

The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisatva

By Ngulchu Gyalse Thogme Zangpo (1245 - 1369)

[Text in square brackets are the comments by Lama Tendar Olaf Hoeyer]

Namo Arya Lokeshvara [Sanskrit: invoking the noble Lokeshvara = *Avalokiteshvara*]. I respectfully prostrate through my three doors [body, speech and mind] to you, Supreme Guru and protector Lokeshvara. Although you comprehend all phenomena as devoid of coming and going, you aim one-pointedly to benefit sentient beings.

1

Possession of the human ground [your body], such a precious vessel so difficult to obtain, allows you to hear, reflect, and meditate by day and night without distraction, in order to liberate others and yourself from the ocean of *samsara*. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

2

The rivers of attachment stream to your friends and those you love. The fire of aversion directs its flames on your enemies. Under the obscurity of ignorance [Sanskrit: *avidya*], you lose sight of, what should be abandoned and what should be practised. So, let go of your country and home. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

3

When you abandon your problematic surroundings [meaning entanglement in normal life situations of family, work and society], your illusions diminish, and because you have no distractions, your practice of virtue [Sanskrit: *punya*] develops spontaneously and enables [your discovery of] clarity of mind. Your trust in the *Dharma* will grow. To live in solitude is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

4

One day old and dear friends will disappear, things and riches obtained by great effort will be left behind. Consciousness, a guest in your temporary dwelling of the body, will leave [your body]. From this moment, let go of all attachment to this life. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

5

If you associate with evil companions, the three *kleshas* increase, your reflections and meditation degrade; love and compassion are destroyed, so abandon dangerous company. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas. [The 3 *kleshas* are: ignorance (*avidya*), desire and anger.]

6

Rely on a spiritual friend [Sanskrit: *kalyanamitra*], who has discarded all illusions, whose skill in the teachings and practices is complete, and whose qualities increase like the crescent moon, so cherish such a perfect guru more than your own body. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

7

How could the gods of this world possibly liberate you, being themselves tied to the prison of *samsara*? Instead go for refuge in what, you can trust: seek refuge in the Three Jewels. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

8

The intolerable suffering of the lower realms [the worlds of animals, hungry ghosts and sentient beings in the hells] is said by Buddha to be the fruit of karma. Therefore, do never execute unwise deeds [that may lead to a future in such places]. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

9

The happiness of the three worlds is like the dew on the tip of a blade of grass, disappearing in an instant, so aspire to the highest and immutable liberation. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

[The 3 worlds (Sanskrit: *triloka*) are: world of passions, world of form and world without form, each consisting of several divisions. Beings in the worlds of form and without are not dominated by passionate feelings.]

10

Since time without beginning, your [many] mothers [from your many incarnations] took care of you with tender love. What use is your happiness, when they still suffer? So, generate *Bodhicitta* in order to liberate infinite numbers of beings. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

11

All suffering, without exception, comes from the desire for happiness for oneself, while complete enlightenment is born from the desire to make others happy. This is why exchanging one's own happiness for the suffering of all others is a practice of Bodhisattvas.

12

If, in the grip of violent desire or cruel necessity [such as hunger], an unfortunate person steals your possessions or incites someone else to steal them, let compassion fill you up, dedicate to this person your body, possessions, and past, present, and future merit [Sanskrit: *punya*]. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

13

Even if you are beaten or tortured, you should not allow any aversion [or ill will] to manifest. Show great compassion for those unworthy beings, who out of ignorance mistreat you. This is a practice of the Bodhisatvas.

14

If, without reason, certain people slander you to the point, where the entire world is filled with their malicious gossip, lovingly praise their virtues. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

[For instance, such people also possess Buddha-nature and potential Bodhicitta. Presently, they may nourish unwholesome (*akushala*) karmas, but they also carry the karma seeds of wholesome (*kushala*) patterns of action. So, they actually **do** possess virtues.]

15

If in the company of people, someone among them reveals a fault [associated with you], that you would have liked [to remain] hidden: do not become irritated with that individual, who treats you in this manner, but consider that person a supreme guru. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

16

If someone, you have helped and protected as your own child, shows only ingratitude and dislike in return: cultivate the tender pity a mother has for her sick child in regard to such a person. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

17

If someone, who is your equal or obviously your inferior, despises you – or out of arrogance attempts to debase you – respect that person as your teacher. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

18

When you are abandoned [by associated people, who ought to care of you], overcome with sickness and worry: do not become discouraged, but imagine, that you are the owner of all wrongful actions committed by others [such as your above mentioned associates] and [imagine], that you have to suffer their consequences yourself. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas. [Thus bringing an end to that karma.]

19

When you enjoy good reputation, the respect of everyone, and the wealth of *Vaishravana* [the protective king of the north in Indian mythology, that traditionally is associated with wealth and welfare]: recognise that the fruits of karma are without substance and do not take pride in this view. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

20

Unless the dominance of your inner demons [*kleshas*] ceases, the more you fight them, the more they grow. So, until you master [attachment and identification within] your own mind, negative forces will attack you [from within]. Discipline your mind through love and compassion [*maitri* and *karuna*]. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

21

The nature of sense pleasures is like that of saltwater: the more you drink, the more your thirst increase, so let go of [attachment to] the objects of your desires. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

22

All that appears comes from illusion [created] by your mind, and the mind itself is from beginning-less time without inherent existence. Free from the two extremes of manifestation [externalism and nihilism] and beyond all conceptualisation: understand the [non-dual] nature of suchness [Sanskrit: *tathata*] and do not comprehend subject and objects as existing independently. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

23

When you encounter an attractive object or something, that pleases your mind, you see it as beautiful and real, but actually it is as insubstantial as a summer rainbow, so abandon attachment toward [attractive and beautiful] things. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

24

The various sufferings are like an experience of the death of [your] only child in a dream. To take that as truth, which is only a false appearance, is to uselessly exhaust the body and mind. When you meet with unfavourable circumstances, simply consider them delusions. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

25

If someone, who desires awakening [Bodhi], is forced to give up the body [for some reason, for instance heroism], this precious human life, what need is there to mention external objects to let go of? This is why practising generosity, without hoping for a reward or karma fruit, is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

26

If you cannot live up to your own [Bodhicitta] commitments, because you are lacking in ethical discipline [Sanskrit: *shila*], but never the less expect, that other folks uphold [the purity of] their vows, you are simply ridiculous. Keep the rules and vows, not for temporal and *samsara* goals, but in order to help all sentient beings. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

27

For a child of the Buddha [meaning: a Bodhisatva], who wants the rewards of virtuous merit [Sanskrit: *punya*], all adverse circumstances are precious treasures, for they require the practice of patience [Sanskrit: *kshanti*, one of the 6 *paramitas*]. Stay perfectly patient, without irritation nor resentment towards anyone. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

28

Even the *Pratyeka Buddhas* and the *Shravakas*, who are concerned only with their own liberation, make great efforts to accomplish enthusiasm [Sanskrit: *virya*], so practice enthusiasm perfectly, the source of all qualities for the benefit of all beings. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

[Pratyeka Buddhas (lonely Buddhas) and Shravakas (listeners) are the 2 traditional kinds of *Hinayana* practitioners.]

29

While realizing how *vipashyana* [insight meditation] in union with *shamatha* [calm-abiding meditation] completely destroys the *kleshas* [passionate feelings], you accomplish the *dhyanas* [mastery of meditation] and go beyond the four levels [the 4 dhyanas]. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

30

Without *prajña* [the wisdom of minds clarity], the five preceding disciplines [called: *upayas*, skilful means] cannot be called *paramitas* [perfections] and are incapable of leading you to enlightenment. [You will need all of the 6 *paramitas*.] Hold on to the right view of comprehension, that someone executing action, the act itself, and the beneficiaries of such action, all completely lack inherent existence. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

31

With intent to analyse your actions [*karma*] and passionate feelings [*kleshas*], do not hinder desires to manifest [in your mind]. Examine your errors and faults in order to get rid of them completely. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

[If you try to suppress your passionate feelings and try to prevent them from manifesting in your mind, you will be unable to let go of attachment and identification, because there is no confrontation, that might make that happen.]

32

Never criticize others or speak of errors, that those, who are on the path of *Mahayana*, may have committed. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

[This point obviously is about the vows of a Bodhisatva, while the *Pratimoksha* vows of individual liberation for monks and nuns **do** invite criticism if broken, according to the *Vinaya*, the code of conduct for monks and nuns. Pratimoksha is mostly concerned with physical and verbal actions and the purity of the *Sangha*, while Bodhicitta vows are about mental actions of inner motivation.]

33

In order to receive offerings and gaining respect, [it happens, that] we fight among ourselves [within the *Sangha* of monks and nuns or in a group of people in retreat] in a spirit of competition, to the detriment of attention toward study, and [consequently also] meditation slacken, so abandon all attachment to the gifts of those, who care for you. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

34

Harsh speech disturbs the mind of others, and your practice suffer the effects of this, so abandon all coarse and vulgar language, all harsh speech and idle chatter. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

35

Because you are used to act under the dominance of your passionate feelings [*kleshas*], destroying [attachment to] them demands great effort. Mindfulness of these [*kleshas*] is the weapon that allows you to let go of [such attachments to] them immediately.

In short: whatever you do, in whatever circumstance or conditions, always be attentive to the situation, as it presents itself and to the reaction, that it causes in your mind. This motivation of directing your behaviour for the good of all sentient beings, is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

36

In brief, wherever you are and whatever your behaviour, you should always hold on to mindfulness [*Sanskrit: smriti*] and introspection and examine the state of your mind. To accomplish benefit for others is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

37

Dedicate the merit, that results from your efforts to reach enlightenment, to the enlightenment [of others], and [dedicate] the wise view of emptiness [*sunyata*] on the three realms of action [body, speech and mind] in order to overcome the suffering of the infinite number of beings. This is a practice of Bodhisatvas.

Dedication:

Basing myself on the teaching of the *Sutras*, *Tantras*, and *Shastras* [authoritative commentaries], I have grouped these 37 practices of a *Bodhisatva* for the application and benefit of those, who would like to follow this path.

Because of my limited understanding and inadequate knowledge, this composition lacks the poetry and elegance of language, that scholars love, but as these teachings depend strictly on the *Sutras* of the Supreme [meaning: the words of *Buddha Sakyamuni*], I think that they demonstrate the practices of Bodhisatvas, free from errors. However, the immense course of action of Bodhisatvas is difficult for someone of my level of ignorance to understand and realize. So I ask the Supreme Ones [the *Buddhas* and *Mahabodhisatvas*] to be patient with me and to pardon my [inaccurate] formulations, and whatever contradictions and inconsistencies may have [slipped my mind and] crept into this text.

By the merit that I have obtained through this effort, as well as through the power of the two *Bodhicittas*, relative and ultimate, may all sentient beings, crossing the limits of *samsara* and *Nirvana*, become like Bodhisatva *Avalokiteshvara*.