, teachings and a supportive community with which to practise. We must have benefactors who provide food, clothing, shelter and medicine so that we can practise. It's rare to have a precious human

life with all the necessary conditions, so once we have it, we should cherish the opportunity that it provides.

We have to create a lot of causes for such a life—keeping ethical discipline, being generous and so forth. It's hard to create all of these causes, and thus it's difficult to attain the result. Just take a look around. Numerically, how many living beings on this planet have a precious human life? Compared to animals and insects, human beings in general are hugely out-numbered. In addition, not everyone who has a human life has a precious human life. To have a precious human life, you must have encountered the Dharma and have interest in it; you must have the mental and physical ability to practise it. Just being born human isn't enough. Looking at it this way, we see that the vast majority of human beings don't have a precious human life.

Thus numerically, it is difficult to attain a precious human life with mental clarity and physical health, ability to meet Dharma teachers, hear teachings, have contact with a sangha of four or more fully-ordained monastics, and live in a place where there is religious freedom so that we can practise. Our present opportunity is quite extraordinary—almost like a miracle—when we think about it. But unless someone points out our fortune to us and unless we recognise and appreciate that opportunity, we will spend our lives complaining about everything that is wrong. Only when we are interested in spiritual practice do we realise how incredibly fortunate our life is and discover that there's not much to complain about at all.

If you're interested in spiritual practice and meditate on precious human life, your heart will be filled with joy. You

will feel so fortunate and will find nothing to complain about because you will realise you have the freedom to do what is most important—to practise Dharma in order to free yourself and others from cyclic existence.

How do you free yourself and others? By hearing, thinking and meditating on the Buddha’s teachings. First we have to hear the Dharma. “Hear” means not just hearing with our ear, but learning the teachings. That is, we want to hear teachings orally, read Dharma texts and study what we have heard and read.

I think hearing is mentioned specifically because in previous times, books were rare. Certainly at the time of the Buddha and for centuries after that, printed material was scarce. Learning was done orally, by hearing the teachings. But, I also think we receive something special when we hear the teachings that we don’t receive when we read them. What do we receive? We receive the oral transmission. We receive the teachings from someone who practises the Dharma and who tells us in person how to practise. That is very different from listening to a tape at home or reading a book. A book can be very inspiring and by reading it, we gain information. Supplementing listening to teachings with reading Dharma books is excellent. But if all we do is read and study through printed material without receiving oral teachings from someone who practises them, something is lacking.

I say this based on personal experience. Nothing can take the place of having a real, live human being there to teach us. A living teacher is a role model of what we can become. He or she provides a vision to us that inspires us to practise and become like them. Our teacher can correct our faults and guide us by giving personal

advice that fits our specific situation. A spiritual mentor shows by his or her example how to live the teachings. That's quite precious. A book doesn't show us how to live the teachings in day-to-day life. However, when we watch how our spiritual mentors act in their daily lives—how they relate to the people and events happening around them—it gives us a living example of Dharma in action.

Hearing the teachings live is also precious. In this day of the Internet, you can listen to valuable teachings online, which is very helpful. But it's different from sitting in a room with your spiritual mentor who is speaking directly to you. Even if you're there with thousands of other students, as is the case when His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches, your teacher is talking directly to you in real time.

You may ask, "Why do I need to leave the comfort of my own home and go somewhere to hear teachings? Can't I just lie down, relax, and have a Pepsi while I listen to the MP3 recording? It's so much more comfortable to sit in my easy chair and watch a streamed teaching on my computer. What's wrong with listening to a CD while I drive to work? My life is very busy and at least this way I can learn the Dharma."

All of that is true, and certainly hearing some Dharma is better than hearing none. But if you have a choice, which mode of learning the teachings will make the most impact on your mind? What do you get from attending a teaching live that you don't get from listening a recording? First there is the effect of the effort that you make to be there. That makes a big difference. When we have to put in effort to be somewhere, we pay more attention to what we learn there. We cherish it more. In addition, when you go

to a centre, temple or monastery to listen to teachings, you have to sit up straight. You're not lying in your bed drinking a cup of tea, relaxing. Thus your body and mind are both more attentive. Your physical posture is one of respect towards the teacher and teachings. This, too, influences your mind. It's very different than lying down or leaning back on your sofa.

Furthermore, you have to put in effort to drive to where the teacher is; you have to go outside the comfort of your own home to receive something of great value to you. Unlike listening to teachings while you're driving, in the presence of your teacher, you're able to pay closer attention; you do not have to look out for red lights or check your speedometer. Your teacher will look at you—that inspires you to pay attention instead of letting your mind wander. That's especially true if your spiritual mentor occasionally stops and questions the students in the middle of a teaching. Also, sitting in a room with other people reminds you that you're connected to other living beings. You're not sitting there with headphones on in your own little world. You're with other people practising. That makes a big difference.

Nowadays people want to get everything in an easy, simple manner. "I want to lie in bed and get enlightened. Why can't I just sit in the garden, look at the flowers, drink a cup of tea, and watch televised teachings at the same time?"

Having to make the effort to come and listen with a group makes a big difference. We sit up straight and pay attention; we are in a room used especially for teaching and meditation, not for sleeping, calculating our insurance, or playing with the kids. We're together with a group of people who gathered together with a

virtuous intention. And most of all, we're listening to someone we respect and trust telling us about how they practise, which is how an entire lineage of practitioners dating back to the time of the Buddha also practised.

Thinking and Meditating

After listening to teachings, we have to think about them. Learning about the teachings is the first step, but it's not sufficient for gaining realisations. We need to think about what we have heard to cultivate a correct understanding. In this context, thinking doesn't mean just pondering by ourselves; it also means discussing with other people. If we only think about the teachings by ourselves, we may think that we understand them. But when somebody asks us a question, we realise we don't understand the teachings well enough to give a clear response. Discussing the teachings with other people, listening to their questions, considering their interpretations of the teachings, and debating the validity of our own and their thoughts on a topic increase our wisdom. In this way we think more deeply and derive a more comprehensive understanding of the teachings.

However, thinking and discussing the teachings alone don't bring in-depth realisations. Although they have a strong impact on our mind, meditating and putting the teachings into practice in our daily life are essential. Towards this end, it's good to have a consistent daily practice during which we meditate on the teachings in a more concentrated way. Here we apply what we have heard and thought about to our life in order to integrate them with our own mindstream.

The great masters recommend we engage in hearing, thinking and meditating in that order. Why? Because in order to meditate, we need to have a correct, conceptual understanding of the teachings gained by thinking about the teachings. In order to think about the teachings, we have to learn them first, and that is accomplished by hearing. So, we start out by learning and hearing, then thinking, and finally meditating.

That doesn't mean that at the beginning, all you do is hear, read, or study with no contemplation or meditation. But as with any topic, we have to first learn about it before we can think about it, and we have to understand it before we can meditate and integrate it in our lives. This is important because many people think that just sitting with your eyes closed is meditating. That's not meditating. Sitting still with closed eyes is what the body is doing. Meditating is done with our mind. We can sit still and look serene and at the same time daydream about a wonderful person we met or plan our revenge against someone who hurt us. That's not meditating.

Thus we have to learn exactly what meditation is and how to do it. If we don't, we'll invent our own "meditation", in which case we'll get the result of inventing our own meditation. That result will be different from following the meditation method taught by a fully enlightened being who describes what he or she did to become enlightened. There's a big difference between making up our own style of meditation where we don't really have a clue what we're doing and following a tried-and-tested method that others have practised and actualised the result of for 2550 years.



Many people don't really understand what meditation is. I get emails from people, saying, "I listen to music when I meditate. What kind of music do you think is best for meditation?" It's clear these people have not listened to teachings because the great masters do not recommend listening to music when you meditate. When you listen to music, you're listening to music. You're not thinking about the teachings and integrating them.

Recently someone told me she meditates best when she's swimming. I wasn't sure what she meant by meditation. Did she mean relax and feel calm? Yes, swimming can accomplish that, but meditation isn't a relaxation technique, although it makes the mind calm and relaxed. The full purpose of meditation is to understand both conventional and ultimate reality so that we can liberate ourselves and others from cyclic existence.

The verse advises us to, "hear, think, and meditate unwaveringly night and day". Does that mean we never sleep? No, our body needs rest. However, we can transform sleep into a virtuous activity by taking

refuge, remembering the qualities of the Three Jewels, generating bodhicitta, or contemplating emptiness before falling asleep. Instead of collapsing in bed with a groan and a lot of attachment to lying down on a comfortable bed, think, “I’m going to sleep to rest my body and mind so I can continue practising tomorrow.” Then sleep an appropriate amount for your body-mind.

Why do we practise hearing, thinking and meditating as much as possible? In order to free ourselves and others from the ocean of cyclic existence. Our underlying motivation is bodhicitta, the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings most effectively by attaining full enlightenment.

An important point to understand about these verses is that they are presenting the most effective way to practise. Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo doesn’t expect us to be able to actualise these instructions instantaneously. Rather, he is pointing the direction for us to go. From our side, we begin where we are and progress gradually. Don’t feel pressured to do it all “right” and don’t criticise yourself for not being able to live each verse exactly as it is written. Remember we are *training* our minds and this entails repeated practice over time. So be joyful when practising, knowing that you will be able to actualise and integrate each verse in time.



VERSE

2

The Three Poisons

Attached to your loved ones you're stirred up like water.

Hating your enemies you burn like fire.

In the darkness of confusion you forget what to adopt and discard.

Give up your homeland—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The Three Poisonous Attitudes

The second verse is very powerful. It begins, *Attached to your loved ones, you're stirred up like water*. Is that true or not? When we are attached to people, we cling to them. "I love you so much. I can't be separated from you." Is our mind peaceful at that time? No. We're stirred up like churning water. We worry if something will happen to them; we're afraid they will stop loving us; we're anxious

about not pleasing them; we daydream about how wonderful they are and long to be with them. Our mind is not peaceful because it is overwhelmed by attachment.

Attachment and love are similar in that both of them draw us to the other person. But in fact, these two emotions are quite different. When we're attached, we're drawn to someone because he or she meets our needs. In addition, there are lots of strings attached to our affection that we may or may not realise are there. For example, I "love" you because you make me feel good. I "love" you as long as you do this and that—things that I approve of. I "love" you because you're mine. You're my spouse or my child or my parents or my friend. With attachment, we go up and down like a yo-yo, depending on how the other person treats us. We obsess, "What do they think of me? Do they love me? Have I offended them? How can I become what they want me to be so that they love me even more?" It's not very peaceful, is it? We're definitely stirred up.

On the other hand, the love we're generating on the Dharma path is unconditional. We simply want others to have happiness and the causes of happiness without any strings attached, without any expectations of what these people will do for us and how good they'll make us feel.

Hating your enemies, you burn like fire. True or not true? Here, the word "enemies" doesn't necessarily mean Saddam Hussein. It means anybody we don't like. It could be the guy that cut you off when you're driving on the highway. It could be the colleague that you're jealous of because she got a promotion and you didn't. It could be the neighbour next door who lied to you. It

could be the thief who stole your stuff. It could be the person who scratched your car. It could be your kid who took the battery out of your car when you had to go to work. Whoever we happen to be upset with at that moment becomes our enemy. We burn with anger towards the people who disturb our peace and interfere with us getting what we want. Some people express their anger; others stuff it inside and become cold. Whether we explode or implode, it's not a state of good mental health.

In the darkness of confusion, you forget what to adopt and discard. When we're confused or spaced out, when we're intoxicating ourselves with television and media, we can't think straight, and so we forget what are the causes of happiness that we need to adopt and practise on the path. Likewise, we're unable to determine the true causes of suffering, and so we're unable to differentiate what we need to abandon and discard on the path. Our ethical conduct becomes nebulous; we practise the path incorrectly and then wonder why we're not progressing. We begin to think that drinking and drugging bring happiness and that getting up early in the morning and meditating bring suffering. The mind is befuddled in the darkness of confusion, and although our wish is to be happy, we create the karmic causes for suffering instead.

These three lines—the first line indicating attachment, the second anger, and the third line confusion—point out the three poisonous attitudes. They poison our happiness because when they are active in our mind creating negative karma happens easily.

What is the solution to these three? The ultimate remedy is to realise reality, the emptiness of inherent existence. The temporary solution is to *Give up your homeland*. What does that mean? The

deeper meaning is to remove from our mind the views, attitudes and emotions that form the familiar *homeland* of samsara. It also means to remove ourselves from situations in which everything and everyone are so familiar to us that we continue to express our habitual dysfunctional emotional and behavioural patterns again and again. For example, some families have what almost resembles a script with the roles that each member plays. So every family dinner, the brother and sister compete, the son argues with his father, the daughter succumbs to the mother's will, the husband and wife pick at each other. In those situations, we find ourselves acting just as we did when we were a ten-year-old kid because the family dynamic is the same as all those years ago. Because the situation is so familiar and we've played a certain role for so many years, we and the others keep acting in the same way even though no one is happy in the situation.

Every family dynamic is a little bit different, but often, this is what we get into when we know people too well. We just play out the same thing. Dad continually asks when you are going to figure out what you are going to do with your life and get a good, high paying job. Mum continually asks when you are going to get married and have a family or, if you are already married, when you are going to have kids. Or, if you already have kids, why don't you raise your kids this way. Your sister competes with you. Your brother plays the joker. You get into the same old interactions again and again, just like you did when you were kids.

The meaning of *Give up your homeland* is to give up these situations. That doesn't mean you stop going to family dinners. It means when you are at a family dinner, you don't play your role. Be the adult that you are; be a wise adult with a helpful and kind

attitude. If you don't play your role, others can't play theirs. If Dad asks you, as he does every year, "Isn't it time you figured what you're going to do with your life and get a high paying job?" instead of becoming defensive or rebellious like you did when you were a teenager, say truthfully, "Yes, maybe it is, Dad. I'm doing the best I can. I enjoy the work I do even though you would like to see me get paid more and have more prestige." Give up being defensive and be comfortable with who you are.

We tend to have a lot of authority issues that we re-enact with our boss, our Dharma teacher, and whoever else we see as being in a position of authority. Giving up our homeland means to let these go. That doesn't mean we ignore them: we explore them, understand their origins and their effects, and then realising that it is painful and not at all beneficial to keep playing out our authority issues again and again, we give them up.

If you choose a monastic way of life, practising in a monastery is recommended. If you stay with your family and old friends, you will tend to think, speak and behave as you always have with them. Transforming your body, speech and mind will be more difficult due to the force of habit that comes to play in a familiar environment with familiar people. In Dharma practice, we are trying to uproot wrong views and ways of thinking that we've had since beginningless time. We're trying to let go of emotions and attitudes that society assumes are real and beneficial. Staying with a group of like-minded people who are trying to do the same thing as you is much easier. If we live with the people we're attached to, our practice will be difficult because our attachment will distract

us. If we stay in the same old hostile environment, our anger will increase and applying antidotes to it will be difficult when we're a beginner. When we hang around with people who are confused—our old friends who drink and drug—we'll do the same.

The reason we established Sravasti Abbey is so that people who want to lead a monastic life can leave their homeland and come live here. Here, our days are structured around Dharma practice. We're doing Dharma activities frequently throughout the day so it's easier to learn, think and meditate. We practise acknowledging our mental afflictions, so resolving conflicts is done in a different manner than you usually find in the world. In short, living in a monastery provides a way to practise that isn't available in the city or when have a very busy working life. So, there are different ways to practise the Dharma, and leaving your homeland has different meanings according to each one.

This is not a prescription for everybody to move out of their house tomorrow. The advice is more about giving up the preconceptions that form the homeland of our mind. It's powerful. *Give up our homeland* is a call for us to change, whether we do this change as a layperson or as a monastic.



VERSE

3

Relying on Solitude

By avoiding bad objects, disturbing emotions gradually decrease.

Without distraction, virtuous activities naturally increase.

With clarity of mind, conviction in the teaching arises.

Cultivate seclusion—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Seclusion

Disturbing emotions like attachment, anger, hostility, resentment, grudge-holding and so forth gradually subside when you are not surrounded by the objects that provoke them. The statement, *bad objects*, doesn't mean the objects are bad in-and-of themselves. It means because our mind is so reactive when we are

in the proximity of certain objects or people, our old habits come up strongly and our mind becomes uncontrolled.

This is not the fault of the object. This is important to understand so that we do not blame the objects or the people that we are reactive towards. Although people often say, “You made me angry,” in fact, no one makes us angry. The anger comes from within us. Yet because we are beginners and our mind is uncontrolled, when we’re around certain people or objects or in particular situations, our destructive emotions arise easily. Knowing this, we choose to live in a different situation. We’re not running away. Rather, we’re giving our minds some space from the things and people that trigger our disturbing emotions, so that we can investigate how these emotions arise and practise the antidotes to them. Having developed the antidotes to those mental afflictions, we will be less reactive and more balanced when we face the same situation again later.

Let’s say I have so much attachment that every time I’m near someone or something, my mind goes crazy with attachment and I can’t think clearly. To be able to develop the skill needed to counteract clinging, I need to keep some distance from those things that bring up strong attachment.

At the beginning, and for a long while, our minds are totally out of control, so we need a secluded environment. Seclusion doesn’t mean we go live in a cave. It means living in an environment where we aren’t exposed to all the things that push our buttons, so we can have the time and space to cultivate the antidotes to our buttons. Here seclusion refers to the environment.

However, real seclusion is mental seclusion. When our mind is secluded, it is not reactive to those things. For example, if you’re

attached to ice-cream, but understand it's bad for your health, and know you don't feel good about yourself when you eat it, then don't go to an ice-cream parlour to meet your friends. This doesn't mean the ice-cream or the ice-cream parlour is bad. It just means your mind is uncontrolled. Initially, we stay away from those things that our mind gets uncontrolled about. That's the meaning of seclusion. If we avoid the objects that incite our ignorance, anger, attachment, resentment and laziness, our disturbing emotions will gradually decrease. This happens mainly because we are now actively hearing, thinking and meditating on the Dharma to cultivate the antidotes to those disturbing emotions.

Simplify Your Life to Stop Distraction

When we stop living such a busy life, running around here and there, doing this and that, we aren't so distracted. Naturally, it becomes easier to focus on the Dharma. This is the value of attending retreats, whether they are for one day, a few months, or even several years. Going to Dharma class every week is beneficial, but when you attend a day-long Dharma class or retreat, your mind becomes more concentrated. You are less distracted because your cell phone is off, your computer isn't next to you, there is no television. You are in silence. You are not busy telling everybody what you like, what you dislike, or what all your problems are. You have time to think and reflect. You are not looking at art books, advertisements, and all those other things that distract you. When you simplify your life and your environment, there is less distraction and thus virtuous activities naturally increase.

When you are at home, simplify your environment. Get rid of the television. I can almost hear you gasp at the thought, “What? No television”? Stop reading all the pop-up ads on the computer. Don’t browse through the catalogues that come in the mail. Put them in the recycling bin right away. Don’t turn on the radio every time you get in the car. Listen to a Dharma CD instead or chant mantra. Simplify your social life too. Do you really need to go here and there and do this and that? Simplify your hobbies. Choose a few things that you enjoy doing, instead of trying to do everything and be everything because that is what you think you have to be and do, so that people will like you. Do what is really important to you. Question the thought that says, “Everybody has to love me. I have to run around and do all these things so that they’ll love me.” Is that true? Make your life simple.

Many people ask if Buddhism is applicable to social issues. Yes, it is. For example, the Buddhist idea of simplicity is an antidote to frantic consumerism and the environmental destruction that accompanies it. Ask yourself why you drive so much. Simplify by car pooling with people, or maybe don’t go to so many places. Structure your life so you run all your errands at one go, wasting less gas and time in the process. Don’t buy so many things because the more you have the more things break, and the more time you spend having to take care of them or fix them. Stephanie Kaza edited a book called *Hooked*, which contains Buddhists’ reflections on consumerism. You may find it interesting to see how some Buddhists apply their spiritual practice to social issues.

With Clarity of Mind, Conviction in Teachings Arises

When we have less distraction and are not around things that incite our disturbing attitudes and negative emotions, we have greater clarity of mind, which facilitates learning, thinking and meditating on the teachings. From those three, conviction in the Dharma teachings arises because our mind is more immersed and more focused.

The people who do the three-month winter retreat at Sravasti Abbey experience that. For three months they are immersed in a different environment, doing six sessions of meditation a day. At the conclusion, they say, “This was fantastic! I had time to think about the Dharma. I’ve heard so many teachings, but I’d never sat down and thought about them in such a consistent or deep way before.” One man said, “I had heard the analogy of the Buddha being like the doctor, the Dharma the medicine, and the Sangha the nurse many times. But now I’ve understood that I’m the patient who needs to take the medicine. I’d kept the Dharma separate from myself and didn’t understand that before.”

The daily schedule repeats each day of the retreat, so you have a clear mind because you are not running around. You meditate, then have breakfast. You meditate again, do yoga, more meditation, and then lunch. After a walk outdoors, you meditate again, read a book, meditate some more, and have medicine meal (dinner). Then there’s another meditation session, followed by taking down the offerings, showering, brushing your teeth, and going to sleep. There are chores to do in which you offer service in the community. It’s a simple lifestyle. This gives us time to observe our mind, to reflect on the Dharma, and to apply it to our

mind. When we do this, conviction and faith in the teachings arise because we see that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. We see through our own experience that the Dharma describes our life and our potential.

When the verse says, *Cultivate seclusion*, it means to live in a secluded and simplified environment when possible. But the real seclusion, the real retreat, is when our mind is secluded from ignorance, anger and attachment.





VERSE

4

Mindfulness of Impermanence and Death

*Loved ones who have long kept company will part.
Wealth created with difficulty will be left behind.
Consciousness, the guest, will leave the guest-house of the body.
Let go of this life—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Loved Ones Eventually Separate

Some people believe that the main purpose of life is to have a lot of family members and loved ones around them. They constantly seek to build the family network so that family becomes their refuge. All of us want to be loved, but because we're not very clear on what love is, we confuse it with attachment. We think

that if people love us, we must be good; we must be worthwhile. So we do a lot of things to get the love we need. But at some time we must part from our loved ones. Everything that comes together must separate. It's impossible to be together forever. So either our loved ones die first or we do, or we part in another way.

Realising that we can't stay with our loved ones forever helps us have a better relationship with them when we are with them. We don't get as attached to them and thus have far fewer unrealistic expectations that lead to conflict and disappointment. We don't take our loved ones for granted as much and thus stop dumping our frustration and anger on them. We stop seeing them as a projection of ourselves and accept them for the lovely human being they are. With less attachment, not only does our relationship with them improve now, but also our Dharma practice is stronger.

Wealth Created With Difficulty Will Be Left Behind

The wealth that we gather with great effort goes quickly, doesn't it? We never have enough money to feel totally secure; we could always use a little more. And at the time we die, all the money we have received is left behind. Not one cent can come with us.

Recognising that we never have enough to feel totally secure and that at the time of death we separate from our wealth, lessens our attachment to it. We stop being obsessed with wealth and driven to procure more. We cease being interested in presenting the image of ourselves as someone who is well-to-do and successful in a worldly way and instead become content with what we have. Contentment is real wealth. If we don't have contentment, we can

have a million dollars and be very unhappy, but if we're content, our mind is at peace even if we have very little.

*Consciousness, the guest,
will leave the guesthouse of the body*

Our mind—that part of us that experiences, perceives, knows, cognizes, feels and so forth—is formless; it is clear and aware. Life is when the mind resides together with the body, but the body is just a guesthouse. The mind cannot stay there infinitely. Some day the body and mind will separate. That is what we call death. At that time, the mind moves on to the next life. The ego identity we constructed for ourselves based on this body, the society and social influences we find ourselves living in, everything familiar to our five senses—all these will cease when the consciousness moves out of the body. We've spent a lot of time and energy building up an identity: "I am this nationality. I am this religion. I am this socio-economic class. I am this educational status. I have these interests. I am this racial group. I am this ethnic group. I am this gender. I am this sexual orientation. I like these hobbies. I don't like these kinds of people. These are my political views, etc". We mistakenly think that all these identities are who we are—that they are permanent and exist with their own essence. But at the time of death, consciousness moves out of this body and the whole thing crumbles. Being aware of our mortality makes us ask ourselves what is important in life.

Since our loved ones who have long kept company will part, is being attached to them worthwhile? Is it important to go through

all the things we do to try to make people love us? Or is it more important to have relationships with people without clinging and attachment and to further our spiritual practice? Relinquishing attachment does not mean we are cold and unloving. It simply means that we do not cling. There is more space for genuine affection and good communication.

Seeing that wealth created with difficulty will be left behind, is it important to work overtime in order to have a lot of money? Is fretting, worrying and being obsessed about money worthwhile considering that we will separate from it when we die, if not before? Or is it more important to spend our time doing meaningful things in life? We can earn enough to keep ourselves alive and be content with simplicity because we know we don't need a lot.

Since consciousness, the guest, will leave the guesthouse of the body, should we keep running around all the time trying to make our mind happy with this small pleasure or that? Or, is there something more important we can do with our mind? Pondering these questions, we will realise our Dharma practice is very important because at the time we die, our wealth stays behind, our body stays behind, and our friends and relatives stay behind. What follow us are the karmic seeds we created to procure and protect all these things. What comes with us are the mental and emotional habits we've developed throughout our life. These could be habits of ignorance, hostility and attachment. They could also be habits of kindness, consideration, generosity, ethical discipline and wisdom. What kind of habits do we want to cultivate? What kind of karma do we want to create? Thinking about this is important because that is what's going to come with us.

Let Go of This Life

The solution to attachment and the problems that come with it is to let go of this life. This means to let go of attachment to this life. That is, we focus on what is important to do, considering that our life is not going to go on forever. In fact, we don't know when it is going to end. Although we may feel we'll live long, we have no idea when we're going to die. Thus we need to be prepared to die at any moment. What does being prepared to die mean? Does it mean you have your burial plot ready? No. It means knowing how to think, how to keep our mind in virtue, how to steer our mind towards a good rebirth, liberation and enlightenment. If we let go of obsessing about this life, and focus on what is important, we will have much more peace of mind in this life. We will be able to die without regrets or fear, and transitioning to our next rebirth will be smooth. We will be able to continue practising the path so that we can progress towards liberation and enlightenment in our future lives.

For highly realised practitioners, death is said to be like going on a picnic. Let alone not having any fear, they are joyful and relaxed. Since we all have to die some time, wouldn't it be nice to die like that? To do so, we need to create the causes now, and that is through practising the path of wisdom and compassion.

VERSE

5

Giving Up Bad Company

*When you keep their company your three poisons increase,
Your activities of bearing, thinking and meditating decline,
And they make you lose your love and compassion.*

Give up bad friends—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Give Up Bad Friends

The term *bad friends* in this verse doesn't mean other people are bad. It means our own mind gets uncontrolled around them. Or, the other person has non-Dharma values and when we hang around them, we come under the detrimental influence of these values. Parents tell their children, "Don't hang around other kids who are into drugs and alcohol." Why do they tell their kids that?

Because they know if their children stay around people who drink and drug, they will start doing it too. Now, the big question comes: Why do some parents socialise with people who drink and drug? They say one thing to their kids and do another thing themselves.

When we hang around people who swear, we start to swear. When we socialise with people who gossip and talk about others behind their back, we begin to do that too. We lose our mindfulness and awareness and get involved in many harmful actions. If you become friends with people who value making as much money as possible—even doing slightly shady or deceptive activities—it is easy to get drawn into their world. If our friends are people who are the busiest of the busy, then we, too, will feel that we aren't valuable unless we're overwhelmed by too many things to do, people to see, and places to go.

The reason our three poisons increase is not because the people are bad, but because our minds are uncontrolled. These people may have values that are not conducive to human happiness, or they may be totally wrapped up with sense pleasures, wealth and reputation. Coming under their influence, we waste time pursuing things that are of no ultimate value from a Dharma point of view.

Making good friends is incredibly important on the path. Our spiritual heart is the most important part of ourselves, and if we associate with people who value that, they will nurture that part of us. Our mindstream contains many seeds, and depending on what environment we put ourselves in and who we are friends with, they water certain seeds and not others. Dharma friends nurture the Dharma seeds in our mind; lazy friends water our lazy seeds; resentful friends feed our resentment. Which seeds in us do we want

other people to water? According to what our answer is, we should cultivate those kinds of friends.

When we tell our Dharma friends, “I’m going to a retreat,” they say, “Great! Tell me about it. I want to come with you.” If you tell your worldly friends, “I’m going to go to a retreat,” they say, “What in the world are you doing that for? You’re going to go sit on a cushion for a whole weekend? Get a life! Do something interesting.” Those people discourage our Dharma practice, and then doubts enter our mind, “Hmm, they’re right; I’m going there to sit on a cushion. Why should I do that? My mind just gets distracted and my knees hurt. It’s better to go to the beach with my friend.”

Our activities of hearing, thinking and meditating decline because those friends don’t support those activities. They want you to go out to the movies, go to a disco, go shopping, or stay home and watch TV. They make us lose our love and compassion because instead of being able to meditate on love and compassion, we continually have to justify and explain ourselves. We get upset at their dishonesty and pretension. We argue with them trying to get them to change, or we worry they won’t like us because we don’t participate in their activities. So give up bad friends and relieve yourself of all the stress of being with them. This is the practice of bodhisattvas.



VERSE

6

Relying on a Spiritual Mentor

*When you rely on them your faults come to an end
And your good qualities grow like the waxing moon.*

*Cherish spiritual teachers
Even more than your own body—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Cherish Your Spiritual Teachers

Verse six talks about good friends. The literal translation of the Tibetan word “geshe” is “virtuous friend.” We want to have virtuous friends because they help us in our practice, whether or not they have the title “geshe.” We need to have virtuous spiritual friends who support and inspire our practice, and the best virtuous friends are our spiritual teachers because they know Dharma well and encourage us to learn and practise it.

The role spiritual mentors play in our life is extremely important. Think about it—our parents love us tremendously, but can they teach us the path to enlightenment? Worldly friends may care for us a lot, but can they teach us Dharma methods to counteract anger and clinging? The people who are able to teach us how to free our mind and escape from the prison of cyclic existence are rare and very, very precious.

That's why the verse says we should cherish them even more than our own body. That has great meaning. It makes us think, "How much do I actually cherish the Dharma?" For instance, when someone chooses not to go for a Dharma talk because sitting till the end of the talk is too uncomfortable, the physical comfort of our body becomes more important than going for Dharma teachings and cultivating a relationship with our spiritual mentors. This happens because we are so attached to the comfort of our body.

We should cherish spiritual teachers even more than our own body because if we lose our body, the worst thing that happens is we die. If we have created some good karma, we will be reborn in conducive circumstances where we will be able to continue practising. But if we abandon our spiritual mentors, we throw away the opportunity for liberation and enlightenment not only in this life, but also in future lives, because who's going to teach us?

Without a teacher, we won't know the correct path to follow to actualise our spiritual aspirations. We may then make up our own path, but we've done that many times in previous lives and look where it's gotten us! Giving up our body harms just this life, but giving up reliable guides on the path to enlightenment brings harm in many future lifetimes and leaves us drowning in samsara. The

value of meeting fully qualified spiritual teachers who will guide us over many lifetimes cannot be underestimated. It's important to cultivate wholesome relationships with these virtuous friends and make prayers to be reborn where we can meet them and continue to be guided by them in many future lives.

When we cultivate relationships with spiritual teachers, our good qualities grow because we are near people who keep ethical discipline. They do not lie, swindle people, talk bad about others behind their back or speak harshly. They do not spend time gossiping, singing, dancing, playing music, watching entertainment or playing video games.

When we stay near people like that, we will come to do what they do: hear, think and meditate in our daily life. When we hear, think and meditate, of course our virtuous activities keep increasing. We become happier and share that optimism and joy with others. Our spiritual mentors are excellent examples to follow; they demonstrate by their lives joyous effort, patience and optimism. We learn not only from their formal teachings, but also from simply observing how they interact with others in daily life and how they make choices.

I love being near my teachers, and one of the most difficult things for me about being in the USA is not being near my teachers. This is another reason why Sravasti Abbey exists—so that like-minded people can stay together and inspire each other through hearing, thinking and meditating together. We invite guest teachers and senior monastics to come, visit and teach us. We offer service to our spiritual mentors, helping them with their virtuous projects that benefit other sentient beings and doing chores and errands

for them so that they can attend to important activities that help others. In saying that it's good to be near spiritual mentors, I don't mean sitting, chatting or spending four hours over lunch. I mean living in close proximity, assisting them, and learning through observing how they act.

Once when I was in India, I took a friend to visit one of my spiritual teachers, who is the former abbot of Seraje Monastery. He invited us to dinner. While we were eating, a beggar came. Khensur Rinpoche quietly went into the other room, got a blanket and gave it to the beggar. That made a huge impression on my friend, who kept saying, "Wow, he gave one of his blankets to a beggar... and it was a nice blanket too." She started thinking, "Would I do that?" And then she began to see his qualities and generosity. If she had not been there at that time, she never would have seen him give the blanket to the beggar and she never would have been inspired by his real-life teaching. Similarly, when we offer service to our spiritual mentors, we learn so much whether we are physically near them or not.

This book that I'm using to give this commentary on the "Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas" is *Transforming Adversity into Joy and Courage* by Geshe Jampa Tegchok. He gave these teachings some years ago, another disciple transcribed them, and I edited them to make this book. That was my way of offering service to Geshela. It was an incredible way for me to learn the Dharma, because when we translate, transcribe or edit our spiritual mentors teachings, the Dharma goes into our mind in a deep way.

Relying on our spiritual mentors also means attending their teachings and retreats. We shouldn't think that it just means being around them during informal times. By listening to teachings we learn the Dharma, and by putting what we learn into practice, our faults definitely come to an end. The primary way that the Buddha benefits us is by teaching the Dharma, so we should make an effort to attend teachings and pay attention during the session.



VERSE

7

Taking Refuge

*Bound himself in the jail of cyclic existence,
What worldly god can give you protection?
Therefore when you seek refuge, take refuge in
The Three Jewels which will not betray you—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Take Refuge in the Three Jewels

This verse refers to taking refuge in worldly gods and spirits, such as through channelling. Rather than take refuge in worldly beings who are trapped in samsara, it's wiser to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for they are reliable and non-deceptive objects of refuge. By turning to them for spiritual direction, we will not be led astray because they embody full wisdom and compassion. A worldly deity, who is bound in cyclic existence just as we are, is incapable of leading us to liberation and enlightenment.

Sometimes people are not clear about their spiritual refuge. Maybe they are half Christian and half Buddhist. That's fine. People can come to Buddhism, hear the Dharma and practise, and take from the teachings whatever they find useful. They can integrate this into their practice of Christianity. There is no problem with that. But in that case, it's clearer to say, "I am a Christian who uses Buddhist teachings to help me."

If you call yourself a Buddhist, your refuge should be clear; you should turn to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for spiritual guidance and direction. Your mind should not be trying to cover both bases, thinking "Maybe I'd better pray to God too." Similarly, we should not substitute Buddha for God, saying, "God and Buddha are the same; they just have different names." In fact, the theistic concept of God and the Buddhist concept of Buddha are very different. We need to figure out what we actually believe in, be clear in our own mind, and then take refuge according to that.

It is important to think about who and what we are taking refuge in, what their qualities are, and what our spiritual goals are. Making soup with a little of this teaching and a little of that is not beneficial in the long term.

The Dharma, as the true paths and true cessations, is the actual refuge. When we have actualised the Dharma in our mind, we are freed from dukkha. The Buddha is the teacher who instructs us and the Sangha assists us as we practise. Both of them see the nature of reality directly and not conceptually, so they are non-deceptive guides who sincerely want to help us. If we take refuge in the Three Jewels, we will be able to actualise our heartfelt spiritual goals.

VERSE

8

Karma and Its Results

*The Subduer said all the unbearable suffering
Of bad rebirths is the fruit of wrongdoing.
Therefore, even at the cost of your life,
Never do wrong—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Don't Create the Cause of Suffering

This verse speaks about the importance of observing the law of karma and its effects. The Subduer—that is, the Buddha—said that all the suffering of unfortunate rebirths such as those in the hells, as hungry ghosts and as animals are the result of our own destructive actions or karma. In other words, we are responsible for what happens to us in our lives. We are the ones who create the causes for our experiences.

Certain actions are considered negative karma because they result in pain and suffering. These actions are not inherently bad or sinful. They aren't negative because the Buddha said not to do them. Rather they are considered negative because they lead to suffering. Similarly, positive or constructive karma is so called because it leads to the long-term result of happiness. These actions are not inherently good; they become constructive due to bringing about desirable results.

The verse is saying, "If you don't like lower rebirths, then don't create the cause for them; that is, abandon destructive actions." These include physical actions such as killing, stealing and unwise or unkind sexual behaviour; verbal actions such as lying, speech that creates disharmony, harsh speech and idle talk; and mental non-virtues, such as covetousness, ill-will or maliciousness and wrong views.

When we get tangled up in these unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind, they leave negative seeds and latencies on our mindstream. Complete destructive actions—that is, we recognised the object, had a motivation influenced by mental afflictions, did the action, and completion of the action—become potent karmic seeds that bring about unfortunate rebirths. Instead of creating actions that project unfortunate rebirths, let's engage in actions of generosity, ethical conduct, and patience motivated by love and compassion which propel fortunate rebirths.

In short, if we don't like unpleasant experiences, don't create the causes for them by doing the ten nonvirtues. Here, too, the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo emphasizes that we are the ones who are responsible for our lives. Feeling sorry for ourselves or blaming others for our problems doesn't make much sense.

VERSE

9

Aspiring for Liberation

*Like dew on the tip of a blade of grass, pleasures of the three worlds
Last only a while and then vanish.
Aspire to the never-changing
Supreme state of liberation—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Worldly Pleasures Last Only A While and Vanish

This verse relates to the practice of an intermediate level practitioner—a person who aspires for liberation from cyclic existence. Why should we aspire for liberation or nirvana? Because the pleasures of the three worlds are transitory. They're nice while we have them, but they don't last long and afterwards we are left, once again, struggling for pleasure.

The three worlds refers to the desire realm, form realm and formless realm. The desire realm is so called because the beings in it are hooked on sensual objects—sights, sounds, odours, tastes and tactile objects, as well as on proliferating conceptions resulting from these. We human beings are part of the desire realm and we can see from our own experience how geared we are to external objects—procuring the ones we find desirable and protecting ourselves from the ones we deem undesirable. Beings in the form realms have deep levels of concentration, which is very blissful, and beings of the formless realm abide in subtle states of meditative absorption in a state of equanimity, which is more refined than the joy of the concentrations of the form realm.

Samsara is comprised of those three realms. No matter where we are born in these three realms, the joys of existence there are like dew on the tip of a blade of grass. It is there for a short while, and then it evaporates, gone forever. We may consider our human life very long, but in comparison to beings in the celestial desire realms and in the form and formless realms, it is short. Even so that pleasure lasts only a while, and then it is gone. At the end of our lives, what we are left with at most are good memories and a lot of photo albums and scrapbooks. But what good are they? It's pretty sad if the only happiness we have comes from remembering past experiences. It's like being happy watching other people's lives on TV. No one makes movies showing people watching TV or looking at photo albums for hours. Why not? Because that's boring. Would you watch a movie that only showed someone watching TV? Instead of having a vibrant and lively mind ourselves, our pleasure comes only from sitting there observing others' lives.

Happiness that doesn't last is not true happiness. It is not something we want to devote our life trying to attain because there is never any end to our efforts in attaining happiness. Whatever happiness we manage to have is always in the process of fading and going out of existence. So, if we really want a top grade happiness, an AAA type of happiness, we should aspire for the peace of liberation which never disappears. For that reason, nirvana is also called the unconditioned and the deathless.

Rather than seek out the pleasures found in cyclic existence, only to have them end when a good rebirth ceases, let's aspire for the never-changing supreme state of liberation. Nirvana is never-changing in that once liberation is attained, it never ceases. Once ignorance has been completely eradicated from our mindstream, there is no cause for it to ever return. In this way, a state of lasting happiness, peace and freedom from afflictions and karma is attained.

Americans often say they stand up for freedom. But, in consumer society we are bound by attachment and thus are not free. Our minds are tied up, not just by craving, but also by resentment, hostility and a host of other disturbing emotions. Are you free when your mind is tormented by craving something—a house, a relationship, delicious food or whatever? Are you free when your mind is overwhelmed by jealousy because others have more or by competition, wanting to prove yourself and be better than someone else? These mental states aren't indicative of true freedom, even if on the physical level we have the “freedom” to buy what we want or go where we like.

In a Buddhist sense, real freedom is not about having the ability to act out any kind of impulse that comes into our mind. True freedom is not being enslaved by hostility, clinging, craving, resentment, spite and so on. So, we want to generate a sincere and steady aspiration for liberation—the kind of freedom where we are free from having a body and mind under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and karma. That's true freedom, because the mind is free—it can abide in deep concentration with wisdom and compassion.



VERSE

10

Bodhicitta

*When your mothers, who've loved you since time without beginning,
Are suffering, what use is your own happiness?
Therefore to free limitless living beings
Develop the altruistic intention—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Repaying the Kindness of All Mother Sentient Beings

This verse begins the topic of the practice of the advanced level practitioner—someone who is cultivating the bodhicitta motivation and engaging in bodhisattva activities. There are two methods for developing the bodhicitta motivation: 1) the seven-point instruction of cause and effect and 2) equalising and exchanging self with others. In particular, this verse talks about the first method.

Both methods are based on equanimity of friend, enemy and stranger. Usually we have very strong emotions towards these three groups of people—attachment to our friends and dear ones, hostility towards enemies and those we dislike or fear and apathy towards strangers. So first contemplate that these three categories are made up by our own mind: it's our mind that discriminates someone as a friend, another person as an enemy and a third person as a stranger. In addition, one individual can move from one category to another very quickly, depending on a small change of circumstances or a small action. Given the arbitrary nature of these three categories, generating strong attachment, hostility and apathy towards anyone does not make sense. Instead, we cultivate an equal feeling of care and concern for everyone. When we do this, we find that it's very pleasant to have a more stable mind that is free from these three deluded emotions.

After that we practise the seven-point instruction of cause and effect:

1. Seeing all sentient beings as having been our mother
2. Understanding their kindness
3. Wishing to repay their kindness
4. Love, wishing them to have happiness and its causes
5. Compassion, wishing them to be free of suffering and its causes
6. The great resolve to undertake the task of bringing them happiness and freeing them from suffering
7. Bodhicitta—the altruistic intention in which we seek complete enlightenment in order to best benefit all living beings—arises as a result of the previous six causes

Some people may not be familiar with the concept of rebirth and wonder, “Have all sentient beings really been my mother?” There is a chapter in my book *Open Heart, Clear Mind* about rebirth. It may help you to read and contemplate it to get a sense of how rebirth works.

Since our mind has existed beginninglessly, we have had infinite previous lifetimes. There was plenty of time for everybody to have been our mother. When they were our mother, they were kind to us, just like our present mother: they gave birth to us, fed us, taught us, nurtured us, gave us an education, etc. Thinking about this, we see that we have received so much kindness from others when they were our mothers and fathers as well. Seeing this, the wish to repay their kindness automatically arises in us because we see sentient beings as lovable. Wanting to repay their kindness, we wish them to have happiness and its causes—this is love—and to be free from suffering and its causes—which is compassion. Then the great resolve to actually do something to bring about their temporary and ultimate happiness arises. Seeing that a Buddha has the greatest ability and capacity to work for the welfare of all beings, we develop the aspiration to become a fully enlightened Buddha for their benefit. Having generated bodhicitta, we then learn the bodhicitta deeds—the six far-reaching practices of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyous effort, meditative stabilisation, and wisdom.



VERSE

11

Equalising and Exchanging Self and Others

All suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness.

Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others.

Therefore exchange your own happiness

For the suffering of others—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Equalising and Exchanging Self for Others

This verse concerns the second method for generating bodhicitta, equalising and exchanging self for others. To meditate on bodhicitta using this method, first we contemplate that just as I want happiness and to be free of suffering, so does everybody else. There's no difference among all sentient beings in that respect. Then, we contemplate

that all our own suffering comes from the self-centred thought that is preoccupied with *Me, I, My, and Mine*. Considering our own happiness more important than others and our own suffering more painful than others, the self-centred thought obsesses, “How I can get what I want? I’m not getting enough support. I’m suffering so much.” This thought makes us easily offended and turns almost everything in our lives into a drama starring *Me*.

The self-centred thought is not who we are. It is a distorted mental state that can be eliminated by applying its antidotes: seeing its disadvantages and cultivating the mind that cherishes others. Although the self-centred thought appears to be our advocate, saying, “Take care of yourself first. Make sure you get what you want. Get what’s good before the other guy does,” that thought is really the grand deceiver. Why? Because the truth is the more we look out just for ourselves, the more we create disharmony around us, and the less others are willing to help us. In addition, we are more easily offended and create more negative karma, which only produces more misery for ourselves. Just seeking our own benefit is a dead end for ourselves and creates problems for others. When we look at the situation realistically, we see that other sentient beings have been very kind to us while our self-centred mind has only harmed us. Seeing this, it doesn’t make any sense to keep being self-preoccupied. In brief, following the self-centred attitude sabotages our own happiness.

Meanwhile the thought to help others is the source of happiness for ourselves and others. When we cherish others, they are happy and so are we. We create good karma, the cause for happiness in samsara and for enlightenment. When we cherish others, feelings

of being alienated, lonely and unloved cease. We are more open and confident, less suspicious and fearful. Others don't harm us as often because we stop creating the cause to be harmed. So many benefits come from cherishing others.

Cherishing others doesn't mean we go around hugging everybody or doing everything that everybody wants. Sometimes, the proper way to cherish others is to say, "No". Sometimes, the way to cherish others is to say, "I'll teach you how to do it, so you will be able to care for yourself." It's important to understand that cherishing others doesn't mean that everybody bosses us around and we do whatever others want. Every parent who cherishes his or her child knows that fulfilling all the child's wishes is a disservice to the child. It's much better to teach the child various ways to handle the frustration of not getting what they want. A child who is used to having all his wishes fulfilled will have difficulties as an adult, while a child who learns constructive ways to deal with frustration and who learns to give and to share will be much happier as an adult. Thus, cherishing others necessitates combining wisdom with compassion.

Seeing the disadvantages of self-centredness and the benefits of cherishing others, the wish to exchange self and others will grow. Exchanging self and others doesn't mean I become you and you become me. It means, instead of working just for my own benefit, I now exchange that and work for the benefit of others. Benefiting others becomes our foremost priority. Just as we previously considered others' happiness to be of secondary importance, we now consider our own selfish pleasure to be less important.

We might worry, “If I don’t take care of myself, then I’ll be miserable because no one else will take care of me.” Seeing the disadvantages of self-centredness and the benefits of cherishing others doesn’t mean we neglect ourselves. On the contrary, it enables us to care for ourselves in a healthy way. The way the self-centred mind “cares” for us results in our being miserable now and creating the negative karma that results in future suffering. When we care for all sentient beings—ourselves and others—we take care of our body and mind in a healthy way so that they can be used to work for the welfare of others. For example, we keep our body healthy not with self-preoccupied panic and worry, but with compassion for ourselves and others in order to use our body to practise the Dharma and benefit others. While self-centredness causes us to not eat properly, cherishing others will lead us to take care of this body by eating properly. We need a healthy body to help others.

This leads to another practice called “taking and giving” or *tonglen*, in which we imagine taking on the suffering of others with great compassion and using their suffering to destroy our own self-centredness. Then, we imagine transforming our body, our possessions, wealth and positive potential into whatever fulfils the needs of others. We give these to them, imbuing them with happiness and feeling joyful ourselves.

The taking and giving meditation is a practice to increase our love and compassion. It takes great courage to do this practice. Let alone actually taking on others’ misfortunes and giving them our happiness, we don’t want to even think about it! We don’t even want to think of experiencing our own suffering, let alone think

of taking on the miseries of others. Usually we want all the good things for ourselves and jealously protect whatever fortune we have. Yet, here, in the “taking and giving” meditation, we imagine taking others’ suffering and giving them our body, possessions and positive potential. Because this practice contradicts the wishes of our self-centred thought, it is a profound practice for cultivating love and compassion. If you wish to do this meditation, listen to the audio recording of me leading it on my website, www.thubtenchodron.org. You can also find more extensive written instructions there on how to do it.

In short, bodhicitta is really the source of all good and happiness in the world, and verses 10 and 11 instruct us on ways to generate this powerful, profound and noble mind.



VERSE

12

Transforming Loss into the Path

*Even if someone out of strong desire
Steals all your wealth or has it stolen,
Dedicate to him your body, possessions
And your virtue, past, present and future—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Transforming Problems into the Path

This verse begins a series of practices called “thought training” in which we practise transforming adverse circumstances into the path to enlightenment. Thought training practices are very practical because disappointments and obstacles abound in samsara. These practices may initially seem challenging, but when we contemplate

them repeatedly, they begin to make sense. They show us a new way to view circumstances—a way that prevents anger and resentment and increases joy and the sense of meaning in our lives.

Dedicate All to the Person Who Steals From You

One of the worst things anyone can imagine is robbers stealing needed and valued possessions from their home or a shady character swindling them out of their house. Normally, what would we do? We would be enraged; we would be furious; we would want revenge. Feeling violated and sorry for ourselves, we would kick up a big fuss, rant and rave and try to retaliate. Verse 12 instructs us to do the opposite. First we train our mind to understand that getting angry doesn't help. It only poisons our mind and keeps us mentally trapped. Thus, instead of being angry and self-righteous, we train our mind to let go and dedicate our body, possessions and virtue to those who robbed us. Instead of thinking, "This is mine," and trying to get it back when there's no way we can ever get it back, we mentally give it to the thief. We don't just offer the thief all of our possessions, but mentally offer our body which can transform into whatever they need, and our virtue past, present and future which becomes conducive circumstances for them to meet and practise the Dharma.

Instead of holding a grudge and having it gnaw at us year after year, we let go and happily give the clung-to possessions to the person. Perhaps, something in your heart says, "Are you kidding? That's not fair." In response, ask yourself, "What will happen if I cling onto my notion of what's fair?" You may cling onto that

thought, but will you be happy? No. In that case, what happens? You have lost not only your possessions but also your happiness. Being unhappy about the loss doesn't return the possessions to us. It just makes it a double loss.

If somebody takes your things without permission, think, "They must need that very badly. I give it to them." If you genuinely give it to them and decide, "Now it doesn't belong to me anymore. It belongs to him," you will have mental peace. On the other hand, if you hold onto the feeling of being wronged and make yourself into a victim of another person's injustice, you'll be miserable.

This does not mean that we allow people to cheat us or if someone steals from us, we say, "Do you want anything else? I can show you where the key to my neighbour's house is." If somebody steals your things, you can try to recover them, but do this without being angry at the person, without being vengeful and seeking retaliation. This verse instructs us on how to work with our mind so that our mind remains content and in a virtuous state.



VERSE

13

Transforming Suffering into the Path

*Even if someone tries to cut off your head
When you haven't done the slightest thing wrong,
Out of compassion take all his misdeeds
Upon yourself—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Compassion for the Person Who Harms Us

If we haven't done anything—at least nothing that we're aware of—and somebody is taking incredible measures to deprive us of our life and happiness, what is our instant reaction? Anger, rage, fear. We may wail that their actions are unfair and uncalled for and possible ways to retaliate race through our mind. Is that

a pleasant mental state? No. Is it a virtuous mental state that can motivate constructive actions? Not at all; in fact it's just the opposite. In other words, we are experiencing the painful result of previously created negative karma and reacting in such a way that we are creating more negative karma that will lead to more suffering in the future.

Are there other alternatives to how we could think and feel in such a situation? Verse 13 proposes looking at the person who is harming us and feeling compassion. Why is compassion an appropriate response? Because the other person is in a tremendously confused and unhappy state. If we focus on him, not on ourselves, we see that he is suffering greatly and in his confusion he thinks that harming us will relieve him of his suffering. Of course it won't; he'll only create more negative karma to experience more suffering in the future. In this life as well, he could experience the misery involved in being arrested and imprisoned.

If we have compassion for him, wishing him to be free of suffering, then we're not harming our own mind and we won't do anything to cause him further misery. Not only do we wish him to be free of suffering, we also do the taking and giving meditation, imagining taking all his negative karma—all his misdeeds—upon ourselves and using them to smash our own self-centredness, visualised as a hard lump at our heart. After all, it is our own self-centredness that motivated us in a previous life or earlier this life to create the negative karma that is ripening in us being in this situation. Seeing that self-centred mind as our actual enemy, it makes sense to take what he doesn't want—the negative karma of his misdeeds and its future suffering result—and use them to

destroy what we don't want—our self-centred mind that pretends to be our friend but consistently deceives us.

If we look at the situation through the perspective of karma, we see that if we had not created negative karma in the past, we wouldn't be experiencing this result now. Thus, it's inappropriate to blame all our fear and suffering on the other person when it's our own self-centredness that is ultimately harming us. So rather than blame the other person, let's have compassion for him, take his suffering upon ourselves through the taking and giving meditation, and use it to destroy our self-centredness.

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama told a story about one of the Tibetan monks who was imprisoned by the Chinese communists for many years. The monk had not done anything wrong but was imprisoned because the communists wanted to crush Buddhadharma in Tibet. Years later, when this monk was finally released from prison, he left Tibet and went to see His Holiness in Dharamsala. His Holiness asked him, "What frightened you the most while you were imprisoned and tortured?" The monk replied, "I was afraid of losing my compassion for the guards." Can you imagine that? He was afraid of relinquishing his compassion for the people who were torturing him. I was very moved when I heard that story. It's clear that the monk's compassion was what kept him alive for the duration of his imprisonment. Why? If you don't have compassion for the person who's harming you, then either you have hatred, which can kill you, or you just give up in despair, in which case you usually die. Instead, he felt compassion and lived.

Sometimes, we find it difficult to feel compassion for people who don't harm us personally, let alone have compassion for people who

harm us. I work with prisoners, and one of the inmates that I write to took one of the female guards hostage. It was all over the news in Portland. It was the first time a guard had been taken hostage in twenty years. I found out about the incident because somebody wrote to my website. Some of the inmates' writings and poetry are on my website and this person wrote to me via the website. He was enraged; he could not understand why I would put the writings of a rapist and criminal on the website. In his eyes, this inmate was not fit to be considered a Buddhist. He said, "I'm a Buddhist and have concern for the image of Buddhism, especially if the media finds out that this hostage-taker was a Buddhist. I have compassion for the guard he took hostage and absolutely no compassion for him."

I wrote back and said, "This inmate is a human being. He is suffering. The Dharma has been a real refuge for him. He has made progress in some ways although he has a long way to go. He still has the Buddha nature, and I will not judge or abandon him just because he made a mistake." I had been corresponding with this prisoner for some time and knew he had a rough life and a great deal of internal suffering. His suffering, and his confusion about how to stop it, overwhelmed him and resulted in his terrifying the guard (who was released unharmed) and sabotaging his own happiness. I'm sure he hated himself after this episode and the internal scathing words he said to himself were probably worse than what the journalists said about him and how the authorities punished him. I think he has some mental illness that requires treatment, but the prison system focuses on punishing offenders, not on rehabilitating them or treating their mental difficulties.

Someone may think that my saying it's suitable to feel compassion for this inmate is belittling the suffering of the guard whom he took hostage and the women whom he had raped (which was the reason he was in prison). That is not my intent. The suffering of those who were harmed is immense, but our hating the perpetrator doesn't eliminate their misery. Hatred only breeds more hatred, and hatred in our heart causes us more suffering than it causes the person we hate.

What is my point in telling this story? That it is possible to have compassion for someone who has done actions that we find despicable. Furthermore, it is possible to feel compassion for those who perpetrate extreme harm on us. Somebody cutting off our head is pretty extreme. But think of how mad we get when somebody does even a minor thing we don't like. For example, not saying "Good morning" to us. We become furious at anyone who does even the slightest little thing that we don't like. So, if the circumstance of somebody wanting to cut off our head when we haven't done anything wrong is a situation calling for compassion, then surely we should be even more forgiving and tolerant in situations where nobody has a bad intention towards us and, misinterpreting that person's actions, we get angry. If we hold a grudge, who does the grudge hurt? It only hurts ourselves. It doesn't hurt anybody else. Therefore compassion is a medicine for our own pain as well as a balm that soothes the external situation.

VERSE

14

Transforming Blame into the Path

*Even if someone broadcasts all kinds of unpleasant remarks
About you throughout the three thousand worlds,
In return, with a loving mind,
Speak of his good qualities—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Attachment to Reputation

Imagine someone savagely criticises you, deriding you, ruining your reputation, and telling dreadful lies about you, and you have no recourse to tell your side of the story to clear your name. Let alone endure someone publicising this in three thousand worlds, we cannot bear someone saying horrible things about us to even

one person! We don't like it when somebody makes one nasty comment about us to one person, let alone broadcast all kinds of lies that make everyone in the three thousand worlds mistrust and dislike us. Imagine the suffering you would experience if someone did this to you.

What does the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo recommend we do in such a situation? Take out a full page ad in the *New York Times* and explain our side of the story? No. Criticise the other person in return so that his reputation is totally shattered? No. Curl up in a ball and feel sorry for ourselves because no one understands or supports us? No. Instead he tells us in return to speak of his good qualities with a loving mind. This sounds impossible and we may wonder if the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo is crazy. We think, "Speak of this guy's good qualities? He has no good qualities. Anybody who criticises me is bereft of good qualities." Isn't this the criteria we use to evaluate people? Somebody who likes me is a good person, and someone who doesn't like me is a bad person. Is this a good way to evaluate other people? Is it a good way to select friends?

We are so easily manipulated. Somebody comes along and, with a manipulative motivation flatters us. We sit there and bask in it, wanting more praise. We think anyone who says something nice about us is a wonderful person. We have no discriminating wisdom. Somebody praises us, and we love that person, even if he is trying to harm us and manipulate us. We fall for praise so easily. On the other hand, when a friend sees us act in a harmful way and out of genuine concern says, "Please be careful how you are acting," we get furious. Our defences spring up, and we scream, "You're not my friend anymore. Why are you criticising me? People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." Yet this person is commenting

on our behaviour because he really cares about us; he doesn't want us to create negative karma and find ourselves in difficulty. But we consider that person an enemy and vow never to speak to him again. We hold a grudge against him and say bad things about him throughout the three thousand worlds, even though he was trying to help us with compassion.

The criteria we use to discern friends and enemies are totally skewed. We fall for the ploys of someone who insincerely praises us in order to get something from us, and we hate someone who out of genuine care and concern says something that our self-centred thought does not want to hear, even though the words are true and need to be said.

This verse counsels us to maintain a loving, compassionate heart even towards a person who turns others against us, gossips about us behind our back, and ruins our reputation. Instead of projecting "devil" onto that person, let's recognise that he has the Buddha nature. He has the quality of kindness in him, even though he isn't showing it towards us at the moment. He has been kind to us in previous lives. In addition, reputation is of no ultimate value. It is only other people's ideas, and others' ideas are fickle and changeable.

So, instead of clinging to our reputation, we say to that person, "Thank you for helping me realise that reputation does not bring happiness." One part of our mind may say, "That's wrong. Reputation makes me very happy." Then ask yourself, "What happiness does reputation actually bring? What good do others' changeable opinions about me do for me? Do they prevent me from getting sick? Do they stop me from dying? Do they make me any

closer to enlightenment? Do they purify negative karma? From a Dharma perspective, what benefit does a good reputation do?" Looking at this with wisdom, we see that a good reputation does not bring us any benefit. If anything, it could harm us by making us conceited or complacent. Seeing that reputation is empty of meaning, let's relinquish attachment to it. Doing so allows our mind to be peaceful no matter what others say about us. Wouldn't it be wonderful to remain calm no matter what others thought or said about you?



VERSE

15

Transforming Criticism into the Path

*Though someone may deride and speak bad words
About you in a public gathering,
Looking on him as a spiritual teacher,
Bow to him with respect—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Compassion for the One Who Derides Us

Here someone harms us by deriding us and speaking bad words about us in a public gathering when all our family, friends and everybody whom we want to impress are present. We seek the approval and appreciation of a group of people, but instead

someone ruins our chance to receive these by disparaging us in their presence. Try to imagine this scene. How would you feel and act?

Trying to impress people, we put on shows. We're very clever when we try to impress someone. First we think of what kind of person they would be attracted to. Then we try to become that person or at least to appear like him or her. In other words, we present ourselves as being someone we think they think would be good. Confusing, isn't it? We display ourselves as attractive; we pretend to be talented, rich, intelligent or artistic. We pretend we're interested in things we're not interested in. We pretend we know things that we don't have a clue about—all because we want somebody to like us, we want him or her to approve of us and praise us, we want them to love us. To get them to say the ego-pleasing words we crave to hear or to do the ego-pleasing actions we want, we go through a big routine trying to become what we think they think we should be.

Even when we go to a Dharma centre, we may try to impress others by boasting, "I've done this retreat. I've taken this teaching. I know this and have studied that." We try to impress people with our Dharma knowledge as well. Or maybe we brag about how many lamas have visited our home or ridden in our car. We will use anything, even the Dharma, in an attempt to make ourselves look good and to get people to like or respect us. It's very sad. This is like using gold to make a toilet.

Here's the scenario: you are speaking to an audience of distinguished guests and are trying very hard to present a good image so that they will praise you and you will have a good

reputation. Then someone you know but haven't gotten along with so well stands up and starts deriding and speaking bad things about you. He tells your faults and brings up your past history, which you don't want others to know. You watch the bright, eager faces of those whose attention you're trying so hard to get, who were looking at you before and singing your praises, now going stiff as they hear this person accuse you of being an insincere charlatan.

Maybe you aren't really everything he says you are, but surely some of the traits apply. But you don't want to admit any of them, especially in front of a group of people you've been endeavouring to impress, and whose love and adoration you're trying to win. You would rather die than go through this. And in fact, some people commit suicide when such things happen.

In this terribly embarrassing situation, what does the Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo recommend doing? Look upon him as a spiritual teacher, and bow to him with respect. Imagine. You put your palms together and say, "Thank you so much for trashing me." And you mean it. You really mean it. You are not doing some kind of phoney trick to look like a bodhisattva. You are not doing a song and dance trying to impress people what a bodhisattva you are by saying, "Thank you for deriding me," while you're thinking, "See what a bodhisattva I am, being so kind and considerate to this idiot here who's deriding me. I hope these people will see how humble I am and will respect me for it."

Instead, from your heart, you speak of his good qualities and look upon him as your spiritual teacher. How is he a spiritual teacher? He is teaching you the uselessness of attachment to praise and aversion to blame. He is educating you about the

vanity of trying to impress people. He is showing you that you don't have to impress other people in order to be liked or loved or to win others' approval.

No matter how much we try to impress them, people are going to think whatever they wish about us. We might as well relax, because we don't have any control over what opinion they will form of us or when they will change it. If we behave naturally and are just who we are, being content with whatever they wish to think or say about us, others may actually like us. That's what this person is teaching us. So we have to put our palms together and say, "Thank you for teaching me that I'm okay the way I am. Thank you for showing me that I don't need to be attached to what people think and say about me. What I need to do is to be happy within myself. If I can be mindful of my motivations and act sincerely, then I'll be happy with my decisions and I won't need others to approve of me. I'll know that ultimately my karma is my responsibility and that what others say and think about me cannot make me take rebirth in a fortunate realm or an unfortunate abode."

This person who is deriding us in a public gathering is throwing us back on ourselves. Instead of seeking others' approval in order to feel good about ourselves, he is teaching us that if our motivations are good, it doesn't matter what other people think. He's teaching us to be content with who we are and to be virtuous instead of simply looking virtuous. He's teaching us to be responsible instead of seeking to look responsible.

VERSE

16

Transforming Betrayal into the Path

*Even if a person for whom you've cared
Like your own child regards you as an enemy,
Cherish him specially, like a mother
Does her child who is stricken by sickness—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Trust Betrayed

This verses speaks of our relationship with someone we have cared for like our child, someone we have invested so much time and energy in, someone we love and trust very much. Instead of feeling grateful and returning our affection, this person turns around and views us as an enemy. Such things happen in families

and other close relationships. One person is very kind to another but the other person can't see his kindness and instead he becomes an enemy and attacks the former.

This painful and unfortunate situation is a result of our own karma created in the past. We did something similar to somebody else in the past. We turned on a person who was kind to us, criticised him, hurt his feelings and betrayed his trust. Now it's happening to us. The instant reaction of the self-centred mind is, "Poor me, I loved you, I cherished you. I did so much for you. Now look at how you are treating me. What did I do to deserve this?"

Some of us relish indulging in self-pity. As one of the inmates I correspond with said, we throw a Pity Party. We are the star of the show and sing our favourite song again and again, "Poor me. What did I do to deserve this?" Everyone feels sorry for us and we don't have to do anything except enjoy being miserable. Self-centred mind loves this. But, instead of going into our "Poor me" routine, this verse advises us to press the pause button on that and, instead, to cherish that person specially like a mother does her child who is stricken by sickness.

A mother whose child has a high fever knows that the child is delirious and will say all sorts of things he doesn't mean. But she doesn't take it personally because she knows the child is ill. Or let's say her toddler has a temper tantrum and screams his lungs out. She doesn't get upset at the child because she knows three-year-olds behave like this at times. She is tolerant and will help the child after he calms down.

If we look upon the person who betrays our trust as a mother or father would regard their child who is stricken with illness, we won't take what she is saying and doing personally, because we know that she is not in her right mind. What is this person sick with? She suffers from her mental afflictions. Her mind is sick with wrong conceptions, which are causing her to repay kindness with hostility. Compassion is called for here.

Does that mean you sit there and let the other person act in an uncontrolled manner? Once a woman came to see me with her three-year old son. He suddenly decided it was a good time to have a temper tantrum and started hitting his mum. I held him and said, "It's not appropriate to hit your mum. You cannot hit your mum. That's not something you can do." Eventually, he calmed down.

Thus, it doesn't mean you let the person be disruptive. In your heart you cherish him like a mother does her sick child. Externally, you show that affection by providing structure and guidance.





VERSE

17

Transforming Derision into the Path

*If an equal or inferior person
Disparages you out of pride,
Place him, as you would your spiritual teacher,
With respect on the crown of your head—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Squashing Our Ego

Placing our spiritual teacher on the crown of our head is a valuable practice. Imagining our spiritual teacher in the form of the Buddha, Chenrezig, Tara or another deity, we visualise him or her on top of our head. Then we do the seven-limb prayer, the mandala offering, purification and so on. After the meditation session, we again visualise our spiritual mentor on the crown of

our head as a witness to all our actions and as an inspiration for our actions during the day. This is a wonderful practice that makes us feel close to our spiritual teacher even when we live far away.

This verse speaks about somebody who has equal or less skill or talent as we do in a certain area. This person disparages you out of pride because she's jealous of you. She behaves just as we do towards the people we're jealous of. We find faults with them and harp on their bad qualities because we can't stand that they are so successful, skilled, athletic, or whatever. Our pride is piqued and in a misconstrued attempt to restore it, we tear down our detractor, thinking it will build us up.

We want to be the best one and what better way to be good than to make somebody else bad? We do that, don't we? So, that's what somebody else is doing with us. He is suffering from arrogance and disparaging us in an attempt to feel better about himself. Of course this doesn't work, just as it has never worked any of the times we've acted that way towards others. Instead of retaliating and disparaging her in return, we put her respectfully on the crown of our head, as we would our spiritual mentor. In other words, this person becomes like a spiritual mentor to us.

What is she teaching us? She is showing us the foolishness of being proud and of being attached to our good qualities. Perhaps the reason this person is disparaging us is because we acted puffed up, thinking we are better than she is. So she is pointing out to us that humility, not arrogance, is a quality of a bodhisattva.

By putting the person who disparages us on the crown of our head, we learn humility. By paying respect to her, our arrogance is reduced. If your deluded mind thinks, "Why should I respect her?"

She's worse than me. She's inferior to me or, at best, just my equal. Moreover, she's criticising me," think, "No. she is a human being who is worthy of respect. She has the potential to become a fully enlightened Buddha, therefore respecting her is suitable. I don't have to make myself Number One, and be the best at every activity and the most outstanding at every gathering."

Such an attitude contradicts our upbringing, in which we were taught to want recognition and to proclaim our achievements. However, in Buddhist practice, being arrogant is not conducive for accomplishing the Path. In fact, talking about all of our strengths and putting ourselves forward can create obstacles in our meditation practice. So humility is very important.

Humility doesn't mean a lack of self-esteem. It doesn't mean we put ourselves down. It just means that we don't go around broadcasting everything we've done or are capable of doing. We're completely satisfied without anyone knowing our good qualities. We don't have to be the most prominent one, to be on display, or to make a big show about ourselves.

These verses are quite potent ways to fight the self-centred thought, aren't they? They strike our self-centred intentions and our deluded needs to be noticed, to be the best, the most famous, the most highly praised, the most loved. We are quite attached to these things and become arrogant or complacent when we have them. Arrogance and complacency are antithetical to the spiritual path. There is no such thing as an arrogant Buddha, so cultivating arrogance will not make us closer to enlightenment. Humility, respecting others, praising others—these are traits of the enlightened ones, so cultivating them makes our mind more like the mind of a Buddha.

VERSE

18

Transforming Poverty into the Path

*Though you lack what you need and are constantly disparaged,
Afflicted by dangerous sickness and spirits,
Without discouragement take on the misdeeds
And the pain of all living beings—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Self-Centred Mind Is the Culprit

Imagine losing almost everything in your life. On the physical level, you lack what you need, and on the social level, you are constantly disparaged and lack the support of friends and family. In terms of your body, you are sick and weak. We usually react in one of two ways to misfortune. One option is to become upset and

angry, wanting to strike back at society or at whomever we deem as the cause of our ruin. Another option is to become depressed and throw a pity party for ourselves. Feeling helpless and hopeless, we throw up our hands and say, “What’s the use? Why should I live? Nobody is helping me and the whole world is against me.” Do either of these solve the external problem or bring us happiness here and now? No. In fact, by thinking in that way, we usually wind up more unhappy and upset.

Before indulging in these emotions, it’s helpful to ask ourselves, “Do I really need all of these things? My living standard may be lower now, but did all those things bring me happiness? Maybe I could be just as happy, or even happier, with less?” Similarly, we could investigate, “Am I really being disparaged by others or is it that I’m interpreting their behaviour in a derogatory way that possibly they didn’t mean?” After all, many times people don’t mean us harm when they say certain things, but we misconstrue their words and take their comments personally when they aren’t meant that way.

Behind our upset facade is often a feeling of entitlement—the universe owes us something, the world should treat us better. We may talk about karma, but when we go through hard times, we don’t think that it is the result of our own actions. Instead we continue to blame someone or something outside. If we thought about karma, we would see, “I’m going through a hard time due to the ripening of negative karma I created. How did I create this karma? Self-centredness, ignorance, attachment and hostility had occupied my mind. Lacking what I need is the result of stealing. Being disparaged is the result of speaking harshly and using my speech to create disharmony. Being afflicted with dangerous sickness and spirits is the result of physically harming others or

deliberately causing them mental and emotional tumult. Now I'm experiencing the result of the causes I created under the influence of my own self-centred mind. What use is it to become angry at others or to feel sorry for myself?"

It is important here not to blame ourselves for our misery or to feel that we deserve to suffer. Whoever we were in a previous life acted harmfully, and we are experiencing the results because we are in the same mental continuum as that person. This does not mean we are bad people. It simply means that self-centredness made the person we were in the past act in harmful ways and we are currently experiencing the result.

Rather than blame other people or ourselves, let's turn to our own self-centred mind and point the finger at it. This doesn't mean criticising or hating ourselves, because self-centredness is *not* a part of us. But since it harms us, let's cease following its dictates and practise the methods to eliminate it.

How do we act without discouragement and take on the misdeeds and the pain of all living beings? Do the taking and giving meditation. In this meditation, think of your self-centred, egoistic mind as a lump in your heart. Then visualise all living beings in front of you and, with compassion, yearn to remove their misery. Imagine all their pain and suffering leaving them in the form of smoke and pollution. Inhale the smoke and pollution, but don't think they stay inside you, making you sick. Instead, the smoke and pollution transform into a lightning bolt that hits that lump of self-centredness in your heart and decimates it. Feel incredible spaciousness in your heart now that the self-centredness is no longer there. Dwell in that spaciousness for a while.

Then from that pure heart, imagine light radiating and think that you have transformed and multiplied your body, possessions, and virtue so they manifest as the people and objects that others need. Give these away happily. Imagine others receiving all they need and becoming tranquil and happy. This is an excellent meditation to do when you're going through hard times, because it completely transforms the misfortune into the Dharma practice of developing love, compassion and bodhicitta.



VERSE

19

Transforming Wealth into the Path

*Though you become famous and many bow to you,
And you gain riches equal to Vaishravana's,
See that worldly fortune is without essence,
And be unconceited—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

See that Worldly Fortune is Without Essence

Due to having been generous and respectful of others in the past, your karma may be such that this life you become famous and wealthy. Many people shower you with gifts, honour you, and proclaim your greatness and glory. The meaning of gaining “riches equal to Vaishravana” is that your wealth equals that of

Vaishravana, one of the deities of wealth. In other words, you're richer than Bill Gates. You have three times everything that you want. In addition to that, everybody thinks you're wonderful. You're famous, powerful and popular.

We may wonder, "What's wrong with that? I've got what I've always longed for; does Buddhism say that I have to give it up?" There's nothing wrong with wealth and you don't have to renounce it. What you do have to do is safeguard your mind from miserliness and arrogance, both of which arise easily when we have worldly fortune. For that reason, we practise seeing that worldly fortune is without essence. In other words, wealth comes and goes. Fame comes and goes. Praise, honour and respect come and go. They are impermanent, transient, arising only when the causes and conditions for them have assembled. Having them does not mean we are successful and worthwhile because they are simply a passing ripening of karma. Therefore they are without essence and lack any ultimate meaning.

How we relate to the wealth and honour influences the karma we create and thus what we will experience in the future. If we care about others in society, want to share our wealth, and use it in ways that benefit humanity, then we create the constructive karma of generosity. If we keep our wealth to ourselves without caring about all other sentient beings on the planet upon whom our happiness depends, then that wealth becomes the source for our future misery, because it has corrupted our mind and made us lose our good heart.

Sometimes worldly fortune can be detrimental to our Dharma practice. We get rich and then become complacent. We forget that

money, possessions, respect and popularity are impermanent. Some people become famous and wealthy and think, “Now, I’m powerful. I can make people follow my wishes. I don’t need to practise the Dharma because I’ve got it made.” This is similar to people who were lonely and then fall in love. They think, “I feel fantastic. Finally, somebody loves me.” Their wisdom has been obscured by attachment to their fortune so they no longer wish to practise Dharma. They are too busy being wrapped up in attachment to their good feeling and the person who appears to be the cause of it.

In reality, all those things are temporary. They come and they go quickly. Even if they last most of this life, at the time of death, we have to separate from them and go on to our future lives without them. Even while wealth, respect and power last, if we investigate them deeply in our mind, we see that we still aren’t completely satisfied and peaceful. We may have worldly success, but we’re still subject to sickness, ageing and death. No amount of money, love or fame can protect us from them. In addition, we have a new set of difficulties: we have to protect our wealth, status and power. Thus rich and famous people have a house that resembles a prison because they have to protect themselves from thieves and from people who resent their wealth or dislike how they use their power. They are restless and fearful of losing what they have. In other words, worldly fortune may be present, but peace of mind is absent.

A friend of mind went back to school to do graduate work. After the first semester, I asked her how it was going, and she said, “I did very well and got As for all my exams. But now I’m very anxious because I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to do that again.” She was successful, but her mind was restless and worried because she

felt pressure to maintain her excellent status. I think many sports heroes and movie stars must feel likewise. In other words, there is no security in worldly gain.

It's clear that even when we have worldly success, the fear of losing it haunts us. We have to fend off competition and enemies who are trying to take it from us. Or, you fall in love, and then become insecure, fearing that the person may abandon you or may suddenly die.

It's extremely difficult, if not impossible for a mind that is bound by ignorance, afflictions and karma to ever be content. Even if we have good circumstances, they lack essence; they don't have the ability to give us everlasting peace and happiness. We have experienced such disappointment time and time again, but ignoring them, we think next time it will be different.

It seems we haven't yet developed enough confidence that Dharma practice can bring a completely different kind of happiness than worldly happiness. We are locked into the narrow view that happiness comes from outside, and so we need external things, people and situations in order to be happy. But when we understand the type of happiness that comes through Dharma practice—mental peace— lasts longer, is more stable, and can be experienced no matter what our external situation is, then our interest in worldly happiness will naturally decline.

In addition, thinking of the benefits that having a Dharma mind can bring to ourselves and others energises us to practise. Think of having genuine deep compassion for others and making your life meaningful by being of service and benefit to others. Know that you have the ability to do that and generate the confidence to

do it. The inspiration and joy this brings in the mind far excel that giddy feeling that worldly pleasures bring.

Think, “What would it be like to be a Buddha? I could be of great benefit to others; I’ll know the right thing to say to somebody at any particular moment and will have the ability to evaluate situations and do what is of the greatest benefit. A Buddha can manifest many bodies and be able to serve sentient beings.” When we think of having such capability, our minds become more confident, joyful, and energised to create the causes for it. That joy is much more worthwhile and meaningful. There is some purpose and reason to cultivate the abilities of the bodhisattvas and Buddhas, whereas worldly success comes and goes in a twinkle of an eye.

This verse recommends that you remain unconceited and humble, even when worldly success comes your way. Instead of getting puffed up and strutting around saying, “Look at me. I’m so rich. I’m so famous. I’m this. I’m that. I’m talented and successful,” be completely humble. A person who has deep self-confidence is able to be humble because they have no internal need to prove themselves to anybody. But, those of us who lack self-confidence easily become conceited, because we don’t really believe in ourselves. We put on a big production about *Me*, thinking that if we can get others to think we are wonderful, then we must be wonderful.

But when we have genuine self-confidence, we don’t need to do that. There is no craving to receive others’ approval because we are able to evaluate our own motivations, actions and confidence in our Buddha potential. We have become friends with ourselves.

Great practitioners are unconceited. I tend to react with doubt towards the meditators and Dharma teachers who make big productions about themselves. His Holiness says that in India some people are nobody, but when they come to the West, they have five titles before and after their name, they wear big hats, and sit on high thrones. Personally speaking, I am much more attracted to the humble practitioners and teachers. I have had the good fortune to meet a number of them and they are excellent examples of what a practitioner should be—kind, generous, unassuming. They encourage others and teach them the Dharma without seeking anything for themselves. These are the people that I admire and want to be like.



VERSE

20

Transforming Anger into the Path

*While the enemy of your own anger is unsubdued,
Though you conquer external foes, they will only increase.
Therefore with the militia of love and compassion
Subdue your own mind—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Subdue Anger in Your Mind

As long as the seed of anger exists within us, we will have enemies. Why? We will find someone to project our discontent onto. It doesn't matter if this person makes a mistake or not, we will still find a reason to hate them simply because there is anger energy inside us. For instance, sometimes I wake up in a bad mood, and I'm

just waiting for somebody to say, “Good morning”, so I can get mad at him. That person doesn’t need to do anything, but I’ll make up a story about how they are harming me, “I can tell by his tone of voice when he said, ‘Good morning’ that he’s trying to manipulate me.”

We project our anger on the most convenient person around, over the tiniest little thing. For example, your spouse forgot to buy peanut butter and suddenly you’re questioning the entire relationship, “We’re out of peanut butter. You knew we were out and that I like it, yet you didn’t buy any more. Now you have the gall to tell me you forgot. Actually you’re being passive-aggressive again. Our marriage has always been like this. You never do what I want, you never consider me. And when I confront you on this, you’re full of excuses. I’m fed up. I want a divorce!”

Our anger has nothing to do with the other person’s actions or motives. Why? One person will become enraged at a situation while another person is calm. If there were an objective fault—let’s say an external situation or another person—then everyone would react the same way. But that is not the case at all. We create a description or story about the situation and the other person’s intentions and actions, and then make ourselves mad. This occurs because the enemy of our anger is unsubdued. As long as this is the case, we find somebody to resent, hold a grudge against, be spiteful towards, and be enraged at.

Although we may conquer external foes and put them in their place, they will increase. When we intentionally inflict harm on others, why would we expect them to be kind to us in return? On the contrary, they become more upset and rally others to side with them against us.

Anger not only affects us on a personal level, it also operates on an international level. A nation may conquer one external foe or destroy one enemy, but two more appear in response to that action. When a country thinks only of its own welfare and does not see that it is interdependent with all others, then it acts in a way that lacks consideration for others' welfare. Others respond with hostility; this keeps happening in human history. For that reason the Buddha said that hatred is not conquered by hatred but only by love.

Such dynamics occur in our personal life as well. No matter how many people we harm in return to what we consider their harm to us, they will respond with further harm. When we think about it, our way of thinking is silly, "I'm going to harm you until you decide to love me." Is that true? Not at all. In fact, just the opposite occurs. In our deep confusion and ignorance, our mind believes that anger and aggression will bring the peace and happiness we want. This doesn't work on a personal level or on the international scene.

On a personal level, we harp on people we love, we nag them and criticise them, thinking that will make them change and then we'll be happy. Does it work? No. But we keep doing it, and, it keeps not working. In fact, it creates quite the opposite effect, distancing us from the very people we care most about and want to be close to.

Furthermore, when we act with anger, other people lose respect for us and do not trust us. When I hear someone speak badly about another person, an alarm goes off in my mind. I know that one day that person will speak of me in the same way. If that person has the

habit of speaking negatively of others, denigrating and lambasting them, someday he will find a reason to do that to me too, whether or not I do anything wrong. To prevent that from happening, I keep a polite distance from that person and do not confide in him.

When people talk badly about others behind their back, they're saying more about themselves than they are about the people they're disparaging. They are sending the message to other people that they're not to be trusted, because others see how they treat people. It's clear that their anger and the backbiting that it motivates bring an opposite effect from what they want. All of us seek friendship, but conquering foes and backbiting do not bring that.

Sometimes it happens that somebody misunderstood what we said, and many people are upset about what they believe we said. At those times, in order to dispel the commotion and misunderstanding, we should explain what we meant and tell our side of the story. We can do this without being angry and without saying nasty things about the person who spoke badly about us.

This happened to me a couple of years back. Somebody whom I considered a friend complained to one of my teachers that I had incited discord amongst his students. In fact, I had tried to pacify the gossip and bad feelings between the different factions. But, for this person, if you weren't on his side, then you were against him. Thich Nhat Hanh faced something similar, but far worse, during the Vietnam War. He tried to pacify the discord between the two warring factions without taking sides, but both sides distrusted him because he wasn't on anyone's side and wanted to help both sides get along. In my case, another one of my teachers

heard about this and said to me, “You should go to your other teacher and explain what the situation was, because he was given misinformation.” I’m very grateful to my teacher for giving me that advice. I went to my other teacher and without blaming the person who spoke ill of me, explained to him my view of the discord and what I had said and done.

This taught me an important lesson: I learned that when there is a misunderstanding and somebody is talking badly about you and other people are getting worked up about it, it is necessary to explain your side of the story without being defensive or blaming. It is important to clear things up as much as you can, especially if you do not want a bad relationship with your teachers. Normally, I would have just kept quiet and let it go. However, my teacher taught me that it is important to clear up misunderstandings and not just ignore them.

When people gossip behind our back or try to harm us, we should clarify the situation with others when it is appropriate to do so, without making the person who harmed us into an enemy. Ruining his reputation or taking revenge is of no benefit. One of the auxiliary bodhisattva precepts says that when people are upset with us, we should try to explain and ease their upset feelings.

Still discriminating wisdom is necessary. Sometimes it’s better to let it go completely because it is not a big deal. If we try to explain, it may stir the conflict up unnecessarily. A great deal of sensitivity is needed to know how to act in various situations. But no matter what the circumstances, subduing our anger is necessary.

We subdue our anger and belligerence with the militia of love and compassion. If you want to stop having external enemies, then attack the hatred and resentment in your own mind with the militia of love and compassion. By pacifying our anger, external enemies and foes are subdued because we cease to conceptualise others in that framework. Instead, we view them as suffering sentient beings who want to be happy and free from suffering but are confused about how to bring that about. That's how bodhisattvas look at the people who harm them. As Verse 17 said, put these people on the crown of your head, regard them as your spiritual master and bow to them with respect. See those people as kind for giving us the opportunity to cultivate patience. After all, we can't practise patience with people who are nice to us; we need people who harm us to do that.



VERSE

21

Transforming Desire into the Path

Sensual pleasures are like saltwater:

The more you indulge, the more thirst increases.

Abandon at once those things which breed

Clinging attachment—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Running after Sense Pleasure

This verse applies to our consumerist culture where we are taught that having “more and better” is the cause of happiness. With this view, we are constantly craving something. Our society is hooked on sense pleasure. The media teaches this, and the government tells us that to be good citizens we should consume

more because it's good for the economy. Sense pleasure is supposed to be the path to bliss, and so we chase after it and struggle to get it at all costs. We don't even realise how much our mind is affected by the consumerist ethic because it is so pervasive.

Beautiful sights, melodious sounds and music, pleasant odours, delicious food, luxurious tactile objects, a good sex life, a new air-conditioner or heater, the latest electronic device—the list goes on and on. We are addicted to sense pleasure, constantly running after it. But like drug addicts, the more we have, the more we need. Although we live in rich countries, we suffer from dissatisfaction and all its ramifications.

Remember when you were fresh out of school with no money and you thought having \$10 made you feel rich? But as time went on, \$10 was insufficient and we wanted \$100. Then we need \$1000, and after that \$10,000. There is a pervasive feeling of poverty, of not having enough. Yet our houses, cars, garages and basements are stuffed with things that we don't even use. Still, we have a hard time giving things away. Fear haunts us: "If I give it away, I may need it later." So we hang onto things we do not use.

The more we have, the more the thirst increases. The more we indulge in sense pleasures, the more we want. One year, we go to vacation in Acapulco, then the next, we have to go to the Bahamas. One partner isn't enough, so we want another and another. The same goes with cars and material possessions. One isn't enough, then we need two, then three. There is no end to the story.

The book *Hooked*, edited by Stephanie Kaza, discusses our tendency to get hooked by the consumerist ideal. The author of

an essay in the book talked about his meditation centre and said, “Many people come to do retreats. In their meditation, they realise how addicted they are to sensual objects. Some of them have enough space during retreat to see that and to take a breather from it, but they don’t necessarily change their lifestyle. And, that’s okay.” I don’t completely agree, because I believe that when the Dharma really touches your heart, you change your lifestyle. It’s not that you have to change your consumption patterns completely, but there should be a shift. In other words, a mental change in view should manifest in different behaviour.

Genuine Dharma understanding impacts how you live. When we realise that we use such an unfair portion of the world’s resources, when we feel interconnected with other living beings, such understanding will affect what you think about when you get into your car to drive somewhere. Caring about the environment, you will try to car pool or use public transportation. Or when the urge comes to buy something that we don’t really need, you stop and ask yourself, “Do I really need it? Maybe the one I have is okay.”

When we understand that the more we indulge, the more the thirst increases; when we understand that the more we use an unfair share of the world’s resources, the more we create suffering for others and enemies for ourselves, it is bound to impact our lives. We will feel compelled to change our lifestyle. That doesn’t mean we have to effect a huge change immediately; it may be easier to start with small changes and gradually increase. By doing so, we will know, through our own experience, that simplicity brings more peace of mind.



I have a reputation in my family. Everyone knows that when I visit, I will look for the recycling bin to use. If there isn't one in the house, I comment on it. My family members all know that when I go to the supermarket, I bring my own bag instead of asking for a plastic bag.

There are many small ways to care for our planet and reduce consumption. For instance, I wear the same kind of clothes every day. Some of you may have noticed that, and wish I would change them! (I wear monastic robes.) But, this makes things very easy. We have only one body, but look how much stuff there is in our closet. Do we really need that many pieces of clothing? Do we really need that many pairs of shoes for our two feet? If we were a centipede, having many shoes would be understandable. But we're just bipeds. Reflect on some examples in your life illustrating that the more you indulge, the more dissatisfied you become. Then with compassion for yourself and for all beings with whom you share this planet, simplify your life.

VERSE

22

Realising Emptiness

*Whatever appears is your own mind.
Your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes.
Understanding this, do not take to mind
[Inherent] signs of subject and object—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Whatever Appears Is Your Own Mind

Things that appear to our minds exist by merely being labelled by mind. They are not literally our mind, but they exist in relationship to the mind that perceives them. Phenomena are not objective entities, out there, unrelated to mind, even though they appear that way and we apprehend them as such. Rather,

their parts which form the “basis of designation” appear and in dependence upon that, the mind conceives and labels objects. Then, having forgotten that our mind designated an object to a basis of designation, we think this object has its own independent essence, existing from its own side, under its own power.

An analogy is helpful. Escher was a great painter who made pictures that could appear as many different objects depending upon how your mind put the pieces together and conceptualised an object. In the same way, we select certain sensory data and conceptualise an object. There is no problem in doing that; it allows us to function in the world. The difficulty arises when we think that something is an object in its own right, independent of any other factors such as its causes and conditions, its parts, the mind conceiving and labelling it.

Our mind creates the table in the sense that on the basis of seeing four legs and a flat top, it labels “table”. This object is not a table from its own side, radiating out the essence of table-ness to us. Rather, on the basis of certain characteristics, all of us have agreed to refer to this object as a table. People who speak another language give it a different name. People using this object for a purpose other than putting things on will think of it differently.

Although everything exists by being merely labelled, we perceive them as having their own independent essence. For example, when we say “I” as in, “I’m really mad”, it seems that there is a real person there, someone who exists independent of all other things. In fact, there are only a body and mind there. In dependence on them, we label “I” or in my case “Chodron”, but aside from the person who is labelled, there is no “essence of person” or “soul” there.

However, our ignorance apprehends a real person there. If we examine our feeling of self, we'll see that we don't feel that we exist by being merely labelled. Instead, we feel that there is a solid, real, independent *Me* somewhere in our body-mind complex. On that basis, we get attached to everything that concerns this seemingly solid, real person. There seems to be an "I" that wants to be happy and that needs to be protected from danger. Everything that concerns this "I" is incredibly important, thus attachment arises towards whatever makes the self happy and hostility arises towards whatever interferes with our happiness or causes us misery. Yet who exactly is it that we are protecting and defending? There is only a body and a mind there. If we look for the thing that's "I", we can't find an independent, identifiable person. The only "I" that exists, is the one that exists by being labelled in dependence upon the body and mind. But that "I" can't be found anywhere when we search for it. The self or person lacks any inherent or independent essence. It is empty of inherent existence.

While there is no independent self there, ignorance apprehends one. For example, think of someone you don't like, let's call him, "Harry". Somebody says the name "Harry" and how do you respond? Your mind conceives of a real, solid, inherently existent Harry. Anger then arises in your mind and adrenaline floods your body. But the only thing that happened is that you heard the sound "Harry". The rest is a creation of an ignorant mind thinking there is an inherently existent Harry with inherently existent negative qualities. You become afraid and therefore speak or act aggressively towards him. Your actions leave a karmic seed on your mindstream. This seed is fertilised by craving and grasping at the time of death,

propelling a new rebirth. In that way cyclic existence continues under the force of ignorance, afflictions and karma.

The line, “Your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes” indicates that the mind, too, does not exist inherently. What we call “mind,” exists by being merely labelled. The mind isn’t a concrete, truly existing thing that exists with its own essence, independent of everything else. What we call “mind” depends on various moments of consciousness. Based upon a stream of different moments of clarity and awareness, the label “mind” is given. But not realising that the mind exists by being conceived and labelled, we think that it has some essence existing from its own. In reality, however, the mind is free from the fabricated extreme of inherent existence. Still it exists conventionally and thus is free from the fabricated extreme of nihilism.

It is important to understand that although phenomena do not exist ultimately, independently or inherently, they are not totally non-existent. They exist conventionally, nominally, dependently, relatively. The state of an object being empty of inherent existence but still existing conventionally is not contradictory. In fact, emptiness of inherent existence and dependent existence come to the same point and are completely complementary.

Understanding that perceived objects are empty of inherent existence and that the mind is also free from inherent existence, we do not take to mind inherent signs of subject and object. In other words, we do not mistake our mind as an inherently existent subject or perceiver, and we do not make perceived things into inherently existent objects. Instead we realise that subject and object exist in dependence upon each other.

This verse refers to meditating on emptiness in a state of meditative equipoise. When someone is able to realise emptiness directly and non-conceptually, there is no appearance at all of subject and an object. All that appears is the emptiness of inherent existence. When great yogis meditate on emptiness, there is no thought, “I am perceiving emptiness”. There’s no thought or awareness of an independent “I” who is perceiving an independent object. This is what is meant by “do not take to mind inherent signs of subject and object”.





VERSE

23

Seeing the Desired as Empty

*When you encounter attractive objects,
Though they seem beautiful
Like a rainbow in summer, don't regard them as real
And give up attachment—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

The Emptiness of Attractive Objects

Verse 22 talks about how to realise emptiness non-conceptually in meditative equipoise. Verse 23 speaks of how you apply your understanding of emptiness towards attractive objects during breaks, subsequent to your formal meditation on emptiness.

When you see things that appear attractive, recognise that they are only appearances; there are no inherently beautiful real objects out there. They're like a rainbow in summer. When a rainbow appears, it appears so real. But is there something solid that you can touch where the rainbow seems to be? No. There is only light appearing to our mind. The rainbow is an example of something whose mode of appearance and mode of existence do not match. It appears real but is not. Similarly, objects appear truly existent, but they are not.

We are especially deceived by the appearance of attractive objects. We think the beauty and desirability of a car, for example, lies in the car itself. In fact, there is no inherent attractiveness in the car; our mind projects beauty on the car and then we get attached to the beautiful car our mind has created. We think, "What a gorgeous car that is! It has this feature and that feature. I really want to buy it"! But someone who is not at all interested in cars sees the same car, is not at all attracted to it, and has no desire to possess it. When our mind gets stuck in longing for someone or something, it is helpful to remember that the attractiveness we see in that person or thing is not inherent in it. It is projected by our mind. There is no inherently existent car or person there to start with, let alone any inherently existent beauty in the car or person.

When you watch TV, there is the appearance of people. But are there real people in the TV? No. When you look at your face in the mirror, there's the appearance of a face in the mirror. But is there a face in the mirror? No. There is only the appearance of the face. When you see a mirage, water appears on the asphalt. Is there water there? No. However it's not that nothing exists. While there are no

people inside the TV, no face in the mirror, and no water on the asphalt, there are the appearances of people, the appearance of a face, and the appearance of water. But how they appear and how they exist are different. They appear real but are not. Similarly, things appear truly existent but are not. Nevertheless they exist on the level of false appearances.

Similarly, the things that appear attractive and real to us have no essence to them. They are just appearances, like a rainbow that appears beautiful. But if we go closer, and try to find the thing that's really the rainbow, there's nothing there to touch. Likewise if we analyse and search for what is so attractive, we can't find it. If we analyse, trying to find something that really is the object out there, we can't find it. It's empty of inherent existence.

When we see things as just appearances, and we don't regard them as real with their own essence, giving up attachment is easy. For example, you see this beautiful person on the television. Does it make any sense to fall in love with the person on the TV? No, because there is no person there. There are just electrons whizzing around giving the appearance of a person on the screen. If we think there is a real person in the TV and fall in love with him or her, we'll be very miserable. Similarly, if we think people are inherently existent—there is a real person or personality, an essence to the person, something that is really him or her—we'll be frustrated because the nominally existent person that exists and the inherently existent person that we've invented are not the same. Contemplating that attractiveness is only an appearance helps us subdue attachment. Contemplating that there is no person there who has a real, inherent essence helps us prevent clinging and craving.

VERSE

24

Seeing the Hated as Empty

*All forms of suffering are like a child's death in a dream.
Holding illusory appearances to be true makes you weary.
Therefore when you meet with disagreeable circumstances,
See them as illusory—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

The Emptiness of Unpleasant Objects or Suffering

How do we give up aversion and hostility when we come in touch with ugly and unpleasant objects or with suffering? See them as being like illusions: they appear to exist one way but exist in another. They appear to have their own independent essence, but they do not.

Let's say you want to have a child. One night you dream that you had a baby and are elated. But as the dream went on, the child died and you are overwhelmed with grief. When you wake up the next morning, you look back on your dream. Was there a real child who died? Was there a real child who was born? Does grieving for the death of the dream child make sense? No. There was no real child in the dream to start with, so there could be no child who died. It was just a dream of a child and a dream of the death. There is no child to be attached to and no child whose loss you grieve. It was just a dream.

Similarly, when we are awake, parents seem to have inherently existent children. You see your children as independent phenomena, not as something that exists by being merely labelled in dependence upon its basis of designation. Although thinking that people exist inherently is incorrect, we don't realise this and instead grasp onto conventionally existent people as having ultimate, independent existence. Then we become attached to them, and the more attached we are, the more worry and fear for their safety. This produces anxiety and clinging and strains the parent-child relationship.

However, if you see your children as nominally existent, then you still care for them but the clinging, obsessing, worry, fear, anxiety, and frustration are gone. You realise that there is no real personality there and there is no real you to say that is *My* child. Parent, child, the relationship between them—all these exist conventionally, but have no inherent essence. Although this may seem hard to fathom initially, by familiarising your mind with this view, your mind will relax and there will be space to actually love not only your child but all children.

Holding illusory appearances to be true makes us weary. Being continually angry, upset, frustrated, disappointed and depressed is exhausting, isn't it? What would happen if we gave all of that up? Seeing that all these situations and the people in them are like illusions—they appear to exist in one way but do not—enables our mind to let go of the emotional upset. Still, people and situations exist—they are not totally non-existent. They exist dependently, so we respond with compassion while knowing that we cannot control everything.

Let's say you won the lottery and are elated. What do you actually possess? The money is just pieces of paper with ink that we as a society have imputed meaning upon. Besides the meaning we have given them, those pieces of paper have no value. The lottery transfers the money to your account and now the shape of the scribbles on your bank statement make you think you are rich. But then the stock market collapses and new scribbles on your bank statement indicate your wealth vanished and you feel depressed. Actually, what did you ever have? Why did the mind become elated at the shape of the ink on one bank statement and dejected at the shape of the ink on a later bank statement? Isn't all of that emotional drama coming from our mind? Was it at all necessary? Chasing after illusory appearance is truly exhausting.

So, when we don't get what we want, we lose what we have, or we meet with disagreeable circumstances, see them as like an illusion and a dream. If it seems that there is a real "me" that all this is happening to or real people or things out there that are involved in the events, search to see if you can find their essence. Try to find something that makes them really them. When you can't, reflect

that there's no real "me" that all this is happening to. There are no objectively existent things out there. It is just an appearance. When you watch a movie, you get emotional about what happens to the characters. But when you remember that there are no real people on the screen, your mind calms down. Life occurrences are the same. They are just illusory appearances. There are no real things out there that have their own essence for one to hold onto, crave or grasp onto. So our mind relaxes and then, because we are no longer overwhelmed by personal distress, there is space to act with compassion in these illusion-like circumstances.



VERSE

25

Far-reaching Generosity

*When those who want enlightenment must give even their body,
There's no need to mention external things.
Therefore without hope for return or any fruition
Give generously—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Practise Giving Without Expectations

Verse 25 begins the explanation of the six far-reaching practices or six paramitas. These six are the principal practices in which bodhisattvas engage: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, joyous effort, meditative stabilisation and wisdom. Verse 25 discusses the practice of giving or generosity.

A bodhisattva is someone whose intention is directed completely at enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. A bodhisattva is not interested in “What will make me feel good today? How can I get what I want? How come the world doesn’t treat me well enough?” Instead, a bodhisattva wakes up in the morning with joy and delight in the prospect of benefiting others and transforming his or her mind through Dharma practice.

People with spontaneous bodhicitta aren’t attached to their bodies. They understand the body is impermanent; it comes and goes. At death we will separate from our body whether we want to or not. We took this body under the influence of ignorance, afflictions and karma, so there is nothing worth being attached to it. The body is just an illusion-like appearance, a collection of atoms and molecules that we label “body”. Not realising all this, we impute value and meaning to this body which it does not have from its own side.

That doesn’t mean we should not care about this body. After all, it is the basis of our precious human life and thus is needed to practise the Dharma. So we keep our body healthy and clean; we rest it and feed it, but we do all this without the clinging attachment and anxiety ordinary beings generally have towards their body.

Clinging to this body with obsessive attachment when we can use it to benefit sentient beings doesn’t make much sense. Thus bodhisattvas use their bodies in whatever way possible to benefit others. At very high levels of practice, they can even give their body away. They are not attached to their body, so giving it away is like giving a carrot to someone. It’s no big deal. However, for those of us at initial levels of practice, who have not realised emptiness

directly, sacrificing our body is not permitted; it's better to use it for practising the Dharma, listening to teachings, meditating, serving others, and so on. Use the body to create virtue so that we will become bodhisattvas in the future.

If bodhisattvas can give their body with such ease, then there's no need to mention the ease with which they can give other things. In particular, bodhisattvas practise giving wealth and possessions, protection from fear, love and Dharma. It's said that the highest gift is that of the Dharma because the Dharma is what can liberate us from cyclic existence altogether. Still, giving possessions, money, protection, and extending our affection and support to those who need it are worthwhile. They create merit that leads to enlightenment and help others immediately as well.

Whatever level of practice you're at, try to give without expectation of receiving anything in return—either praise, a gift, or even the karmic fruition of a fortunate rebirth. Thus practise giving without thoughts such as, “I hope they'll give me a present in return,” “Maybe they'll tell others how generous I am,” or “May I be reborn in the celestial realm.” Practise like bodhisattvas do, with both motivation and dedication aimed at full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

For those of us who are beginners, it's an incentive to us if we think, “Generosity creates good karma, so I will be generous in order to create the cause to have wealth in the future.” For ordinary beings, the idea of creating good karma which will ripen, resulting in future lives' happiness is a good motivator. There is nothing wrong with such motivation for that level of practitioner. But, when we progress to a higher level of the path, limiting the ripening of

virtuous karma to a fortunate rebirth is very narrow. Instead, we aim for full enlightenment to benefit all beings. But because a series of good rebirths with its conducive circumstances to practise the Dharma is necessary to attain enlightenment, we dedicate for that by the way. However, the pleasures of cyclic existence, which include fortunate rebirths, are not our real aim.

When we are generous because we care about others and are aiming at full enlightenment, our generosity becomes very pure. In addition to this altruistic intention, if we contemplate the emptiness of the sphere of three—that is ourselves as the giver, the thing that we are giving and the action of giving, as well as the recipient are empty of true existence but existentially dependent on one another—our generosity becomes the far-reaching practice of generosity.

Offering water bowls on the altar each morning is a practice of generosity. We can offer water very freely; usually we aren't attached to water. When we offer water to the Buddha, we do not expect the Buddha to give us something back. When we offer cookies, we may have to be more careful, because the next day, when we remove the plate of cookies from the altar, some attachment may arise as we look forward to eating them. So it's important when we make offerings to the Buddha that we give it from our heart, without any thought of consuming it later ourselves and without any expectation of achieving worldly gain.

I've seen people make offerings to the Buddha as if they were doing business. They think, "Buddha, I'm offering you so much money. Make my son marry a nice woman, my daughter get a high paying job, and my family be in good health." Other people are

more clever businessmen, they say, “Buddha, if all these things occur, then I’ll make an offering to you”. Implicit in this is “... and if they don’t occur, then you don’t get an offering.” Clearly this is not the correct attitude to have when making offerings to the Three Jewels!

When we give to others, let’s do so without thinking, “I gave this small gift. Now, when the holiday season comes, they’ll give me something back.” Or, “I gave them this present. Now, they’ll like me.” Or, “I made this donation. Now, I’ll be able to sit in the front row when a high lama comes to teach.” Or, “I offered service by working in the Dharma centre, therefore, I’m entitled to..”. We may have all sorts of unconscious expectations about how others should act towards us because we’ve given them something. Such thoughts bring a lot of disappointment, not to mention that they contaminate our motivation for being generous.

The Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo encourage us to give because we take delight in giving. The delight we take in giving itself is the “reward”. Giving is incredibly enjoyable when we do it without expecting anything in return.

At Sravasti Abbey, we eat only the food that is offered to us. We want our lives to be lives of generosity and hope that others will respond by providing us with the four requisites for life: food, clothing, shelter and medicine. When people attend a retreat at the Abbey, we encourage them to cultivate a mind of generosity when they offer food. Instead of thinking, “I better bring food to the Abbey or else I won’t have anything to eat this weekend,” we encourage them to think, “I’m going to a monastery and will be offering food to the monastics and others who are practising the Dharma there.

How wonderful it feels to support people who are practising the Dharma". Although the actions of shopping and delivering the food are the same, our motivation determines whether or not we are being generous. It also influences whether or not we feel happy when giving.

Whether giving food is an obligation that we do reluctantly or an act of generosity we do joyfully depends on our motivation. This applies to the monastics and lay residents at the Abbey as well. We want to live a life of giving, so we don't charge for anything when people come here. They can leave offering in a dana basket if they wish. Some people do and some don't. But from our side, we want our lives to be lives of generosity. Many Dharma centres charge for teachings; most retreat centres charge for room and board. We don't charge for either. Why not? Because if we charge and others pay, then it's a business transaction, and neither we nor our guests creates any merit. In addition, Dharma becomes something only for the well-to-do who can afford the high prices many places ask. The Buddha gave the Dharma freely to everyone, whether they had money or not. We want to do likewise and we trust that others will support us in return so that we will be able to continue living like this. When everyone practises generosity, then all of us experience the delight of giving and all of us create virtuous karma.

In our consumerist culture that puts a monetary value on everything, we are swimming upstream. But this is worthwhile, because we won't attain Dharma realisations by making Dharma into a business. The Buddha didn't say to his disciples, "I'm showing you the path to enlightenment. This is the most valuable thing you could ever receive, so turn over all your gold to me." The Buddha just sat in a grove; people came and he spoke. They were inspired and practised the teaching. Seeing the value in this and wanting to make it possible for more people to learn and practise the precious Dharma, Anathapindika gave a park at Sravasti to the Buddha and the Sangha. Visakha gave the Buddha and the Sangha another park, also at Sravasti. Other people in other places donated what they could because they were inspired, appreciated the Three Jewels, and wanted to spread goodness in the world. They took delight in giving; that's the model we're trying to use at Sravasti Abbey.



VERSE

26

Far-reaching Ethical Discipline

*Without ethics you can't accomplish your own well-being,
So wanting to accomplish others' is laughable.
Therefore without worldly aspirations
Safeguard your ethical discipline—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Practise Ethical Discipline Without Worldly Aspirations

Before being able to benefit others, we must first restrain ourselves from harming them. Harm can be done physically, verbally or mentally. To help us be more aware of our actions, the Buddha delineated ten non-virtues which he recommended we avoid. Three of these are done physically, four verbally, and

three mentally. Physically there is killing, stealing, and unwise or unkind sexual behaviour. Verbally there is lying, creating disharmony, harsh speech, and idle talk. Mentally there is coveting, malice, and distorted views. Physical and verbal harms begin with the mind, however, because without the mind having an intention, our body and speech do not act. Pratimoksha vows—which include monastic vows, lay vows, and the one-day vow—regulate physical and verbal actions. The bodhisattva and tantric vows also regulate mental activity. Therefore they are more difficult to keep.

By restraining ourselves from negative actions, we become somebody who can actually be of benefit and service to others. You can't underestimate the value of ethical discipline. When you look at the pain and suffering in our world, it all boils down to people engaging in the ten non-virtues listed above. Why is there disease? Because in previous lives people harmed others' bodies. Why is there discord and dissention? The four non-virtues of speech are involved here. We not only experience the results of lying and so forth done in previous lives, but people engage in non-virtues in this life too, leading to unequal distribution of wealth, oppression and so forth.

Living in ethical discipline, especially taking vows, is an excellent way to train our body, speech and mind and to guide them to virtue. When we stop harming others, we suffer from less guilt and regret, and our relationships with others are more harmonious. We transform into a likeable person whom others can trust, so automatically we'll have more friends.

To live ethically, setting our motivation every morning is essential. When you first wake up, before even getting out of bed, think, "Today, as much as possible, I will avoid harming others."

As much as possible, I will help them. I will live today in accord with my long term motivation to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Karmically, keeping ethical discipline results in fortunate rebirths in the future. As with far-reaching generosity, here we practise far-reaching ethical discipline not with worldly aspirations for only a good rebirth. We practise it with the bodhicitta motivation aiming for full enlightenment. Fortunate rebirths are a by-product. Bodhisattvas seek them not as an end in themselves, but in order to have conducive circumstances to practise the path so the final goal of full enlightenment can be actualised.

Far-reaching ethical discipline is of three types: 1) abandoning harm, 2) accumulating virtue, and 3) benefiting others. These are wonderful practices which bring not only long term spiritual results but also give meaning and purpose to this life.

VERSE

27

Far-reaching Patience

*To bodhisattvas who want a wealth of virtue
Those who harm are like a precious treasure.*

Therefore towards all cultivate patience

Without hostility—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

Practise Patience to All Without Hostility

The accumulation of merit or virtue is essential for progressing on the path and attaining enlightenment. Patience is the ability to endure suffering or harm without getting upset and hostile, and it is an excellent way to create a wealth of virtue. How do we practise patience? We need somebody who harms us. We can't practise patience with people who are nice and kind. We need to

have people who harm us. So, the people who harm us become like a precious treasure. Therefore, bodhisattvas cherish the people who harm them and are very excited when someone does so because then they have the opportunity to practise patience. This is the opposite of how we ordinary beings think, isn't it? But look at the result: we have many people whom we don't get long with or who harm us. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, have a hard time finding enemies to practise patience with. This could be because they've cultivated love and compassion towards all sentient beings.

Spiritual masters must practise patience with their disciples, but a real teacher does not find this too difficult. It is said that when Lama Atisha came to Tibet, he brought a cook with him. This cook was very argumentative and disagreeable, so much so that the Tibetan disciples complained about him and requested Atisha to send him elsewhere. But Atisha explained that the cook was essential for his practice of patience.

I found a few of my teacher's students very difficult to be around. They were demanding, discourteous and self-centred, always ready to blame others. Of course, I considered myself to be just the opposite—so pleasant, polite and harmonious. One day, two Chinese nuns visited our monastery, and I was able to arrange for the three of us to have lunch with Rinpoche. This was special because my teacher is usually very busy, so I rejoiced that these nuns would have the opportunity to meet him. We had just started our lunch when one of the difficult students barged into the room unannounced, without an appointment, while Rinpoche was busy with other guests. He had just left a meeting of the Dharma organisation and was extremely angry. He complained, "Rinpoche,

you know I've been serving this Dharma organisation for years, and now these people are accusing me of xyz; they are criticising me and blaming me, without any appreciation of all I have done." He went on and on and on in a loud voice. The two nuns didn't even get a chance to talk to Rinpoche because this guy monopolised the situation. Meanwhile I was becoming furious. Of course I couldn't show it. I was in front of my teacher and wanted to look like a good disciple. But inside I was fuming. The thought of practising patience didn't even occur to me.

I'm thinking, "Rinpoche, please ask him to leave. Tell him to come back later. He has no business being in here." But Rinpoche responded to his complaints kindly and sweetly, saying, "It's fine. You've done well. Don't be offended by what they're saying about you." I'm thinking, "He should be offended because he does all those things the others say he does. He's so disagreeable; it's no wonder that others criticise him." But Rinpoche thought a totally different way. At the end, who was Rinpoche teaching that whole time? He was teaching me. He was giving me a real-life practical lesson on importance of quarrelsome people and the way to practise patience with them.

Therefore, towards all beings, let's cultivate patience free from hostility. Remember patience does not mean letting someone do whatever they like. If someone is harming others, we should try to stop him. But we do so without being angry at him. In other words, we cultivate compassion for both the perpetrator and the victim. Without hating one side and pitying the other, we wish both parties well and do what we can to prevent harm.



VERSE

28

Far-reaching Joyous Effort

*Seeing even Hearers and Solitary Realisers, who accomplish
Only their own good, strive as if to put out a fire on their head,
For the sake of all beings make enthusiastic effort,
The source of all good qualities—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Practise Enthusiastic Effort for the Sake of All Beings

Hearers and Solitary Realisers are practitioners whose aim is liberation from cyclic existence, not the full Enlightenment of a Buddha. They cultivate compassion, but they don't cultivate the great compassion or bodhicitta as bodhisattvas do. Although their spiritual aim is more modest than that of a bodhisattva, they are

very good practitioners who work very hard to practise Dharma.

We have to understand the analogy of “strive as if to put out a fire on their head” properly. Usually we think, “If there were a fire on my head, I would have panicked and be screaming with fear. Is that how I’m supposed to be in my Dharma practice? That doesn’t seem like a relaxed, concentrated, wise mind”. The analogy doesn’t mean that we should practise with terror. Rather, if your hair were on fire, you wouldn’t sit back and lounge around, would you? You would be very focused and alert and no matter what effort you needed to exert to extinguish the fire, you would joyfully do it.

In the same way, if we are able to see cyclic existence clearly, for what it is, we will know that the situation we are trapped in right now is much worse than our hair being on fire. The suffering caused by our hair being on fire doesn’t last so long compared to the *dukkha* we have been experiencing in cyclic existence since beginningless time. So, if we would put in enthusiastic effort to extinguish a fire on our head, we should be even more enthusiastic and energetic to get ourselves out of cyclic existence.

If, even those who strive for their own liberation, such as the hearers and solitary realisers, make incredible enthusiastic effort, then for the sake of all sentient beings, we too should make enthusiastic effort to accomplish the path.

Enthusiastic effort is called the source of all good qualities because it is through joyous effort that we accomplish all the other excellent qualities and realisations of the holy beings. If we do practise out of obligation, thinking, “I don’t really want to practise Dharma, but I guess I have to,” creating merit will be tedious and

a real hardship. In addition, since our mind is not virtuous, the actions motivated by it will have little virtue even though externally they may seem to be Dharma actions. Enthusiastic effort is a mind that takes delight in virtue. It is a joyful mind, not a mind that pushes ourselves and puts ourselves down with a lot of “should’s,” “supposed to’s” and “ought to’s”. We usually think effort means forcing ourselves to do something. But here, it is joyous effort that takes delight in virtue.

Enthusiastic effort in the Dharma does not mean being frenetic, with a mind buzzing around thinking, “I’ve got to do Vajrasattva practice, then the Tara practice after that. I’ve got to do more lamrim meditation too. How am I going to get all these practices done in one day?” Joyous effort means having a happy, relaxed mind that delights in purification, creating merit, serving others, and hearing, thinking and meditating on the Dharma.

The main hindrance to joyous effort is laziness. There are three types of laziness. The first is what is commonly called laziness—lounging around, sleeping, doing nothing. The second is being busy with worldly activities. While from an ordinary viewpoint, a person like this is seen as energetic and successful, from a Dharma viewpoint he is lazy because he has no energy to practise the Dharma. Having an active social life, working a sixty-hour week, spending hours thinking about the stock market, playing politics in our workplace, and engaging in other such activities are considered being lazy. In other words, just being busy is not joyous effort. It depends what you are busy doing.

The third type of laziness is discouragement. This is the mind that thinks, “I’m incapable of practising the Dharma. The path is too hard. Enlightenment is too high a goal.” This type of thinking which underestimates our capability and puts ourselves down is very detrimental.

We need to apply the antidotes to the three types of laziness. In the case of sleeping and laying around, we can reflect on death and impermanence to help us set good priorities in life. When we are overly busy with worldly activities, contemplating the defects of cyclic existence is very helpful.



For depression and discouragement, thinking of our precious human life, its meaning, the rarity and difficulty of finding it, and Buddha nature are recommended. Reading the biographies of previous great practitioners is also helpful. We see that they, too, went through hardship and by persevering, they became fully enlightened beings.



VERSE

29

Far-reaching Meditative Stabilisation

*Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed
By special insight with calm abiding,
Cultivate concentration which surpasses
The four formless absorptions—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Cultivate Special Insight with Calm Abiding

This verse talks about the far-reaching practice of meditative stabilisation. Special insight (*vipasyana/vipassana* in Sanskrit and Pali respectively) is a penetrative mind that is on the side of analytical meditation. Calm abiding or serenity (*shamatha/*

samatha in Sanskrit and Pali respectively) is a peaceful mind which is on the side of stabilising meditation. Stabilising meditation makes the mind focused and more single-pointed. Analytical meditation examines phenomena and develops understanding. These are generally cultivated separately, but later on the path the mind is so skilled that analytical meditation is able to produce the pliancy that is indicative of serenity. When this is focused at the object, emptiness, it is said that the union of calm abiding and special insight on emptiness has been attained.

There are different kinds of special insight, but the one that we want to develop specifically is the special insight that realises emptiness. That special insight is conjoined with an extremely still and clear mind that can be directed towards any object and remain there single-pointedly. Therefore, the union of special insight and calm abiding is not just about understanding the nature of reality, but also being able to focus on the nature of reality single-pointedly, with the very deep concentration of calm abiding. These two in union give the mind the strength to realise emptiness directly and thus begin the process of eradicating the afflictions from their root.

This verse advises us to cultivate the concentration which surpasses the four formless absorptions. Earlier we discussed the three realms—the desire realm (consisting of hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demi-gods, and celestial beings), the form realm which consists of four states of meditative absorption (*dbhyana/jbana* in Sanskrit and Pali respectively), and four formless realms where the beings remain single-pointedly focused

on infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, or have such a subtle mind that it is difficult to tell if there is perception or not. Beings are born in the form and formless realms because they attained a comparable level of concentration when they were human beings.

As a human being, you can attain the level of concentration of the form and formless realms. If you develop those levels of meditative absorption without also cultivating wisdom, you are born in the form and formless realms. While the mind is very blissful and equanimous there, because you are not liberated from samsara, when your karma runs out to enjoy those deep states of concentration, you plummet down to lower realms of cyclical existence due to the ripening of other karma.

Even non-Buddhists can practise concentration, and attain the four formless absorptions. It is said that all of us have been born in these realms of meditative absorption before. Believe it or not, we have had single-pointed concentration before. We have been born for eons in these blissful realms of pure concentration.

We are still in cyclic existence today because we neglected to renounce all of samsara and to cultivate the wisdom realising emptiness which has the power to cut the root of samsara. Thus, now we want to do something different from what we did before. In this life we want to train in concentration which surpasses the four formless absorptions. This means to cultivate concentration that is conjoined with special insight realising the emptiness of inherent existence. In this way, we will be able to cut off the ignorance that is the source of the afflictions and karma and to free our mind from the afflictive obscurations that keep us bound

in samsara. Because we are committed to benefit all sentient beings and seek full enlightenment in order to do so most effectively, we will continue to practise until all cognitive obscurations—the latencies of afflictions and other stains—have been removed from the mind and we have become fully enlightened Buddhas.





VERSE

30

Far-reaching Wisdom

*Since the five perfections without wisdom
Cannot bring perfect enlightenment,
Along with skilful means cultivate the wisdom
Which does not conceive the three spheres (as real)—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Conjoining Wisdom and the Other Perfections

The first five perfections of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyous effort and concentration are essential aspects of the path. However, by themselves, they can't bring full enlightenment because only the perfection of wisdom can cut ignorance—the root of cyclic existence—and eliminate it, its seeds, and its latencies completely so that they are not able to reappear in the mind ever

again. Thus along with skilful means that know how to benefit sentient beings, we also want to cultivate wisdom which doesn't conceive the three spheres as real.

What are the “three spheres”, also called the “circle of three”? They are the agent, object and action. These three exist by being merely labelled in dependence upon one another. None of them exists independently from its own side. Thus, they form a circle of three elements—agent, object and action. For example, when we practise generosity—let's say we give a donation to a temple—the agent (ourselves), the object (this is the temple that is the recipient or the donation that we are giving), and the action (the action of giving) have no inherent essence. They do not exist under their own power, independent of other factors. The recipient cannot exist without the person who is giving, the object given and the action of giving. The other elements are similarly dependent on the others. They all exist by being merely labelled in relationship to one another.

Everything exists by arising dependently. Functioning things depend on 1) their causes and conditions, 2) their parts, and 3) being conceived and labelled by the mind. Dependent arising and the emptiness of inherent existence come to the same point. They are not contradictory. Dependently arisen phenomena lack independent or inherent existence. But emptiness does not mean total non-existence. Phenomena exist. How do they exist? Dependently. Thus emptiness and dependent arising are complementary.

When doing bodhisattvas' activities, we see all the components—agent, object and action—as dependent on one another, on their individual causes and parts, and on the mind that conceives and labels them. Being dependent, they cannot be independent, possessing their own true essence.

For instance, Harry criticises you, and you feel anger starting to arise. You choose to practise patience because you understand the disadvantages of anger. Patience doesn't mean stuffing your anger. It means seeing the situation from a different viewpoint so that there's nothing to get angry at. So you remember that Harry is a sentient being caught in samsara. "He doesn't really intend to harm me, he's just under the influence of his own confusion and anger right now and that's why he is criticising me." Thinking like this, your mind calms down. As you continue to think about his suffering, you even begin to feel some compassion towards him. That's the practice of patience.

Then conjoin this with wisdom by seeing that the "I" who is practising patience exists in dependence upon the action of practising patience and also in dependence upon Harry, the person you are practising patience with. Harry isn't the object of your patience from his own side. Rather he becomes the object of your patience because you are practising patience and because there is the action of practising patience. Similarly, you become the one practising patience because of Harry and the action of practising patience. All these elements are interdependent. Everything that exists becomes what it is in relationship to other phenomena. None of them has its own independent existence or its own inherent essence that makes it what it is.

If we practise the first five perfections with bodhicitta and then conjoin them with the perfection of wisdom by meditating on emptiness of the circle of three—agent, action and object—then our actions become the cause to attain full enlightenment. Method and wisdom are combined.

VERSE

31

Avoiding Hypocrisy

*If you don't examine your own errors,
You may look like a practitioner but not act as one.
Therefore, always examining your own errors,
Rid yourself of them—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Look Within & Examine Your Own Errors

The next few verses discuss how to practise skilful means so that our own practice stays on track and so that we can continue to benefit sentient beings. Thinking, “I’m a Dharma practitioner” doesn’t make us one. Taking monastic vows does not make us holy. Taking the bodhisattva vow or tantric initiations does not mean our mind has been transformed. We must actually live

according to the precepts we have received, practise the deity whose initiation we have received, and transform our mind by subduing the disturbing emotions and relinquishing negative actions. In addition, we need to purify our previously created negativities and put effort into creating virtue. Only then is the label “Dharma practitioner” suitable.

It is easy to look like a practitioner by wearing robes, sporting elaborate titles, or having an entourage of people following us around. It’s not too hard to impress people if we receive lots of offerings and praise, publish books and travel around the world giving teachings. You can look like a good teacher. That’s not too hard to do because it is just superficial external appearance. But, inside, if our mind doesn’t accord with the mind of someone practising the Dharma, then we’re just mainly deceiving ourselves, because we are the ones who will experience the results of the actions we have done. Eventually, our defects will surface and others will notice. Unfortunately, this is very harmful for any students or admirers we may have.

That is why it is important, if we are in the position of being an example to others of how to practise, to always examine our own errors. Otherwise, we wind up being a hypocrite, don’t we? We wind up having a Dharma appearance, but not a Dharma mind.

One lama told me that when people ordain, the most important thing for them to develop is a “monastic mind”. Taking ordination is not too hard. Some lamas will ordain you almost at the snap of a finger. But, to develop a monastic mind where you are humble, respectful and cherish others—that’s a whole other ball game.

It is not too hard to come to the West, have a position, receive some titles and have followers. But to practise deeply and cultivate a Dharma mind is very difficult. Why? Because to have a Dharma mind, we have to do so many other practices like giving up attachment and pacifying anger. Are they easy to do? No.

If we are really going to have a Dharma mind, we have to look within and be attentive so that we recognise our own ignorance, anger and attachment when they arise. We must be able to notice our own self-centredness, jealousy and competitive mind; our own arrogance, laziness and excuses. We must acknowledge our tendencies to justify, rationalise and defend our destructive attitudes and actions. The Dharma path entails continually turning the mirror back on ourselves. Even when we do actions to help others, we always need to watch our own body, speech and mind, and examine our own errors.

Sometimes when we first meet the Dharma, we become so enthused by the idea of bodhicitta and of benefiting all sentient beings that we become busy helping others but forget to look at our own minds. We think, “I’m working so hard to benefit sentient beings.” We might be busy doing charity work or setting up a Dharma centre, but we forget that the bottom line of benefiting sentient beings is not to harm them. And to not harm them, we have to examine our own mind and motives.

Let’s also remember that part of benefiting sentient beings is transforming ourselves into as worthy a practitioner as we can be. It is not enough to do some Dharma practice and then say, “Okay, now I’ve finished my practice. I’m going to go out and serve sentient beings.” We have to continue to meditate. We cannot stop hearing,

thinking and meditating on the Dharma, for if we do, our mental state will degenerate. It's not appropriate to say we don't have enough time to meditate because if we don't look at our mind, before long deeply rooted disturbing emotions will rear their ugly heads.

Lots of people are eager to become Dharma teachers; they want to be respected, appreciated and to feel that they are doing something beneficial. But it is not that easy to be a Dharma teacher. Being a teacher is not about sitting on a high throne and smiling while a group of devoted students look at you with appreciation. Guiding people in the Dharma necessitates incredible patience because students will do all sorts of things that you do not like. They will come to you for advice and then ignore it. They will criticise you when you say something that doesn't accord with their opinions. They will promise things and then be too busy or distracted to carry through. Dharma students are sentient beings, after all, which means that they are not perfect, whatever "perfect" means.

If we do not observe our mind, we will fall back into the same old unrealistic expectations and judgmental attitudes as before. Thoughts such as, "I'm working so hard for these students, and they don't appreciate me" will appear. If we don't examine our own errors, we may look on the outside like an accomplished practitioner or a respected Dharma teacher with many students, but on the inside, we are not acting as one. Eventually the façade will be shattered, and even if perchance it isn't, we will still experience the results of our actions.

Therefore, the antidote is to always examine our own errors and rid ourselves of them. That is the bottom line. When people come to me and say, "I want to ordain so I can teach the Dharma," I'm

cautious. I want to check what their actual motivation is. How can they aspire to teach others if they don't study and practise themselves first? I believe our core motivation for requesting ordination is that we want to improve our own mind; we want to stop harming others and start benefiting them. To do this we see our body, speech, and mind need restraints and that living in precepts can provide the structure that we need to tame our unruly mind. Remember verse 26 says, *Without ethics, you can't accomplish your own well-being, so wanting to accomplish others' is laughable.* Isn't it a bit idealistic to want to teach others if we lack the intention of establishing the foundation by practising the Dharma ourselves?

Verse 32 emphasises the importance of practising ourselves. Only on the basis of ridding ourselves of our own faults, can we then act in ways that benefit others. Therefore, learning the Dharma so we can teach others, or wanting to ordain so one can teach others should not be our initial motivation. Our primary motivation should be, "First, I need to get my own mind under control. After I have done that, I can then begin to think about teaching others." Without knowing ourselves well and restraining our own ignorance, anger and attachment, our intention to benefit others will make us what is called a "Mickey Mouse bodhisattva". A Mickey Mouse bodhisattva seems to have a lot of compassion, but lacking wisdom and skill, he creates havoc.

We don't need to wait to become Buddhas to benefit others. While we are on the path, we can benefit others in whatever ways we are capable. But we avoid making ourselves appear like something we are not. Rather, we remain humble, more concerned with correcting our own errors than in pointing out those of others.



VERSE

32

Not Criticising Bodhisattvas

*If through the influence of disturbing emotions
You point out the faults of another Bodhisattva,
You yourself are diminished, so don't mention the faults
Of those who have entered the Great Vehicle—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Comment On the Action, Not the Person

When we start attacking somebody else verbally with the intent to ruin their reputation, we are actually saying more about ourselves and our own faults, than we are about the person whom we are bad-mouthing. When someone comes to me to complain about another person and criticise his or her actions, I think, “At

this moment, he is bad-mouthing so-and-so, but one day he'll also criticise me to others". In other words, I don't trust the person because he appears to have the habit of criticising others behind their back. Although he's not disparaging me at this moment, one day he will due to this habit. So by criticising the other person, he's actually telling me more about himself and his tendencies than about the third party.

Therefore, don't mention the faults of those who have entered the Great Vehicle. The Great Vehicle is the Mahayana and someone who has entered it is a bodhisattva. Criticising someone who has the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings and attain enlightenment only creates horrible negative karma. We already have enough negative karma and *dukkha*, why create more for ourselves? If we truly care about our own happiness, we don't damage it by creating negative karma due to pointing out the faults of others, especially a holy being such as a bodhisattva.

The masters recommend that since we lack clairvoyant powers and cannot discriminate who is a bodhisattva and who isn't, it's better not to criticise or point out the faults of anyone. So what do we do when we see somebody doing something that doesn't seem very good? Do we just say, "That person could be a bodhisattva. I don't want to create negative karma and diminish myself, so I just won't say anything and let them continue with what they are doing"? No, it doesn't mean that. If somebody is doing an action that appears harmful to you, you can talk about the action, and ask that person questions about their behaviour. But, you can do this without denigrating him.

People and their actions are different phenomena. We can discuss the appropriateness and inappropriateness of an action or the benefit and harm of an action. But, we cannot attack another person, accusing them of being evil, sinful, or hopelessly corrupt, because that person still has the Buddha nature, the Buddha potential.

For example, let's say somebody's behaviour appears questionable. Rather than jump to conclusion and criticise either the person or the behaviour, we can go to that person, and say, "You're doing this and that. I don't understand it. Please explain to me why you're doing this." Then we should be quiet and listen to his explanation with an open mind. If the leader of a group is doing something that doesn't look too good, approach him and respectfully ask him to explain his way of thinking or give him some useful feedback. If his explanation is satisfactory, talk to the other members in the group and say, "This is what I observe. These are my doubts. I'm not making an accusation, but I need my doubts clarified." That is very different from making an accusation when you don't know the real story. It is very different from imputing various motivations on somebody when we don't know if that person has those motivations. It is very different from creating a stir by blaming a person when it is actually the behaviour that you want to comment on.

VERSE

33

Avoiding Attachment to Benefactors

*Reward and respect cause us to quarrel
And make bearing, thinking and meditation decline.
For this reason give up attachment to
The households of friends, relations and benefactors—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Give Up Households of Friends, Relations & Benefactors

You might be known as a Dharma teacher or a great practitioner, but if you haven't reached high levels of the path and achieved direct insight into the nature of reality, you are still susceptible to attachment, jealousy or envy arising in relation to receiving reward and respect. For instance, somebody respects you, and you get a

little bit arrogant. Somebody gives you a lot of offerings, and you think you must be pretty great. Or you are envious when somebody respects another teacher more than they respect you because you want them to come to your Dharma centre and not go to the other one. These things happen. Craving reward and respect can cause a lot of division because envy, jealousy and attachment arise.

Clearly, when we become competitive, our mind is just thinking about our own reputation, status and wealth. Therefore, hearing, thinking and meditating decline because our mind is more concerned about gaining a good reputation for ourselves and competing with the other person, than it is in subduing our own mind. So, we forget about hearing the teachings, thinking about them, meditating and integrating them. Instead we are doing “single-pointed meditation” on the eight worldly concerns—honour, respect, wealth, praise, sensual objects and so on.

Not only does our own practice degenerate, we also harm others when we are in a leadership position in the Dharma world and get wrapped up in seeking respect and offerings. Eventually others will see our corrupt motivation and lose faith in us. If they trusted us before, our acting in ways that damage or betray that trust can be very harmful to their Dharma practice.

What is the antidote for craving to have a big name as a Dharma teacher, lots of followers and a heap of offerings? Give up attachment to the households of friends, relations and benefactors. These are the people who praise you, make offerings to you, respect you, and boost your reputation and renown. So, rather than be attached to their households and cultivate their friendships with the motivation of trying to get something out of these people, you give up that

attachment to reputation and wealth and thus stop trying to take advantage of and manipulating these people.

It doesn't mean you become rude or ignore those people. You still have students, relations and benefactors. But you deal fairly and equally with those people, and give up any motivation of trying to get something out of them or use them for your own benefit. Spiritual mentors should continuously work to benefit their students with a compassionate motivation that wants to help them progress on the path to enlightenment,

Whether one is a Dharma teacher or not, we use others for our own advantage, don't we? When we desire reward and respect, we know how to manipulate people by flattering them, dropping hints, or giving them a gift so they will give us something bigger in return. We put them in a position where they cannot say, "No," and they feel obliged to give us something or to praise us. Sometimes we'll act very holy and proper when our benefactors are around, but very sloppy and self-centred at other times. We are very good at these things. We cannot become a real spiritual practitioner if we rely on these wrong ways of earning our livelihood that seek material possessions, honour and reputation.

One of the things that initially attracted me to Buddhism was that it points out our hypocrisy and cunning ways no matter how much we try to hide it or pretend it's not there. Whenever we try to put on a show for ego's benefit, there is a verse in a thought training text that points our error out to us.



VERSE

34

Refraining from Harsh Words

*Harsh words disturb the minds of others
And cause deterioration in a Bodhisattva's conduct.
Therefore give up harsh words
Which are unpleasant to others—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Give up Harsh Words

We spoke about harsh words in previous verses, for example, verse eight is about karma, and “harsh words” is one of the ten destructive actions. However, this verse talks about giving up harsh words when you are in the position of a leader such as a Dharma teacher, counsellor, administrator and so forth. When we are in a leadership position, it is very easy to become arrogant and feel as if we are infallible.

So many scandals with CEOs, politicians and even religious leaders are due to such arrogance. When some people are in a position of authority—having wealth, power and respect—they forget their own ethical values. They do things that get themselves into so much trouble and make other people lose faith in them.

Harsh words is one example of this. Until we have direct realisation of emptiness, we have to watch our mind, because it is easy for such foibles to come up. If you are trying to be a leader and instead of leading people in virtue, you abuse your authority, thinking, “I’m the leader and these people respect me, so I can scold them, I can boss them around, I can criticise them to their face if they don’t do what I want. I can embarrass them and humiliate them because I’m the person in power. They believe in me and will follow me no matter what.” Arrogantly thinking like this diminishes your love and compassion, impedes your bodhisattva conduct, and leads to harming others through harsh words. Therefore, Togmay Zangpo advises us to give up harsh words which are unpleasant to others.

Does that mean that when you are in a leadership position, you never say things that are unpleasant to other people? No. From your own side, you don’t have the motivation to hurt or embarrass others. However, there are times when you have to speak in a straightforward manner to get across a point that is important for others to understand so that they can prevent suffering and attain happiness.

When you speak with a good motivation, does it mean that you will always be successful in not saying things that are unpleasant to others? No. People will find a way to be offended even if nobody

is intending to offend them. We know that ourselves, don't we? Sometimes people tell us things out of kindness, but our ego doesn't like to hear those things, so we get upset and angry. We accuse them of speaking harshly to us when actually, the words were said out of kindness and compassion.

If you are in a leadership position or are practising as a bodhisattva, it doesn't necessarily mean that all you say is, "You're such a sweet dear loving person. You are so wonderful. You're talented and never do anything wrong". Blah blah blah. People may lap that up and love you because you flatter their ego, but that isn't necessarily what is most beneficial for an individual to hear at that particular moment. Sometimes, you have to be direct and assertive in order to protect them from harm, and they may find your words painful. But, you know that is what they need to hear to wake them up on the path.

My teachers have spoken like that to me. Once I asked His Holiness some questions about a certain topic. He explained the point, but I didn't understand the context in which he was explaining it. So, I just kept on saying, "I don't understand" this and that. At one point, he looked at me and said, "I've explained this many times before in teachings. Were you sleeping?" Ouch. I immediately got defensive and tried to explain myself. But then I realised I probably was sleeping when he explained it before. What he said woke me up. I realised I need to listen better and try harder to understand. Instead of bothering him with a lot of questions, I need to remember and reflect on what he had taught before.

Many years ago, Zopa Rinpoche asked me to lead a meditation course in Kopan. I was just a baby nun who didn't know much at

that time and responded, “I can’t do that.” Rinpoche told me to talk with Lama Yeshe about it. So I went to Lama Yeshe and said, “Lama, I can’t lead this course. I don’t know anything.” Lama just looked me straight in the eye and said, “You are selfish.”

Gulp. Silence. “Okay, Lama, I’ll lead the course,” I answered. He had to speak that way to me because I was so dense that he would not have been able to get the point across to me if he spoke in a sweet, encouraging voice. He wanted me to understand whatever I know I should share and however I can help, I should try to help. He made me see I couldn’t just hide behind a facade, “I’m just little old me. I can’t do anything”. I was caught in the extreme of self-deprecation, putting the focus on me instead of on others and thinking about how I could benefit them, even if only in a small way.

Sometimes our Dharma teachers have to tell it to us as it is. We have to be able to take it when they do and not think, “I work so hard for my teachers. They are so privileged to have *me* as their student. But look at how they treat me”! That kind of attitude is the opposite of what we should be cultivating in our spiritual practice.





VERSE

35

Abandoning Bad Habits and Mental Afflictions

Habitual disturbing emotions are hard to stop through counteractions.

Armed with antidotes, the guards of mindfulness and mental alertness

Destroy disturbing emotions like attachment

At once, as soon as they arise—

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The Importance of Mindfulness & Mental Alertness

This verse acknowledges the fact that habitual disturbing emotions are hard to stop through counter actions. Unless we have the wisdom directly realising emptiness, we can't cut their root. So, until we have that wisdom, we have to be armed with the guards of mindfulness and mental alertness. Mindfulness has different

meanings according to the context. Here, it means mindfulness of the bodhisattva practices, mindfulness of our vows and precepts, mindfulness of our spiritual aspirations. With mindfulness we try to live according to our precepts and aspirations. Since the mind has so many non-virtuous tendencies, we employ mental alertness to see if our mind is still focused on the constructive or if it has gotten overwhelmed by an affliction or distraction. Here, alertness is a part of the mind that is aware of what we are saying, thinking, feeling and doing; it alerts us if we have gone astray from being mindful of what is wholesome. Mental alertness allows us to see if we are actually living up to our aspirations and if we are actually applying the counterforces to the disturbing emotions. It checks up to see if we actually have a good motivation or are just rationalising things.

The two mental factors of mindfulness and mental alertness are important, not only for living in pure ethical conduct but also for cultivating single-pointed concentration. In the practice of concentration, mindfulness focuses on the object of meditation, and mental alertness checks up to see if we are still focusing or if we have gotten distracted. If we discover that our mind is under the influence of agitation, laxity, dullness, or distraction, we apply the appropriate antidote.

Disturbing emotions come into our mind when we least expect them. Once they arise, we can't just sit there and say, "Oh, attachment, you are coming into my mind. Welcome. Come in. Sit down and have a good time." or, "Anger you are coming into my mind. Fantastic! I haven't gotten angry for a while. I could use a good buzz of adrenalin. Anger, my friend, sit down and have a cup

of tea.” The disturbing emotions are said to be like thieves because they steal our happiness and they steal the happiness of others. If a thief comes into your house, you don’t sit down and serve them tea, do you? You call the police, you sound the burglar alarm and you chase them out.

Disturbing emotions and the negative attitudes are more harmful than external thieves, because they make us create negative karma and cause us to do things that are harmful to other living beings. So, when they enter our mind, we should not tolerate them. We identify them and then evict them, using the guards of mindfulness and mental alertness. We chase them out right away; we don’t let them hang around and create mischief. Catching and counteracting them right away takes some practice. Our mindfulness and mental alertness must be very strong, and that comes about through repeated and patient practice.



VERSE

36

Training in Mindfulness and Alertness

*In brief, whatever you are doing,
Ask yourself “What’s the state of my mind?”
With constant mindfulness and mental alertness
Accomplish others’ good—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Constantly Check the State of Your Mind

To sum up the previous thirty-five verses, whatever you are doing—whether you are standing, lying down, walking or sitting; whether you are awake or asleep; whether you are happy or miserable; whether people like you or don’t like you; whether you

are dying or living; whether you are in pain or are healthy—no matter what is going on in your life, ask yourself, “What is the state of my mind?” Because the mind is the source of happiness and suffering, it’s important to check what state it is in.

Then, being aware of the state of the mind, evaluate, “Is my mind involved in what is constructive and virtuous now? Or, have the thieves of disturbing emotions taken over and are they running the show?” If our mind is involved in what is beneficial and wholesome, let it be or encourage it. If disturbing emotions have entered the mind and are destroying our happiness and the happiness of others, apply the counter forces.

By continually being mindful of what is wholesome and being alert to see that our mind has not gotten distracted from this, our good qualities will increase and we will accomplish others’ good. In this way, we fulfil our main motivation—accomplishing the welfare and benefit of other beings, as well as our own. That is the essence of the bodhisattva vow.

When alertness discovers that the mind has strayed and is involved in greed, stinginess, arrogance, vengeance and the like, we then apply the remedy to that disturbing mental state and remind ourselves of a virtuous emotion or activity. We do this no matter what’s going on in our lives. We don’t have to sit in a meditation hall on Sunday morning to do this. We don’t have to be healthy. We don’t have to be seated in vajra position in order to do this. Whatever we are doing, whatever is happening, we practise; we keep integrating our mind with bodhicitta no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

VERSE

37

Dedication of Virtue to Full Enlightenment

*To remove the suffering of limitless beings,
Understanding the purity of the three spheres,
Dedicate the virtue from making such effort
To enlightenment—
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

Dedicating Our Merit to Attain Enlightenment

In the last verse we dedicate all the positive potential or merit from the previous practices to removing the suffering of limitless beings by attaining full enlightenment. Only when we have attained the enlightenment of a Buddha do we have the full compassion, wisdom, power and skilful means to be of utmost benefit to all.

As a Buddha, we won't be prevented from benefiting living beings by disturbing attitudes, negative emotions or incapability of our body and speech.

We dedicate all of our virtue for full enlightenment for ourselves and others. In particular, we dedicate, by reflecting on the purity of the three spheres—that the agent (ourselves as the one dedicating the positive potential), the objects to whom we dedicate (sentient beings), the aim we dedicate for (full enlightenment), the action of dedicating, and the merit we dedicate—all of these exist by being merely labelled. They are empty of having their own inherent nature. By reflecting on dependent arising and emptiness of inherent existence in this way, we make a perfect dedication.



VERSE

Epilogue

*For all who want to train on the Bodhisattva path,
I have written The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas,
Following what has been said by the excellent ones
On the meaning of the sutras, tantras and treatises.*

*Though not poetically pleasing to scholars
Owing to my poor intelligence and lack of learning,
I've relied on the sutras and the words of the excellent,
So I think these Bodhisattva practices are without error.*

*However, as the great deeds of bodhisattvas
Are hard to fathom for one of my poor intelligence,
I beg the excellent to forgive all faults,
Such as contradictions and non sequiturs.*

In these verses, the author, Gyelsay Togmay Zangpo, was being very humble. He credited all the words of wisdom he had just spoken to the Buddha and to the lineage of great masters who have

preceded him. You can see that he truly treasures others and is not concerned with his own reputation or place in history. Instead of saying, “I wrote this text. Look at me, aren’t I wonderful? These are all my ideas”, he says, “All the words of wisdom here came from the Buddha. I have poor intelligence and lack of learning. I don’t write things very well, so, I may have made some mistakes. But, I tried my best to rely on my teachers and the teachings they have given me. So, as far as I understand, what I said here is without error.”

Through the way he wrote the epilogue, he shows us an example of a real bodhisattva. Perhaps we read it and say, “This guy has no self-confidence.” But actually, that was not the case. He is showing us, through his own actions, the activities of a bodhisattva.

*Through the virtue from this may all living beings
Gain the ultimate and conventional altruistic intention
And thereby become like the Protector Chenrezig
Who dwells in neither extreme—not in the world nor in peace.*

This is Gyelsay Togmay Zangpo’s dedication. The ultimate altruistic intention or ultimate bodhicitta is the wisdom realising emptiness. The conventional altruistic intention or conventional bodhicitta is the aspiration for full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Here he dedicates so that through the virtue of his writing this text and of us studying it together, may all living beings gain the ultimate and conventional bodhicittas and, thereby, become like the Protector Chenrezig, the Great Compassionate One. This is another name for Kuan Yin, the Buddha of Compassion.

Like all Buddhas, the Great Compassionate One dwells in neither extreme—his mind does not dwell in cyclic existence or in the self-complacent peace of his own personal nirvana. Concerning cyclic existence, he does not dwell in the eight worldly concerns or in attachment to the bliss of samadhi. Concerning nirvana, he does not dwell in the blissful state of self-complacent peace without benefiting sentient beings. Chenrezig has attained full enlightenment which enables him to be of greatest benefit to all beings. May we aspire for and dedicate for this as well, just as Chenrezig has.

This was written for his own and others' benefit by the monk Togmay, an exponent of scripture and reasoning, in a cave in Ngülchu Rinchen.

This text was written for his own and others' benefit by the monk Togmay, an exponent of scripture and reasoning, in a cave. The translation was prepared by Ruth Sonam. It was published in the book, *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, which was an oral teaching by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, who is one of my teachers.

We have gone through a lot of teachings this weekend. That's the step of "hearing". Now, it is time for us to return home and continue our study. I recommend you read Geshe Sonam Rinchen's book, *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* as well as Geshe Jampa Tegchok's book, *Transforming Adversity into Joy and Courage*. Read and think about these teachings deeply, not just superficially. Contemplate them in depth over time so that you first get a correct conceptual understanding of the teachings.

Talk about the meaning of these verses with your Dharma friends. Gather in discussion groups and discuss what they mean and how to practise them. Also meditate on them in your daily meditation practice. Do analytical meditation by reflecting on the points in this teaching in relationship to your own life. Think about the logic in these new and different ways of viewing things. When you reach a conclusion or have an experience of the meaning of a verse, rest your mind on it single-pointedly. By doing this, you will understand these teachings correctly and will be able to apply and integrate them into your life. Then these verses will have a truly transformative effect on you.



It is not enough to listen to teachings and then do only practices in which you visualise and recite mantras. We should also think deeply about and meditate on the meaning of these teachings as well as practise them in our daily lives. This text is so practical. It talks about how to deal with situations which we encounter in our daily life. For instance, we need to practise as explained in situations where somebody, out of strong desire, steals our wealth or has it stolen. In situations where somebody broadcasts all kinds of unpleasant remarks about us, let's practise as it says in that verse. When we find that desire and attachment plague us, we need to recall the verse about attachment being like salt water—the more we indulge, the more the thirst increases. We ask ourselves if we'll ever find satisfaction and peace by chasing objects of attachment. Or will we only encounter frustration in the struggle for happiness?

Recall events that have happened to you in the past, and bring what you have learned in the Dharma to apply to those past situations. In that way, transform your mind. That is the true meaning of practising the Dharma. In addition, using past experiences as examples of each verse helps you process your previous experiences and actions, so you can make peace with them. Use the verses to help you forgive others. Meditate on the verses so that you can forgive yourself for previous mistaken actions as well.

We have all made mistakes in the past. Instead of sitting and feeling guilty about your mistakes, use the Dharma teachings and apply them to previous situations. Ask yourself, "If I had known the teachings at that time, how could I have seen the situation and freed my mind from affliction?" Contemplate, "How would a bodhisattva

have felt and acted in that situation?” When we meditate like that, we see alternatives to what used to be knee-jerk emotions, where we believed we did not have any choice about how to feel or react in a situation. Seeing that there are other ways to feel and think gives us choice. We don’t have to suppress negative emotions, we can let them go and retrain our minds. As we become less self-centred, our feelings and thoughts will be more peaceful and amicable to ourselves and others. That will enable us to heal from past issues and will help purify mistakes that we have made. It also gives us some training in these techniques, so that when similar situations come up in the future, we will have some familiarity with these techniques and can recall and apply them in the situation. Even if we forget to apply them in the situation, we will go home and pull out this text to read. Figure out which verse applies to what happened during the day and reflect on it to transform your mind.

In that way, you will have a taste of the Dharma. Tasting the Dharma isn’t an intellectual process, it’s experiential. When you experience the effects of practice in your life, your conviction in the Dharma will automatically increase. Realising the validity of the teachings from your own experience will enhance your faith in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and your spiritual mentor. That, in turn, increases your eagerness to learn and practise the Dharma even more. If you practise with a motivation of bodhicitta, your actions will be beneficial to all living beings.

A Short Biography

Born in 1950, Ven Thubten Chodron grew up near Los Angeles. She graduated with a B.A. in History from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1971. After travelling through Europe, North Africa and Asia for one and a half years, she received a teaching credential and went to the University of Southern California to do postgraduate work in Education while working as a teacher in the Los Angeles City School System.

In 1975, she attended a meditation course given by Ven Lama Yeshe and Ven Zopa Rinpoche, and subsequently went to their monastery in Nepal to continue to study and practise the Buddha's teachings. In 1977, she received the sramanerika (novice) ordination, and in 1986, went to Taiwan to take the bhikshuni (full) ordination.

She studied and practised Buddhism of the Tibetan tradition for many years in India and Nepal, and directed the spiritual programme at Lama Tzong Khapa Institute in Italy for nearly two years. She studied three years at Dorje Pamo Monastery in France and was a resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore. Ven. Chodron was a co-organiser of Life as a Western Buddhist Nun, and took part in the conferences of Western Buddhist teachers with H.H. the Dalai Lama in 1993 and 1994. She currently lives and teaches in Sravasti Abbey in Washington and continues to travel worldwide to teach the Dharma. Her books include *Open Heart, Clear Mind* (Snow lion, Ithaca NY), *Buddhism for Beginners* (Snow Lion, NY), *Taming the Monkey Mind* (Graham Brash, Singapore), and *Glimpse of Reality* (with Dr. Alexander Berzin).

Access the Internet for up-to-date information on Ven. Chodron's teachings, dharma activity schedules, publications and more at www.thubtenchodron.org

