

# GATSAL

## TEACHING

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on

# 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

Part IX

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*Verses translated by*  
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24. *The various forms of suffering are like the death of one's child in a dream:*

*By clinging to deluded perceptions as real we exhaust ourselves.*

*Therefore, when encountering unfavourable circumstances,*

*To view them as illusions is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Again the suggestion is given that we are fabricating our own reality and because we believe it all so desperately, we suffer. If we could only see that it is just a projection like a movie. When we see a film, we laugh if it is a comedy and we cry if it is a tragedy. But we remember it is just a show. At the end, when the heroine dies in the arms of the hero, however much our heart is hurting at the time, we don't go out wanting to commit suicide – it is just a movie.

I remember seeing Bambi when I was just a little girl. Ah! The part where Bambi's mother dies! I only had a mother and I didn't know mummies could die. It was a terrible shock. I felt distraught, torn apart and I cried so loud my mother had to take me out of the cinema! So, we have to be careful which movies we watch!

*The various forms of suffering are like the death of one's child in a dream:*

If we dream of somebody we love dying, then in the dream we feel completely traumatized. We cry and on waking up, our pillow is soaked with tears. But then one thinks, 'Oh but that was just a dream.' However because we think that everything is so real, not realizing that on an ultimate level it is all really our projection, therefore we suffer. This is a hard one

for people. But really and truly this is all just like a dream. We live in a dream and we have to wake up – the whole of Buddhism is about waking up from the dream of our ignorance. We solidify everything and we make everything seem so real, so truly existent – but it isn't. It is like a rainbow.

It is not that we become unfeeling and remote, but nonetheless we begin to see from a higher perspective. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is constantly being told awful things that are happening, not only by Tibetans, but also by others around the world who come to tell him all the dreadful things taking place in their countries. When His Holiness hears these tales of sorrow, he cries. His Holiness is not one of those who think it is not manly to cry. He is happy to weep (so to say) because he has such an open heart that really empathizes with the sufferings of others. That is the compassion aspect of a bodhisattva.

But then the wisdom side sees that ultimately it is all like an empty rainbow. It is always just a projection. And so five minutes later His Holiness is laughing again. It is not because he doesn't care, but because he has the balance of wisdom and compassion so that he can absorb all this suffering, this sadness, and then transmute it so it doesn't sit heavily in his heart.

Because this universal suffering doesn't sit like a huge boulder in his heart, he is not in deep depression the whole time: bitter and angry. Instead all that suffering that he hears about, nurtures his compassion and wisdom, so therefore when people are with him they feel comforted. They feel an inner joy and a sense that somehow it is all okay. That is part of his power. I was talking with one of his secretaries and he said that some people go for an audience and they are so tense and upset, angry and crying. They tell His Holiness such terrible things – but then, just by the way His

Holiness sits and takes it all in and then gives out his own words of advice - and because of his infinite love and compassion - the visitors come out smiling. Somehow he has taken all the grief into himself and relieved them. As though he has taken that burden from them and dissolved it back into primordial emptiness again. He has been doing this for more than fifty years.

We have to bring our pure perception on how things really are - and remind ourselves. Obviously when something really terrible happens, like losing somebody whom we love very much, naturally we are going to grieve. Nobody is saying don't grieve. But, at a certain point, too much grief becomes dissolved into self-pity - pity for ourselves, no longer just pity for the one that died or got sick. This is also another boost to the ego and doesn't help anybody. It is counterproductive. The ego is very happy to be miserable. The ego feeds on our unhappiness as much as on happiness because when something awful has happened, if we are in grief, if we are suffering, then we recall our grief again and again - so we are thinking only about ourselves. This self-absorption is all the ego wants: whether a happy me or miserable me, it doesn't matter - it is about *me*.

People who have psychological problems are usually absorbed in themselves. The most sane and healthy people are those who don't think primarily about themselves because they are much more interested in the welfare of others. That gives them a kind of peace and space. So even when difficult situations come up in this world, we have the space to absorb and then to dissolve. There comes a release of such tight grasping.

So Thogmé says:

*The various forms of suffering are like the death of one's child in a dream:*

*By clinging to deluded perceptions as real we exhaust ourselves.*

*Therefore, when encountering unfavourable circumstances,*

*To view them as illusions is the practice of a bodhisattva*

So we need to move on and not make these difficulties and tragedies into the centre of our life. This is just one scene within the extended on-going movie which is our life.

It is very important to bring wisdom and understanding into our lives. We need to acclimatise our mind beforehand so that when something bad does happen, we have the prior knowledge and strength to deal with it. Buddhist wisdom deals

with the recognition that things are not as solid and unchanging as they seem to be. To appreciate that how we see things is only how *we* see things - this doesn't mean that is how things really are. Actually, everything we perceive is only perceived through our deluded minds - we do *not* see things as they really are - only a Buddha or Arya Bodhisattva sees things truly. We only see things through our distorted perception.

So even if we can't see things as they are, at least we can try to *remember* that we are not seeing things as they really are. Those with higher wisdom agree that our seeming reality is just a projection. So even if we don't see things in that way, we should remember that more advanced teachers who know much more than we do, are in accord that this is just a projection. So no need to grasp what is pleasurable, nor to grasp at what is painful.

I was brought up as a Spiritualist and the séances at our home occurred in the 1950s just after the 2nd World War which was still very much in people's minds. We had a couple of friends who would come regularly, having lost their only son in the war. He had died when his tank had overturned on a bridge and exploded, so the soldiers trapped inside the tank had both burned and drowned. So this bereaved couple would come to the séances just to communicate with their son. He said to them 'Yes that was horrible - but I'm fine now and I need to go on. Please stop trying to get in contact with me. We had our time together but now let me go, and you carry on with your life.' But they couldn't let go of their grief and attachment, because they had centered their whole life around their son - and his loss.

The point is, to lose your only child is a terrible thing - but, the show goes on. He has passed on, and we have to keep going too. To get stuck in that one scene and keep playing it over and over - it doesn't help anybody. Therefore, whatever awful things happen to us, we have to remember that people are dying and coming into birth all the time. Of course it is horrible and we wish it hadn't happened, but it *has* happened, and we have to accept that. All these things which come to us, they can teach us something. What can we learn? It is important to take everything which occurs in our life and try to learn from it.

Some people call this the Schoolhouse of Life, so we have some lessons which are very hard - but this is how we grow in understanding and experience. If everything was always easy and pleasant, we wouldn't learn that much. Looking back on their life, many people realise that it was during the difficult parts, the challenges, that they felt they actually made some inner progress. Later they feel grateful for that

opportunity to grow. Otherwise we just have to keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again until finally we learn the lesson. Once we learn the lesson we can graduate from that class and go on.

25. *If those who wish for enlightenment must give away even their own bodies,  
How much more should it be true of material objects?  
Therefore, without expectation of result or reward  
To give with generosity is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

As we know, the path of a bodhisattva as laid out in the paramitas starts with generosity, because even if we are not very ethical, even if we have a bad temper, even if we're lazy and pretty dull-minded, and we hardly ever meditate, anyway at least we can be generous. That doesn't require any other particular qualities. It's the start. And generosity is important because as we give with our hands, if we give with the right motivation, it also starts to open up our hearts.

There's a story of the Buddha when he met with this wealthy man who was an entrenched miser. He would never give even a grain of rice to anyone, even though he was very wealthy. So the Buddha said, 'All right, you take some fruit in your right hand, and you give it to your left hand. Then from your left hand back to your right hand.' Just the idea of picking something up and letting it go. Opening up our hand and for a moment it is not ours until it gets into the next hand—just to get practice of releasing and giving is so important.

We were dealing before with the idea of grasping and clinging and attachment as being the source of our problems, and so the direct counter balance to that is to start giving and sharing, to cultivate the pleasure of making others happy through gifts—not just material gifts, but also gifts of time. People have problems so we give them the time by listening to them and maybe trying to help. The gift of service. Many work their whole lives helping others or in service to the dharma. This is all an aspect of generosity.

It is not necessary to always be thinking 'this is mine, I've got to keep it. If I give it away, what will I do? I will be deprived. Therefore I have to keep everything for myself.' That is a sad state of mind. Whereas, the mind which says, 'Oh, this is lovely. I really like this, who can I give it to?'—is an open, joyful mind, and everything flows beautifully. Usually people who are generous also find that things come to them too. Nothing gets stuck. It is like we don't have sticky fingers. Everything comes and then is shared out.

This is a beautiful way to live. Not only are our hands open, but our heart is open too. So, for all of us, this answers the question of how to transform our

lives from the ordinary worldly idea of accumulating, to the spiritual ideal of giving. This is one reason why it is the beginning of the bodhisattva path as laid down in the paramitas.

As mentioned before, in Asia this is understood. One is overwhelmed by people's altruistic generosity. People often give more than they can afford, but with so much joy. It lightens everything up.

This quality of giving, of generosity of heart, is a very important one for all of us at whatever level we can manage to incorporate this as our practice. Just the joy in giving joy to others is a very beautiful thing. It really makes the heart sing.

In many Jataka tales retelling past lifetimes of the Buddha, in many animal forms it is recounted how the bodhisattva sacrificed his own life for the sake of others. The great merit which was created in this way became a prime cause in finally becoming a Buddha.

Of course people sometimes think, 'Look at me, I'm being so virtuous!' Certainly in Asia, people can start totting up the merit as though they were keeping a merit bank account. Apart from their material bank account, they have got a merit one too. The problem is that according to the texts we the amount of good karma we earn is also in dependence on the object of the generosity. So therefore, it is much more meritorious to give to monks than to give to nuns.

Actually one of the problems for nuns throughout Buddhist history up to today has been that people would rather give to the monks (i.e. males) because it is more meritorious than to give to nuns. Therefore unlike the monks, nuns have always had problems getting adequate support. Even Shantideva in the Bodhicharyavatara prays that the nuns will be given support. That is the most he hopes for them actually, along with living harmoniously and not quarreling. Thank you, Shantideva.

So, it is important, to give without expectation of reward—forget the merit. Actually, the more we think of the merit, the least meritorious it is. Just give for the joy of giving. Just give because we want to make others happy, or because others are in need. Sometimes also it is good to give something just because we really like it a lot, and we can see the attachment there. Just watch what happens inside.

Generosity is a beautiful quality. It is a loving, soft, spacious quality and it is something which all of us need to cultivate. Not just material gifts but service and care for others. In many ways, just this openness of heart which delights in giving and sharing is already an important component on the spiritual path, or also a worldly path. To be happy, we have to have a generous heart. We cannot be genuinely happy with a

closed, tight heart that doesn't want to share anything with anybody.

26. *If lacking discipline, one cannot accomplish one's own good,  
It is laughable to think of accomplishing the good of others.  
Therefore, to observe discipline without samsaric motives is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Again, if we want to cultivate a garden, first thing we have to do is to protect that land from predators. After that we can continue with digging, pulling out rocks, pulling up the weeds, putting in the fertilizer, making sure the soil is fertile and good and then planting good seeds. First we build a protective fence.

Likewise with our spiritual life, when we are trying to cultivate generosity, patience, meditation, and wisdom, applying ourselves to study in order to understand and to cultivate a genuine dharma life, if we have no ethical guidelines, then without those basic principles there is no way. Our practice is not going to benefit even ourselves so how can we be of benefit to others?

The basic five precepts are the way to live in this world harmlessly. They have nothing to do with what we eat or what we wear. They are not something which was important in India 2600 years ago but is no longer relevant anymore. Or is only relevant if we live in Asia but doesn't matter when we go back to the West. These basic rules of conduct—not killing, stealing, responsible sexual conduct, having ethical speech, and not destroying our minds through drugs and alcohol, these are eternal rules of conduct to uphold our spiritual life.

It is like a cup. If we want to pour the elixir of the dharma, we have to have something to contain it. So we need a clean cup, or a vessel in which this elixir can be kept so that it doesn't just run all over everywhere and get wasted. The vessel holds the liquid. So likewise, for our spiritual cultivation we need a container which is our basic ethical conduct, the way we live in this world so that any being who comes in our presence knows they have nothing to fear from us. We are not going to hurt or cheat or exploit them. They are safe with us. We are also safe with ourselves because we know by maintaining the precepts we will not be creating negative karma: we have promised both ourselves and the buddhas.

So these ethical guidelines also give us a safety. There are levels of ethical conduct, both lay and monastic, but all include these basic five precepts of right living. It doesn't matter even what religion we

hold or do not hold. To live harmlessly, not only with our body and speech but especially in the mind.

It may happen that at first our mind is running wild with anger or lust and we are inwardly involved in all sorts of negative scenarios. But if outwardly we appear peaceful and restrained, then we must work to gradually quieten down the mind. If our outward behaviour is impeccable, we can more easily sit and meditate because we don't feel guilty about our outer conduct. So, always it benefits ourselves. And certainly it benefits the world. Without that, it's laughable to say we are practitioners.

Maybe we are not yet bodhisattvas, but we are trying. This is our practice. Practice makes perfect, as they say. So, if we want to be perfect we have to practice. So, one of the most important points is to start from where we are now. We are happy to bring our lives into line with where we are aspiring to go. Otherwise, it is counterproductive. We are aiming in one direction, but our conduct goes another way, because all our friends are going out and partying or because it is the norm in the kind of society we live in.

But to be a practitioner, we are not following the norm. The Buddha 2600 ago said that anyone who practices the dharma is like a fish swimming upstream, when all the rest of the shoal are going downstream. That was in India, in his day. Imagine what he'd say now.

So, each one of us is responsible for our own life, our own actions, our own speech, and our own mind. No one can do it for us. Taking precepts is really is a big help for us and acts as a reminder of the direction we are trying to go in.

So therefore, *'if we lack discipline, we cannot even help ourselves, we cannot even accomplish our own good'*-- because all these actions like killing, stealing and sexual indulgence and so forth, hurt us as well as hurting others and create bad karma leading to a very unhappy, undisciplined life. What to speak of the harm this does for other people. We can't talk about benefitting other beings at the same time that we are killing or stealing or lying to them. So therefore, we observe discipline without samsaric motives—it is not just so we can gain merit or that everybody will look and say what a good person we are.

That is not the reason. It is not so that everybody will admire us: and think, wow, how disciplined and what an exemplary Buddhist, or whatever!

The point is if we sincerely aspire to travel the path, the sine qua non is an ethical life—whether people know about it or don't know, approve of it or disapprove, because we know in our heart it is right and in tune with what is true. So we uphold the precepts without making a fuss.