

GATSAL TEACHING

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on

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

Part XI

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So now we are on verse 30 which says:

30. *In the absence of wisdom, perfect enlightenment cannot be attained through the other five perfections alone. Therefore, to cultivate wisdom combined with skilful means and free from the three concepts, is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Buddhist wisdom is a huge subject but why does it say without wisdom enlightenment cannot be attained by the other five paramita? It is like the two wings of the bird – compassion and skilful means is one wing, the other wing is wisdom. They have to be balanced so that we can fly to enlightenment. If we have only got one wing we are not going to get off the ground.

So in the context of these five paramita, *merely* acquiring generosity, patience, effort, meditation, based on the concept that it is *I* who am doing this, and therefore not understanding emptiness and no self, will not result in enlightenment. It will result in making lots of merit but of itself it will not give us the breakthrough. Therefore it is specified that to attain enlightenment we need to cultivate wisdom *combined* with skilful means or the other five paramita. All these need to be free from the *three concepts*. Now to explain the three concepts basically: I give this packet of Little Gem chocolates to Tsunma Aileen because Tsunma Aileen likes them and I want her to be happy. Or maybe even because I am especially attached to *Little Gems* myself and I want to help my sense of renunciation! Anyway for whatever reason I give it to her with good motivation, so that will make merit - positive karma - and then what we do with the merit is up to us. But *of itself* this action is caught by three false concepts: there is the subject (the person who is giving) there is an act of giving and there is a recipient - and all these actually exist just as I am thinking. So the idea of subject, object and action, the belief in their

absolute existence as we conceive it with our conceptual mind, binds and captures us. Therefore, that action in itself will still bind us to samsara.

The action itself is good but in order to become an actual means of opening up to ultimate reality, it needs to be conjoined with wisdom. Otherwise the underlying delusion doesn't free us, it doesn't liberate us because it's still an ego-centred action. *I am virtuous, I am generous, I am patient*, there's always *me* there and so of *itself* it cannot liberate, unless those meritorious actions are conjoined with right view. This means the understanding that from the beginning there has *ultimately* been no one to give, nothing to be given and no one to receive. So this is the purity of view that we understand through a genuine realization of emptiness and the nature of the mind. Then we will spontaneously perform all these actions without being conjoined with the idea of a personal, immutable, solid *me* at the centre of everything. There will be open spaciousness instead of being trapped in our usual tight, conceptual thinking. This is liberation of the mind and why wisdom is the crown jewel of Buddhism. It's even symbolised as a *female* deity! In fact the central image in our nuns' monastic college is of *Prajñāparamita*, the Perfection of Wisdom. She symbolises ultimate reality – the Dharmakaya - and she is the mother of all the buddhas because the buddhas are born of perfect wisdom. The point is that without wisdom free from these three concepts of grasping at subject, object and action, the other paramitas by themselves will not take us to enlightenment. It could also be said that the other paramitas are the legs and wisdom is the eyes. If we are trying to reach the goal, either we've got the legs but we can't see where we are going or we only have eyes and no legs, so we are not going to get very far. So we need both eyes and legs to travel the path to enlightenment.

31. *If I do not examine my own defects. Though outwardly a Dharma practitioner, I may act*

contrary to the Dharma.

Therefore, continuously to examine my own faults

And give them up is the practice of a bodhisattva.

We have to look at our own actions and our own mind and where there are faults, where there are problems, where there are difficulties, we have to acknowledge it. It doesn't mean that we beat ourselves over the head; it doesn't mean we think we are bad people, rather it's like if we go to a gymnasium with a weak body, they don't throw us out. The trainer notices scrawny legs and gets us working on the treadmill!

The point is that we need to see the problem in order to set about remedying it. It's like first we recognise that we are sick and then we will take the treatment. It's not that we feel guilty or punish ourselves because we have some illness. So having acknowledged that there is some problem we then seek to find how to make ourselves spiritually healthy again. Because our true nature is healthy, our true nature is Buddha. But our thoughts and our emotional defilements obscure that truth, so we have to heal and remove these obscurations. But not with the sense of getting out the whip and flagellating ourselves. We acknowledge that there are problems, but as it says in the text, we can deal with these problems because there is always a skilful way - and that's the work, that's the path. It's nothing to get depressed about, in fact it's something to get energized about! This is my problem so let's get to work on it now.

Otherwise we can pretend to ourselves. This is sometimes a problem with dharma people, especially westerners. We read all the texts on how a perfect bodhisattva acts who never gets upset, never gets angry, even when people cheat them and abuse them and they say *oh thank you, my spiritual friend*. So people read all these texts and think, that's how a bodhisattva has to act, so I am going to be a bodhisattva and act just like that. Then we pretend. We take on the role of never getting upset, never being depressed or angry - because bodhisattvas would not do those things. So we pretend to ourselves and especially to others that there's no problem and that we are sincere dharma practitioners, while all the time we suppress and ignore all these problems which are growing in the darkness. Many things are growing in the darkness so we need to open up and expose them to the light. Then they begin to shrivel and we can see what's going on in there.

It is not virtuous to pretend to be who we are not. It is skilful to aspire to overcome our problems but it is *not* wisdom to pretend that there are no problems to overcome. This is important because there is often a trouble in Dharma Centres because everyone is trying so hard to be perfect and we're not perfect. Of course we try to do the best we can but still we have to acknowledge to ourselves when problems arise and if someone upsets us we have to *admit* that they upset us. Then we can think how can we deal with this in a suitable dharma way and we try. But to pretend

that we are not upset because bodhisattvas never get upset, is just to be in denial and that is psychologically unhealthy. Then what happens is that the shadow grows because we cannot acknowledge it.

Yes we are trying our best but we have to see where the problems are, we have to be honest with ourselves, and honest with others. This is not a game of pretending, this is finally coming into our true nature. So therefore one has to look at one's faults and then work to give them up or transform them. We ask ourselves, 'What is the best way for me to deal with this problem that I have?' We search in the texts, ask the teachers, think about it, and finally decide what works for me. Then do it.

*32. If, impelled by negative emotions, I relate the faults
Of other bodhisattvas, I will myself degenerate.
Therefore, to not talk about the faults of anyone
Who has entered the Mahayana is the practice of a
bodhisattva.*

On the whole to gossip about others and to denigrate others is definitely a non-virtuous action. It creates disharmony and often it's a way of avoiding one's own shortcomings by talking about the faults of others. We should always listen to what we are saying, hear ourselves speak. In addition we should not say anything about someone else that we would not be happy to say in their presence. Whether they are on the Mahayana path or not, just as a general principle.

But, when we know of someone who is abusing their position, who is acting in ways which are unethical and unacceptable then, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself said, we should speak out, if only to protect others. We don't need to make a major issue out of it, but we should speak up, for their sake as well as everyone else's sake. Because otherwise if we sweep everything under the carpet and put the carpet down and think the room is clean when it isn't, this is a disservice to that person who might then continue in his corrupt conduct which is karmically unwholesome, and also a disservice to anyone else who comes under their influence. It can create an atmosphere of deceit and harm with everyone afraid to speak out honestly. So sometimes we have to speak out with compassion for both the victims and for the perpetrator and for maintaining the integrity of the precious path. But be sure of your facts.

*33. Offerings and respect may bring discord
And cause listening, reflection, and meditation to decline.
Therefore, to avoid attachment
To the homes of friends and benefactors is the practice of
a bodhisattva.*

This is especially for lamas, senior monks and important people who have a large circle of admirers showing so much respect and making many offerings. Therefore if

we are in that position and spend our time being invited out and made lots of fuss of, that could promote our sense of arrogance and love of comfort. So obviously that is to be avoided. To make offerings and show respect in themselves are good. We should always honour the Lamas and teachers or anyone worthy of respect. Generosity and respect are good qualities from the side of the donor, but if the recipient begins to expect such attention and enjoys being the centre of everybody's adoration, then he is in trouble. Of course Thogmé Zangpo was an important lama in his day, so here he is warning his fellow lamas to watch out because some lamas spend all their time going out to perform household pujas and raking in the offerings. Then they are so busy that they forget that what they are really supposed to be doing - which is this study, contemplation and meditation.

Especially if they are newly set out on the path which is the time that they should spend in studying and practicing. If they get drawn into going on the usual lama circuit then it can happen that their practice declines and they might start to expect people's respect and adoration which is even worse. It's a big danger especially in this present day when there are many young incarnate Lamas –the rebirths of great Lamas of the past who had already set up so many Dharma centres all around the world. After they have passed on their incarnations are recognized and within a very short time, if they are not careful, are then sent around the globe because the Dharma centres need to make money and also they need to keep the students motivated and interested. So these young teenage boys are sent out and of course everyone adores them because they look so fresh and pretty. They are often very cute but they haven't done much cultivation in this lifetime. These former great lamas from Tibet not only had studied since the age of 6 but then they often spent 20-30 years in retreat during their lifetime before they started out to teach.

But nowadays everybody is in such a hurry and the Dharma centres are not well established in the way that the monasteries were back in Tibet when they didn't really need the Lama physically there. Sometimes the head lama would emerge from retreat once or twice a year for important rituals, give blessings and then go back in retreat. But nowadays these monasteries in exile rely upon outside funding because they don't own the vast quantities of land and villages the way they used to, so they send these young incarnate lamas all around the world before they are ready, while they are still not cooked – half baked in fact. It's very hard for them too, since they know they are not ready: they haven't finished all their studies, they haven't done much practice. Some of them haven't even done a ngöndro and yet there they are, set up on a high throne like they are the Buddha himself. So it is very dangerous not only for the students but also for the lamas because it's a huge responsibility and they haven't finished their training yet.

So actually this verse, although it was written 600 years ago is actually even more relevant today when we have this whole new batch of recycled lamas coming out in this new fashionable edition. Many of them are very brilliant, I am not saying that they are not clever and charismatic, but they are mostly not fully cooked and then if they are not careful all this unquestioning adulation goes to their head. Whatever the lama says, it must be true, even if it is nonsense. It's very dangerous, for the lama also.

*34. Harsh words disturb the minds of others
And spoil our own bodhisattva practice.
Therefore, to give up rough speech,
Which others find unpleasant, is the practice of a
bodhisattva.*

Well that is obvious since we like to hear good speech, we like people to speak kindly to us, nicely but kindly, we don't like people speaking hurtful, harmful, harsh words. So as we don't like it, other people also don't like it - so don't do it.

*35. When emotions become habitual, they are hard to get
rid of with antidotes.
Therefore, with mindfulness and vigilance, to seize the
weapon of the antidote
And crush the attachment and other negative emotions
The moment they arise is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is rather what we were dealing with earlier concerning anger. It is important to cultivate precise and clear mindfulness and the vigilance which oversees what we are doing, and checks up on our state of mind. Here mindfulness means being clearly present and knowing what we are doing and thinking and feeling while we are doing it, while vigilance doesn't stay all the time but it just looks in and checks – is our mind very distracted, is it sinking, is it full of negative thoughts, what's going on there? When it checks, if everything is running smoothly, then it recedes back again and just comes back later to keep checking. It ensures that the mind is doing what it should be doing.

So the more precise our sense of presence is, the more we are conscious of what is happening in the moment, the more clear and vivid that is - which comes with practice – then we are able to catch these negative emotions like attachment and anger and jealousy and pride and all these other negative emotions. If we can catch the afflictive emotion in the moment it arises, see it nakedly, it will dissolve and transform into sharp wisdom energy.

Usually if we are used to being angry when something upsets us or we're used to being greedy every time we see something we like or we get jealous every time somebody has something which we want, then we just get used to reacting like that – it becomes our neural pathway. Unless

we are very alert, it's difficult to apply the antidote once we are way down the road to expressing our afflictive emotions.

We need to develop mindfulness, a clarity of mind that rests in the moment, being conscious as soon as these habitual negative emotions arise so we can zap them before they carry on gathering momentum and explode into their usual unskillful responses. The Buddha said that mindfulness is the path to liberation. It means the quality of being present, of awareness, of *knowing*, which we need to cultivate in our daily life, so the Buddha started by saying first of all be conscious of our physical movements – when standing know that you are standing; when sitting know that you are sitting and so forth and then bring that awareness to the feelings and sensations of pleasure, displeasure and neutrality. Then to bring that awareness to our mind – what is our mind doing in this moment? And then also to the interaction between external phenomena and our mental input. The path of practice is the path of becoming more conscious and the more conscious we get, the quicker we can deal with the negative emotions as they arise.

*36. In short, wherever I am, whatever I do,
To be continually mindful and alert,
Asking, "What is the state of my mind?"
And accomplishing the good of others is the practice of a
Bodhisattva*

Thank you, Thogmé, it is exactly that. We have to *know* what is going on in our mind while it is going on and not just get engulfed and swept away by the flood of our thoughts and feelings. This is very important. *To be continually mindful and alert, Asking 'what is the state of my mind?' and at the same time, not only doing that, but also accomplishing the good of others.*

So we have to become more aware, more centered, more conscious, more present and at the same time, open our heart to the happiness and benefit of others. That should keep us going! People always complain, 'we have no time to practice', well as long as we are breathing we can practice!

*37. Dedicating to enlightenment,
Through wisdom purified of the three concepts,*

That means we dedicate the virtue without grasping at the notion that there is anyone who has dedicated the virtue, there's anyone to dedicate it to, or there is any dedication going on.

*All merit achieved by such endeavor,
To remove the suffering of numberless beings is the
practice of a bodhisattva.*

Amen.

So this text concludes:

*Following the teachings of the holy beings,
I have arranged the points taught in the sutras, tantra,
and shastras
As The Thirty-seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisattva
For the benefit of those who wish to train on the
bodhisattva path.
Since my understanding is poor, and I have little
education,
This is no composition to delight the learned;
But as it is based on the sutras and teachings of holy beings
I think it is genuinely the practice of the bodhisattvas.
However, it is hard for someone unintelligent like me
To fathom the great waves of the bodhisattvas' activities,
So I beg the forgiveness of the holy ones
For my contradictions, irrelevances, and other mistakes.
Through the merit arising from this
And through the power of the sublime bodhichitta,
relative and absolute,
May all beings become like the Lord Avalokiteshvara,
Who is beyond the extremes of samsara and nirvana.*

*For his own benefit and that of others, Thogmé, a teacher
of scripture and logic, composed this text at Rinchen
Phug, in Ngulchu.*

Many lamas have expounded on this beautiful text with excellent commentaries, so if there is interest please really study these books and try to apply the principles to daily life *because* it is such a practical text. Sometimes when we read books on profound philosophy or advanced meditation such as mahamudra and dzogchen, it all seems very difficult unless we have endless amounts of time. We wonder how will we be able to accomplish such heights. But this text was written for daily life and daily practice, so there is no excuse not to read these verses, think about them and apply them to our lives. We have to become accustomed to these principles through applying them in our daily round and being grateful for the opportunities our life gives us to actually put these values into application.

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