

What a Bodhisattva does

Thirty-Seven Practices

By Ngulchu Thogme

Namo Lokeshwaraye.

*I bow down continually with body, speech, and mind
Out of respect for the supreme teacher
And Avalokiteshvara, the protector.
Though seeing that phenomena neither come nor go,
They strive one-pointedly for the benefit of beings.*

*The fully-enlightened buddhas,
The source of benefit and happiness,
Have come about from having accomplished the holy dharma.
This, in turn, depends on knowing what to do,
So I shall explain what are the practices of bodhisattvas.*

1.

Once having gained the free and well-favored human birth
So hard to come by and so powerful,
Persevering steadily, night and day, to free yourself
And others from the ocean of samsara—
To listen, reflect, and meditate
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

2.

Towards friends—passion like turbulent water;
Towards enemies—hatred like raging fire;
Obscured by ignorance—forgetting what should and should not be done—
To leave behind one's homeland
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

3.

When bad circumstances are left behind,
The obscuring emotions and beliefs gradually subside.
Without distractions,
Persistence toward virtue increases naturally.
As awareness clears, certainty in dharma arises—
To spend time in solitude
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

4.

At death, the visiting consciousness leaves behind the body
Like a guest leaving a guest-house—
Leaving behind loved ones to whom one has long been close,
Leaving behind wealth gained through effort.
Thus, to give up this life's concerns
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

5.

People you are with who increase the three poisons,
Who weaken the practices of listening, reflecting, meditating,
Who undermine loving-kindness and compassion—
To give up bad friends
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

6.

Those you depend on who put an end to vices,
Who make good qualities increase like the waxing moon—
Holding these spiritual friends even more dear
Than your own body—
This is the practice of a bodhisattva.

7.

Who can the gods of this world assist
When they are themselves trapped in samsara's prison?
Thus, when you seek help, taking the genuine refuge
Of the Three Jewels
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

8.

The Buddha said, "The result of negative actions
Is the suffering of the lower realms so difficult to bear."
Therefore, not commit evil acts
Even at the cost of your life
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

9.

The happiness of the three worlds is like dew
On a blade of grass, vanishing in an instant.
Striving for the supreme state—
Liberation which never changes—
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

10.

What's the point of personal happiness
When every mother so affectionate to you
From beginningless time
Is suffering? Thus, in order to liberate

Infinite number of sentient beings,
Generating bodhicitta
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

11.

Without exception,
All suffering comes of wanting happiness for yourself;
Perfect buddhas are born from wishing to benefit others.
Thus, truly exchanging your own happiness
For the suffering of others
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

12.

Even if someone, from great want, steals all your wealth
Or has someone else steal it, dedicating to the thief
Your body, your enjoyments, and your merit—
Past, present, and future—
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

13.

Even if someone cuts your head off
For having done nothing wrong,
To take on that person's negativities
Through the power of compassion
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

14.

Even if someone slanders you, and
Broadcasts it through a billion universes,
To speak of that person's good qualities
With a caring mind
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

15.

Even if someone insults you
In the middle of a gathering,
Pointing out your hidden faults—
Bowing down respectfully, seeing that person
As a spiritual friend,
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

16.

Even if someone regards you as an enemy,
Though you've cared for him as you would your own child—
Being especially affectionate toward him
As would a mother whose child is taken ill
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

17.

Even if someone, your equal or less,
Treats you with contempt out of arrogance—
Putting him above you respectfully,
As you would your teacher,
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

18.

Even though you may be penniless,
Continually despised by men, terribly ill,
Struck down by harmful forces—
To take onto yourself
All evil acts and sufferings of beings—
Without losing heart—
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

19.

Though well-known and well-respected,
As rich as Vaishravana,
Having seen that worldly wealth and glory are essenceless,
To be free of arrogance
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

20.

When the inner enemy, one's own anger, remains uncontrolled,
Seeking to subdue outer enemies only makes more of them.
Therefore, to tame your own mindstream with the forces
Of lovingkindness and compassion
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

21.

Desire is like drinking salt water—
The more you indulge, the more craving increases.
Letting go immediately
Whatever makes attachment arise
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

22.

Apparent phenomena, all of them,
Are fabrications of the mind;
The innate nature of mind
Is separate from mind's fabrications.
Having seen this,
To be uninvolved with dualistic perception
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

23.

When you happen on beautiful objects,
The practice of a bodhisattva
Is to forgo attachment by viewing them
As lovely but unreal as summer rainbows.

24.

Taking illusory appearances as real
Is exhausting, like going through
The death of one's own child
In a dream—
Our many sufferings are like that,
Thus, to regard as fantasy
The unlovely happening of life
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

25.

Those who want enlightenment
Must give even their bodies, if needed,
Not to mention giving external things.
To give generously—
Without hope of reward
Or hope of result—
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

26.

Without discipline,
You can't even achieve benefit for yourself,
So wanting to benefit others is just a joke.
Thus, to maintain a discipline
That is free of attachment to this world
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

27.

All that is hurtful is like a jewel-treasure
To the bodhisattva who wants the pleasures of virtue.
Thus, to cultivate patience
Without anger or resentment
Toward anyone at all
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

28.

Although sravakas and pratyekabuddhas
Accomplish benefit for themselves alone,
They strive as though putting out a fire in their hair.
To make efforts from which are born
Good qualities which benefit all beings
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

29.

The obscuring emotions and beliefs
Are completely conquered by vipashyana
Which has been integrated fully with shamatha.
Understanding this, to practice stable meditation states
Beyond the formless realm's four states of mental absorption
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

30.

Since perfect enlightenment cannot be obtained
Through the five paramitas without insight,
Cultivating insight which is free of concepts, and
Endowed with threefold purity and skillful means
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

31.

If you don't examine your own confusion,
You may become a charlatan
In the guise of a dharma practitioner.
Therefore, always looking into your own confusion
And the leaving it behind
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

32.

Due to the strength of the obscuring emotions and beliefs,
Speaking of the faults of bodhisattvas
Defiles oneself. Thus, not to speak
Of the faults of others on the Mahayana path
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

33.

The activities of hearing, reflecting, and meditating
Become defiled by arguing over goods and services.
Giving up attachment to friends' and donors' households
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

34.

By speaking harshly, a bodhisattva's conduct becomes defiled
And other sentient beings are disturbed.
Therefore, to give up harsh words
Displeasing to the minds of others
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

35.

Once you become used to dense states and primitive beliefs
And habituated to the obscuring emotions,
They are hard to reverse with antidotes.
Therefore, wielding the weapon of mindfulness,

To conquer these obscuring mental states (such as desire, and so on)
Immediately, as they arise,
Is the practice of a bodhisattva.

36.

In short:

Whatever you do, wherever you are,
Look into your state of mind.
By keeping continuous mindful awareness
It is the practice of a bodhisattva
To accomplish benefit for others.

37.

It is the practice of bodhisattvas
To dedicate the merit accomplished through their efforts
By means of completely pure insight
Free of concepts of giver, receiver, and gift
In order to clear away the suffering of sentient beings.

*For the sake of those wishing to train on the bodhisattva path
I have presented these thirty-seven bodhisattva practices
Based on the meaning related in the sutras, tantras, and treatises
In accord with the words of the holy ones.*

*Although due to my small training and low intellect
This was not composed in a way that would please scholars
I think these bodhisattva practices are unmistakable
Since they rely on the sutras and sacred teachings.*

*However, since it is hard for a person of low intellect like myself
To understand in depth the vast conduct of bodhisattvas
I ask patience of the holy ones
With any errors of writing, logic, and so forth.*

*By this merit, may all sentient beings
By means of the supreme absolute and relative bodhicitta
Become like lord Avalokiteshvara
Who dwells beyond the extremes of nirvana and samsara.*

This was composed in the jewel cave of Ngulchu by Tsunpa Thogme, who teaches authentic scriptures and reasonings in order to benefit himself and sentient beings.

Notes of this translation

We have done our best to render these verses in ordinary, easily-intelligible English, trying to translate accurately from meaning to meaning (rather than doing a more literal, word-for-word version). This has been done in an attempt to bring out the poem's primary teaching function. It is a provisional translation at best, particularly bearing in mind that translation of Dharma texts from Tibetan into Western languages is still in its infancy—at least by comparison to the translation of Dharma texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan, which took several hundred years. In any case, we hope it may be of some benefit.

Some clarifications follow:

Verse 1: What is literally “great vessel”, a standard metaphor for the precious human birth which has the power to carry one across the ocean of samsara, it here rendered as the “free, well-favored human birth” that is “so powerful.”

Verse 3: “Nyon mongs” (Skt. *klesha*) includes in its 6 root and 13 branches rather a wide variety of obscured states of mind. The 6 principal ones are: attachment; hatred; arrogance; and, variously, basic unawareness [*ma rig pa*] or a dense mental state [*thi mug*]; doubt [*the tsom*], for example, doubt as to the truth of karma, cause and effect, and so on; and obscured viewpoints [*lta ban yon mongs can*], for example, to regard the ephemeral skandhas as comprising a real individual, belief in “me” and “mine”, and so on.

We have rendered this term variously as “the obscuring mental states”, “the obscuring emotions and beliefs”, and, in one case have used a long formula (see verse 35), with *ma rig pa* and *thi mug* (as well as some branch states) as “dense mental states,” and *the tsom* and *lta ban yon mong can* as “primitive beliefs about reality.” We hope readers will be kind enough to bear with our difficulties in translating this term.

Verse 4: “At the time of death” is implied but not present in the Tibetan.

Verse 22: Here, the complex term *tshan ma* would be more literally rendered “labelling thoughts and subtle preconceptions,” but, insofar as these labelling thoughts and subtle preconceptions reflect fundamental dualism, we have chosen, for reasons of brevity with the rhythmic context of the line, to use the phrase “dualistic perception.”

Translated by Kiki Ekselius and Constance Wilkinson.

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