

# GATSAL

## TEACHING

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on  
**37** Practices  
of a  
Bodhisattva

Part V

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8. *All suffering arises from desiring happiness for one's self*

*While perfect Buddhahood is borne from the thought of benefiting others.*

*Therefore to exchange my own happiness for the suffering of others, is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

The reason why we suffer is because we are in the grip of our egoistic delusion and we imagine that as long as we serve the interests of myself and can fulfill all our wants and desires, then somehow we will be happy. Other people can take care of their own happiness, it's not my own concern. My concern is to make "me" happy. But it doesn't work. It really does not work. The most unhappy, desperate people are those who are only thinking about their own happiness. We get caught more and more because our desires grow and grow and are endless. We are never going to be satisfied anyway, and even when we are satisfied, so what?

Another desire takes its place. It's not like if we fulfill our desires, then that's the end of desire. More desires come up, then more and more. It's endless. Our desires spiral round and round until we just end up desperate, and farther and farther away from liberation. Because the ego just gets bloated.

Until in the end we are the slave to our own desires and our own grasping at material satisfaction and power. A lot of seemingly successful people end up depressed and on alcohol or drugs of various kinds. Very pitiful. So the point is that if we are only thinking about our own happiness, our own satisfaction and well-being, we end up completely trapped and desperate. Not happy at all. Yet people put so much misdirected energy into being happy.

Our society presents happiness as the result of acquiring more possessions, gaining a high status, staying forever young and beautiful, being desirable to

others, and along with it, defending our own territory. These are just the familiar five poisons: our greed, aggression, pride, jealousy, and envy: our ignorance or fundamental ego delusion, which Buddha himself said is the cause of suffering. Yet our modern society projects these emotional afflictions as the causes of happiness! No wonder everyone is racing after satisfaction like a mirage in the desert. Looks like there is water and palm trees, but it's all an illusion and we die of thirst. So it's very sad that so many people are desperately chasing after a mirage. The very causes of suffering are being touted as the causes of happiness.

So therefore he says:

*"All suffering without exception arises from desiring happiness for oneself.*

*While perfect Buddhahood" - which is genuine happiness - "is born from the thought of benefiting others."*

So if we think about others and their happiness, and we stop worrying so much about our own happiness, suddenly we find we're happy. Therefore, *'to exchange my happiness for the suffering of others is a practice of a bodhisattva.'* So this also includes the well-known practice of *Tonglen*. In the Tibetan tradition, coming from the lojong lineage (mind training) of Atisha, there is an important practice which is called "giving and receiving". This has many different applications, but here is the basic practice.

Imagine someone who is suffering. They could be actually present or we can just think about them or use a photo. We think of someone who is suffering, whether mentally, emotionally or physically. They are not happy.

On the incoming breath one visualizes drawing in dark light, rather like a vacuum cleaner sucking up all their suffering, including the causes of their suffering, not only the present but also the past karmic causes. Visualize drawing into oneself their suffering in the form of black light or smoke and pollution. This goes down into the

heart (the centre of the chest at the heart chakra, not the physical heart) and dissolves into a little black pearl there which represents the self-cherishing mind.

This is the mind which is thinking, “Well I’m really sorry you’re sick, but I’m glad it’s not *me!*” Or “This is a very good practice, but I hope it doesn’t *really* work.” Although we are very sorry for the other’s suffering, we wouldn’t want to take it on ourselves. This is the self-cherishing mind. The egotistic mind which doesn’t want other people’s suffering, however sorry we may feel for them. So therefore this dark light of others’ suffering comes into oneself, it goes down and dissolves into that little black pearl of “I-ness” (because the last thing “I” want is somebody else’s problems!) Then instantly as the dark light dissolves into the pearl - that itself transforms into a diamond which shines very brightly, representing our true buddha-nature, which is never ever contaminated by anything.

Our true nature is endless well-being, so as soon as the small black pearl of self-cherishing disappears, we discover our true nature which has no problems. So then on the out-breath goes this clear white light representing all our boundless wisdom, compassion, good health, good karma, everything good within us. This is then sent out with the breath and we visualize the light melting into the person - real or imagined - in front. Visualize that every cell of their body is soaked in light and being healed, so that they are completely happy and at ease. So with the in-breath we take in the darkness, with the out-breath we give out all our bright healing qualities as clear light.

This practice can be used in many ways. For instance, if we ourselves are sick, instead of lying down and feeling sorry for ourselves, we can imagine that the suffering of all those with that particular sickness is being absorbed into ourselves. For example if we have a headache, then we can visualize that the headaches of all the beings in the world are drawn into ourselves. We will take on all this sickness and may other beings be free of that! Or even if we are feeling very sad we can also do Tonglen for ourselves. It’s very beneficial. Many lamas when they are very ill or dying claim that they are practising Guru-yoga and Tonglen.

This practice makes sense of our own suffering and it is of great benefit to others. Many people who go to visit people in hospitals, don’t know what to do when sitting with somebody who is sick or even dying. So we could just hold the patient’s hand and sit there doing tonglen quietly. Sometimes people coming into the room remark on the peaceful atmosphere. Or the patient says that for whatever reason they feel comforted.

Actually our thoughts can have great power and this is a practice which is motivated totally on compassion. Its genuine result not only can benefit the person who is the

object of the practice, but it also does help to highlight and reduce our own egotistic self concern.

This quality of selfless love that we develop really opens our heart to the suffering of the world and allows us to breath it in, along with the willingness to give out all the goodness within ourselves to other beings without any reservations. This is our challenge.

Now the text follows through when cruel things happen to us, especially when we don’t think we deserve them, how should we respond in order to carry them on to the path? Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes taking everything on to the path, not discarding anything, even things which we think are big obstacles and problems, which make us think “I would be a much better practitioner if only...”

Everything has to be used, so it’s like when we throw away vegetable peelings, instead of just discarding them as useless, we can mulch them and make them into compost that helps all the flowers and vegetables to grow even better. Likewise, in our lives nothing is discarded, everything is made use of because the understanding is that if things always go too smoothly, we could be lulled into thinking that we are much more advanced practitioners than we actually are. If everyone is lovable, it’s easy to be loving. Of course we want people to be friendly and kind to us but the problem is that that can make us think that we have no problems inside - *I’m always so kind and friendly* - because we are meeting only with kindness and friendliness. That can give us a false idea that we have overcome anger, that we have overcome jealousy, that we have overcome feeling hurt, but this might not be true. Often these afflictive emotions are lying latent inside us still, to come surging right back up when we meet with adverse people or circumstances.

However instead of feeling upset either at the person causing this negative reaction, or at ourselves for feeling angry, we think “*Oh good, this person is so obnoxious! What a wonderful opportunity! Now I can really practice, so thank you so much for showing me how much work I still have to do. You really are my teacher, I didn’t notice how sensitive I was about that and you have shown me, I’m really very grateful to you for that.*”

So instead of regarding somebody who is annoying or hurtful as being the enemy, as being somebody antagonistic to us and then getting all upset and angry, we might recognize that actually this has given us a great opportunity. It helps us to see ourselves much more clearly - what work needs to be done still and at the same time the opportunity to get to work with the remedy.

So just changing our attitude can change everything and situations which can seem so difficult and hard are now regarded as being a great spiritual opportunity for us to develop and learn. Again it is like going to a gymnasium

and being faced by a machine which is challenging and designed to test our muscles. But we don't resent that machine, rather we are grateful to it for showing that we need to do a lot more work. We don't start kicking the machine and getting all upset because it is difficult, we think 'wow this is giving me a really good workout' and we come out covered in sweat and feeling fantastic! So this practice of *lojong* is a workout in the spiritual realm which challenges us much harder but the resulting inner strength is so profound.

When we come across people who create difficulties for us or who shame us, there is this sense of *I* which comes so strongly: *They are insulting me, humiliating me, cheating me.* That sense of *I* which is so strong at those times could be very helpful, because we see clearly what we are dealing with. If there was no "I" there then where would the problem be? There wouldn't be any problem. When we come into opposition with people who are humiliating or criticizing us, especially if it's not even true, then that sense of defensiveness becomes very clear. Since this is what we are dealing with, we feel grateful for their help.

So this is the central part of this text, how to take these challenging situations involving the eight mundane concerns of praise and blame, gain and loss and so forth onto the path and use them for our spiritual progress towards inner transformation. This is the heart of the matter.

The verses may sound somewhat similar but each one is dealing with a slightly different nuance of problems that arise in our daily life.

Verse 12

*If someone driven by great desire  
Seizes all my wealth, or induces others to do so,  
To dedicate to him my body, possessions,  
And past, present, and future merit  
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Normally, when someone steals things from us then we get upset, feel deprived and of course we want to get our things back again. This verse does not mean that for example if someone steals our passport, credit cards or so on, we shouldn't go to the police and try and get them back. But from the point of view of practice, supposing for example we have wealth and someone comes and robs us. There are two issues here: firstly if we ourselves are robbed it's the result of having stolen from someone else in the past. Now that karmic debt is cleared up so that is nice. Secondly if someone takes everything we own then we no longer have to trouble to protect it. The more people have, the more they set up alarm systems and guard dogs and triple locks and surveillance systems.

The wealthier we get, the more incarcerated we are by our possessions. If we don't have much then it's highly unlikely that anyone is going to bother to take it and if we do lose it, so what? Instead of getting all upset if people steal things from us, the opposite attitude is to say *In this and future lives I will offer all my body, possessions and all my merit.* So we don't even get caught up in thinking this is my merit – creating a nice merit bank account for the future. We offer everything, take it all, you are welcome.

There is a story of a Zen monk who was quite poor and he lived in a hermitage. One day he came back and his hut had been broken into and everything had been taken from him: his pots and pans, store of food, everything. He looked around and then went outside where it was night time with a full moon. He looked in the sky and said *Oh, I wish I could have given him the moon!*

So it is a feeling that whatever the thieves took, we want them to take more, we want them to be happy. If they stole it's because they have negative emotions in their minds or maybe they have a great need. So if they took money then we can think, *"I hope he really needs that money; maybe he needs to educate or feed his children. Hopefully he doesn't just use it on drink and that he puts it some good use. I'm happy for him."* So if the money is gone anyway, why worry? Whether or not the money is returned, the point is either we feel upset, angry and deprived or we consider, "Oh well, that's cleared up that karma and I hope that now he's content because he made a really good haul. Good that I made one sentient being happy today!"

It is usually not the situation in itself which causes the problem, it's our reaction which causes the problem. When we create the suffering for ourselves it is not the perpetrator who is suffering. We have the suffering of loss and we have the suffering of resentment, so we have double suffering. This doesn't mean we don't lock our doors and take sensible precautions, but it does mean when we lose things then we accept we have lost them, but really so what? When things happen in our life that we don't want to happen, I usually say to myself *"If this was the very worst thing that was happening in the world at this moment, this would be a pure land."* Because really most of our problems are so irrelevant compared to the dreadful things that are happening to other people right now, so why do we get so upset?

More follows:

13. *If, in return for not the slightest wrong of mine,  
Someone were to cut off even my very head,  
(Forget about losing your passport!)  
Through the power of compassion to take all his  
negative actions  
Upon myself is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Now, this is very relevant at this time because in many countries including Tibet with their totalitarian regimes, many people are hauled off to prisons and savagely tortured or executed through no wrong of their own. So again this is something which is not just theory but is actually happening, all around the world. If we take Tibet as an example, so many great Lamas and others were imprisoned and very cruelly treated, interrogated and tortured for 20 or 25 years. They hadn't done anything wrong as far as this lifetime is concerned. Many of them were great masters. They were probably reciting to themselves exactly this text which they would have learned when they were little monks, because so many of them when they were released after 25 or 30 years imprisonment in labor camps, instead of being bitter and angry and feeling they had just wasted their lives, they came out radiant; thin but shining and with their eyes just glowing. As is well known, His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked one of these political prisoners what had been his greatest fear and he said "*My greatest fear was losing compassion for my tormentors.*" Clearly he didn't lose compassion because he just radiated that love. We also hear these real practitioners say how grateful they were for undergoing these hardships. Otherwise all of this stuff is just theory, precepts that we can learn by heart. But when we are faced with someone whose only thought is to harm us – even though we have never done anything to hurt them, at least not in this lifetime – how are we going to respond? Well either we can react with anger, fear, fantasies of retaliation or we can think, "*This poor person is acting like this because of their own delusions. How sad! I take all their negativity onto myself and I give them all of my virtue and merits. May they have great happiness, may they find peace!*" and the more difficult it gets the more we extend to them compassion and loving-kindness. It can be done, either we go under and end up bitter, revengeful and full of self-pity or we surmount and take everything that happens to us as a teaching on the path.

This is an important point although few of us are going to be imprisoned, beaten and interrogated, but there are always situations happening in life, such as people who don't act the way they should for no ostensible reason. Why should they be so nasty? How do we react? Do we take that as an opportunity for enhancing our practice and benefiting them through our thoughts of loving-kindness - or not? Do we act like ordinary people who have never heard a word of dharma? Sometimes I remind our nuns that it's not having a shaved head and wearing robes that makes us a dharma practitioner, it's how we respond to everyday circumstances. Especially if someone does something we don't want or speaks to us rudely or criticizes us, how do we respond?

An Australian friend of ours, when she drives on Indian roads, which are a great challenge (especially when

someone cuts in front on a blind curve or stops dead with no indication and so forth,) of course she comes out with quite ripe language to express her feeling and then immediately adds, "*And may you be well and happy!*" So, as long as we remember that bit...

The other point to consider in the case where we haven't done anything wrong and others are being so mean, is to remember that obviously we ourselves created the causes from past lives. Nothing just happens without a cause so either in this life or in some past life these seeds were planted and now they are coming up. If we respond with anger, indignation or fear, we are just creating more negative karma, whereas by responding with patience and love and understanding then that karma becomes purified completely.

Sometimes I get letters from people who reiterate in each letter how they got cheated out of some property or someone abused them maybe even 30 years ago! It's so sad. I keep reminding them that all this happened in the past. Just let it go and consider right *now* what have you got? They are creating their own suffering, far more than the person who cheated them. It's like having a wound and if we leave it alone, it will start to heal itself, but if we keep scratching then it just gets worse and in the end becomes infected and poisons our whole system.

We cannot base our lives on anger, resentment and fear. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a wonderful example of how to cope skillfully with unfair oppression, as is Aung San Suu Kyi who has been under so much pressure, faced so many difficulties and no doubt a lot of fear under that repressive government. But still while under house arrest, instead of using her time to write scathing letters around the world about the awful government, she meditated, read books, thought constructively, and tried to use that time to inwardly develop as a bodhisattva.

If we are faced with someone who is *especially* difficult, we can try to just put ourselves in their shoes. How would we like to have their mind? What would it be like? Then we feel natural compassion because people don't harm others unless they themselves are hurting inside. A person who is completely happy and at peace with themselves doesn't need to hurt others. In the end it all comes back to our own inner response, not what happens to us but how we deal with what happens to us, skillfully or unskillfully.

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