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on

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

GATSAL TEACHING

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In the next few editions of Gatsal we will go through a very important text on Lojong or mind training called the 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva. This was written in the 14th century by a monk named Thogmé Sangpo who was born in 1296 near to Sakya in western Tibet. From a very early age he exhibited great qualities of compassion and caring for others. There is a story from when he was just a toddler: children wore a fleece-lined chuba – kind of long jacket tied at the waist - and one time he went outside in winter and when he came back inside he was naked. His parents said to him, “What have you done with your chuba?” and he said, “Oh there is a being out there who was very cold”. So they went and looked outside and there was a bush which was covered in frost and so Thogmé had put his chuba over it to keep the bush warm.

His biography is full of these charming stories of how even as he grew older he went to immense trouble for the sake of others - especially those who were in difficult circumstances such as beggars, poor people and so forth. Thogmé became very learned and the Abbot of several monasteries. He was extremely well known and beloved in his day. He died in his sixties which was a good age by Tibetan standards since at that time people didn't live long. He wrote many books but the one which has become a classic in Tibetan literature is known as *Gyalse Lalen*. *Gyalse* means literally *sons of the victorious one*, meaning Bodhisattvas and *Lalen* means *a way of practising*. So it is usually translated as *The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva*.

Our nuns at the DGL Nunnery also study this text because it is accessible to anyone – monks, nuns, lay people whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist - because it deals, as all Lojong texts do, with *how* to make use of the difficult circumstances in our life, especially our own mental defilements which give us so much trouble, as well as the problems caused by others. Lojong texts show us how to make use of those difficulties by transforming them and taking them on the path. So it is a very practical text.

At first it might not sound very realistic for us ordinary people but actually the advice is *highly* practical since taking adverse circumstances and using them as our practice is very important for everybody.

I received a commentary on this text from the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, and also a short explanation by the Dalai Lama himself and also from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. But most of the verses are pretty obvious.

So as in most traditional texts the text starts with the invocation explaining for whom this text was composed. So he starts by saying *Namo Lokeshvaraya*. Lokeshvara means *Lord of the Worlds* which is another name for *Avalokiteshvara* or *Chenrezig* or *Kuan Yin*.

Chenrezig is the bodhisattva of compassion so an appropriate object of obeisance for a text dealing with the Bodhisattva's way

of compassion. Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom and he is invoked in those texts dealing with philosophy, logic and so forth, but those texts which are dealing with the heart and how to incorporate compassion into our daily lives invoke Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig.

So, the text reads:

*Though he sees that in phenomena there is no coming and going,
He strives solely for the sake of beings:*

Phenomena here is the word dharmas, meaning ordinary things, just outer things. As we all know in Buddhism there is a great emphasis on impermanence and the momentary nature of all outer and inner phenomena, that everything arises and disappears momentarily like a flowing river. It looks like the same river but moment to moment the water is changing, moving, moving, moving. So everything is like that, everything comes into being and disappears again, instantaneously, although in our perception it looks like a continuity.

So since impermanence is a very fundamental axiom of Buddhist thought we might ask why it says *he sees that in phenomena there is no coming and going?* Here it is dealing with ultimate reality. In our ordinary, relative way of seeing, things come and they go, things are up, they are down, things last forever or they disappear. But in ultimate reality all these dualities no longer pertain. So there is no coming and going, there is no higher and lower, there is no annihilation or endless existence. All these opposites, all these dualities are transcended in a state of how things truly are. So although Avalokitesvara is the Bodhisattva who represents compassion, his compassion is naturally from the point of view of his perfect wisdom.

The images of the 1000 armed Avalokitesvara which represent his endless compassionate activities on behalf of all beings, in each hand there is an eye which symbolises that he sees the situation accurately, both from an ordinary and from a transcendental level. So he knows *how* to act, or how *not* to act, because sometimes it is better to leave matters alone, even though we would like them changed. So he sees things with the total clarity of an enlightened mind therefore he sees that on an ultimate level there is no coming and going, that all *dharmas* are in a state of *suchness* which is beyond the temporal idea of the constant flow of phenomena.

The first line praises Avalokitesvara's wisdom, the second line relates to his compassion. So *because* he sees the transcendent, the ultimate, then on a relative level with compassion he constantly strives for the sake of others. It's very important that wisdom and compassion come together, otherwise we can be very compassionate but if we don't see things clearly, we often can mess things up. We have a good motivation but we don't understand the situation

because we see things very narrowly. But Chenrezig sees things vastly and just how they truly are. So from that *infinite* perspective he is able to *spontaneously* act in a way which is of ultimate and relative benefit for beings. He combines ultimate and relative truth.

Therefore, this is Chenrezig who is also the sublime teacher, meaning our root guru. Or you could think of His Holiness the Dalai Lama or the Gyalwang Karmapa who are also Chenrezig.

*To the sublime teacher inseparable from Avalokiteshvara,
the Protector of Beings,
I pay constant homage with respectful body, speech, and mind.*

In Buddhism we have the three doors meaning the body, the speech and the mind. So, we pay homage, why? To our teacher, who is inseparable from Chenrezig. The buddhas and bodhisattvas such as Chenrezig and Tara are not separate from us, they are our true nature. This is who we really are, if only we could see clearly. We think we are ordinary sentient beings but we are not. This is our tragedy.

But the teacher, a genuine realized being, *Lama*, understands that. It's not that they are inherently different from us and so in Buddhist meditations we absorb either the deity or the Lama or both together into ourselves, thinking that our minds and their minds are mixed together like water with water so that we *recognize* that there is no distinction. The distinction comes from our side. We think we are ordinary and they are special but that's part of our delusion and so we have to work away, cleaning and polishing. It's like a beautiful silver pot which is so thickly tarnished that it looks black. So we have to keep polishing until we get back to the silver which has never, in its essential nature been tarnished. However much outer gunk there might be around it, if we diligently clean then there it is, shining. This silver pot has been there all the time, it hasn't gone away and come back when we clean it, it is always there but we don't recognize it. All we see is the black covering. Whereas the great Mahabodhisattvas and the Lamas, the true genuinely realized Lamas, they are very much in contact with their silver base and they do not have tarnish in the way that we do. But the essential nature is the same, their silver is not better than our silver. This is very important to remember.

*The perfect buddhas – source of happiness and ultimate peace –
Exist through having accomplished the sacred Dharma,
And that, in turn, depends on knowing how to practice it;*

The buddhas like Shakyamuni Buddhas, on a relative level, had to strive for countless aeons in order to clear away the tarnish and come back to their true metal and how did they do that? All the buddhas of the universe, how did they become Buddhas? They became buddhas by actually practicing the Dharma. It is very important that we practice all this, that is why this text is so important.

We have to practice it, we can take it with us and use it, it's not high philosophy that we need to go away and think about, that is all up there somewhere in the sky. This text is absolutely down to earth, which we can all use, all day with whomever we meet, in fact we *need* to meet people because then we can practice.

*1. Now that I have this great ship, a precious human life, so hard
to obtain,
I must carry myself and others across the ocean of samsara.
To that end, to listen, reflect, and meditate
Day and night, without distraction, is the practice of a
bodhisattva.*

Samsara is sometimes described as a wheel but it is also very often likened to an ocean because just as an ocean has big waves so in samsara we are tossed up and down endlessly. Sometimes we're

up, sometimes we're down and then we're up again and we're down again. It's just endless and the problem is that we're caught in the waves and we're thrown up and we're thrown down and so we get very battered by life. Let us remember that all these waves going up and down are on the surface. If we go down into the depths of the ocean we come upon whole realms of calm and quiet, all the way down to the ocean bottom, with all sorts of fascinating fish and marine animals and monsters of the deep as we meditate. But mostly we are living our lives on the surface, tossed up and down by our thoughts and emotions, so in that circumstance, what do we need?

So we need a boat because even though the boat also goes up and down, we are not completely drenched and gradually the boat moves to the other shore. The Buddha himself many times talks about this shore and the other shore, the other shore being liberation. So to get to the other shore we need a boat, we can't just swim because it's too far and we get tossed up and down too much all by ourselves.

So therefore we need a boat to carry myself and others across the ocean of samsara. Now we have this great boat, which is the Dharma, but it is also this precious human life so hard to obtain. Every single one of us has a precious human birth. Now we might think, 'well billions of people have a precious human birth, so what?' But it's not true. A precious human birth does not mean just being born as a human. There are many categories which make a precious human birth – like being born in a Buddhist country, having all our faculties, having faith in the Dharma and finding a teacher and so forth. We are not born in the higher realms where everything is too pleasant that there is no incentive to practice and we are not born in the lower realms where there is so much misery and suffering that we are completely caught up in our own paranoia. Nor among the animals who, lovable as so many of them are, do not have the ability to really practice the spiritual path in this lifetime.

What makes a human birth precious? Think how unique we all are. For a start we can read, that's very rare in this world! But what is even more rare is that we can read and comprehend. Do you know how rare that is? Even among the Tibetan population, there are many monks who can read all the texts but they don't know what they mean. However we can pick up a book on Dharma and providing it's not too obtuse, we can get something out of it: the words have meaning. Certainly if we pick up an ordinary book on basic Dharma practices or biographies of Lamas or other great teachers, we can understand them easily, you can curl up with them.

Tibetans usually don't, apart from an advanced Geshe, a Geshe Lharampa or a good Khenpo, he wouldn't just sit down with a book, read it and enjoy it, only if he had already studied it. So we're all educated, we can understand concepts which we have not met with before, the mind can grapple with, can think about it. Here it says:

*To that end, to listen, reflect, and meditate
Day and night, without distraction, is the practice of a
bodhisattva.*

Well, day and night without distraction might be a bit much, but first we have to study. So back to this precious human birth. What makes this human birth so precious? We are all born in countries where we are allowed to think what we want. How many countries in the world we would not be allowed to think what we want. Where we could not just go and change our religion if we felt like it or read books on every kind of religion or go to Dharma Centres if we want to. In many countries of this world, either there are no Dharma Centres and even the word *Buddha* is never heard or even if there are Dharma Centres you are not permitted to go there because you belong to another religion. That's *much* more common than normally we are conscious of while living in India or America, Europe or Australia. But those are not the only countries in the world.

So we have our human birth and we are probably relatively healthy and anyway we can think, our minds are clear. We have the freedom to think what we want, to read what we want *and* above all, we have the interest in the Dharma. That is the most important of all. Do you realize how rare *that* is? I mean here we are in India, which is supposed to be a spiritual country. How many people are *really* interested in any Dharma? In the sense of really wanting to transform themselves, not just get the gods to make their children healthy and pass their exams and get more money and a better job, which is mostly what people pray to the gods for?

How many people go to the temple to pray for enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings? How many people even go to the temple to pray for the wellbeing and happiness of others outside of their family circle? So even to have some aspiration outside of our own self-interest is rare, very rare.

I was brought up as a Spiritualist and every week we had séances at our house. At that time I was around 7 or 8 years old. Even at that young age I noticed everyone was asking these spirit guides, “My Aunt Edith is having an operation next week, is she going to be alright?” or all the time wanting to get in contact with someone who had died and I thought “Here we’ve got these people on the Other Side, let’s ask them something of *meaning*. They might know or they might have a different angle on it.” So I asked them “Well is there a God?” I thought they might know. The spirit guides replied “Well of course we don’t really know, but what’s going round in the spirit realms is that God isn’t a person, but ultimately there is light and love and intelligence.” So I thought, “Yeah I’ll buy that.”

Ultimately there is light and love and intelligence in this universe. And we are it, we carry that within us, its not just something out there, it is within us. This is what we are trying to re-connect with, our original light and love and intelligence, which is who we really are. So it is important not to get so distracted by extraneous things, but to really remember what we are here on this planet for. Why having this precious human body is so *precious* because if we waste our life again. Otherwise we are living basically like a well-trained animal – what do animals want to do? For instance our dogs at the DGL Nunnery, they want to be fed, they want to be comfortable, when it’s cold they snuggle up in the sheltered places, when it’s warm they go lie in the sun, when it gets too hot they go and lie in the shade again, they want to be comfortable. They want to eat nice food, and if they’ve not been neutered, then they want to mate. If a strange dog comes by who looks threatening, they will fight them to preserve their territory, but if it’s a doggy friend, then they will play around together.

Well, if we lead our lives basically on that level, we might as well have come back as a pet dog. In fact, in New York there are more pet shops than there are beauty parlors! Pets have become like children really, all these pets with their little bows, their little tiaras and their little jackets. Anyway, the point is, if all we want is to be comfortable and petted, loved and admired, then we might as well come back as a poodle because we have *wasted* our human birth. It is very hard to get a well endowed human birth which has the freedoms and the endowments and if we waste this opportunity now, it will be difficult to regain that in the future.

All the causes and conditions have come together because of our past efforts in other lifetimes, so if we don’t make efforts in this lifetime it’s going to get lost again, because we are not making the right causes and conditions. So now is the time because in the future, we don’t know.

Now, the Dharma is here, the teachers are still here, the books are still here, we have the freedom to listen and practice, nobody is stopping us. So if we don’t make *full* use of this opportunity, then next time, who knows and even later in our life, who knows. The only time we can be certain of in our lives is right now, so this is

very important.

What we have to do is *listen, reflect and meditate*. First, we have to accumulate the knowledge, we have to listen. Traditionally in the Buddha’s time, things were not written down, so therefore in the sutras they always talked about listening because they didn’t have books. So first of all is to listen, this includes reading, studying, downloading off the internet, all of that, any acquisition of knowledge is considered listening. So it means to study the dharma. We take it in, we read about it, we hear about it, then we have to *think* about it. It’s not enough that we just take it in. It’s like food, we take a bite but then we have to chew it in order to digest, we don’t just swallow it in great big lumps! So we have to think about what we have read, what we have heard and really try to understand. If we have doubts, that’s fine, no problem, we do not have to believe blindly, it says that we have to believe because we understand. So if you don’t believe something then put it aside for a while, or go and study more.

Almost every year when I was staying in Lahaul I would go and see my Lama, the former Khamtrul Rinpoche, and I always had a long list of questions from my retreat. I used to keep a piece of paper beside me and when a thought, a question would come up then I could write it down and forget about it, I didn’t have to keep it going in my mind. So when I went to see my Lama he would lean back and say, “Where’s your list?” and I would bring out the pages with all my questions. I think Rinpoche kind of enjoyed it because the questions went up and down and all over the place and occasionally he said “Oh nobody ever asked that before, I have to think, hmmm.”

But some things I just really didn’t believe and he would say “It doesn’t matter, just put that to the side for now” and sometimes he would laugh and say “Everything you read in the books isn’t true” and he even said, “Well we just write like that to frighten people into being good!” But the point is that one doesn’t have to just believe everything because otherwise we’re frightened that a thunderbolt from heaven is going to come down and hit us! It’s not that, it’s an intelligent believe, a belief based on our own reasoning.

Sometimes I call Buddhism *enlightened common sense* because once we hear it, we think, ‘yes, that makes sense’. But if we hear and think, “hmm that doesn’t sound right”, then put it aside or maybe study more about it. Maybe we didn’t understand it or maybe it was just a provisional truth which isn’t ultimate truth anyway. Perhaps it was just what people believed in society at that time. We don’t all have to believe that the world is flat with Mount Meru and the four continents but that is the kind of cosmology that was current in those days. Nowadays nobody gets burnt at the stake for believing that the world is round. The world is round, the world is flat, in any case it’s all empty!

So think things through, really try to understand, and if we don’t understand, then read more about it, think more about it, ask questions. Reflection is a very crucial part of the Dharma. Then, most important of all it says *meditate*. But actually the word *Gompa* literally means to become accustomed to or familiar with something. So what we have to do then is practice it, put our ideas into action. One of my Lamas said: first you hear and study, then you think about it, then you *become* it. And that’s the point. It goes from the head down into the heart and we transform. Then spontaneously what we say, what we think and what we do comes naturally from our understanding.

This is very important, because otherwise mere learning is not going to help us. One time I went to see Trijang Rinpoche, who was the Junior Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his first question of course was “Who is your Lama?” and I said Khamtrul Rinpoche and he replied, “Ah, Kagyu! Well the thing with the Kagyupas is that they practice, that’s the emphasis with the Kagyus” and he turned to his secretary and he said “At the time of death

what is going to help us – a head full of book knowledge or genuine understanding and realization in the heart? You know, we don't need to study so much, what we need is to study, understand what we have read and then *really* practice it and put it into our heart, *that* is what is going to help us." Otherwise it is just endlessly learning, learning, learning while nothing inside is transforming. Someone says something nasty to us and we get all upset and defensive and think "How can they do this to me?" Then what is the use of all this learning? We haven't learned anything.

So it's *very* important, these three things. First we have to study to know what we are trying to do, then to really *think* it through so that we *really* understand it and then incorporate it in our lives and become it. So we've got work ahead.

Day and night, without distraction, is the practice of a bodhisattva.

That means whatever happens, even if we are watching a movie, try to see it from a Dharma point of view. It's quite terrifying, how much people act out their emotional defilements and negativities and without anyone ever thinking there's a problem here. It's supposed to be a romantic drama so there is all the attachment, all the jealousy and all the anger. The point is, whatever situation we find ourselves in we should at the same time be observing it with clarity of mind and openness of heart and in this way, day and night we are *constantly* practicing the way of a bodhisattva. There are not times off if you are a bodhisattva. It's 24 hours, seven days a week – what can I say?

We shouldn't be too frightened by these verses.

*2. In my native land waves of attachment to friends and kin surge,
Hatred for enemies rages like fire,*

*The darkness of stupidity, not caring what to adopt or avoid,
thickens –*

To abandon my native land is the practice of a bodhisattva.

This verse does not just refer to our outer native land. It doesn't just mean that we all have to go across the world in order to practise, because we take our mind with us and it's our mind which has all this attachment and hatred and the darkness of our unknowing.

On the one hand, people get locked into habitual relationships. How often people are reacting to each other due to old habits without even really thinking about it any more. So many negativities come up because it's just the way they act and talk to each other nowadays since it's much *easier* to do that with people with whom we are familiar. Maybe in childhood we had already started up the patterns and so these continue on and on.

In that way it's good to be able to get away and maybe get some new perspective through being in a different environment where we can try to incorporate better ways of dealing with people. But the problem really is, our 'native land' means our ordinary habitual responses, this is what we have to leave behind. So the way to leave them behind is first to be conscious of them.

The waves of attachment that surge within and around us: we are lost floundering in this huge ocean of caring about people and worrying about them and fearing they are going to leave us and then happy again when they tell us that they love us.... Parents with their children, couples in relationships, all of this, there's so much going on that it's very rare to relax in a calm quiet lake. Mostly the waves of our hopes and fears send us surging up and down. It is all our attachment. Attachment doesn't mean love, there's a huge difference between love and attachment. The Buddha said the cause of our suffering, of our *Dukkha* is attachment, clinging and grasping. But love and compassion which are *essential* qualities on the path are very different, actually the opposite of attachment and grasping. It's one of the most difficult points for

us as ordinary sentient beings to really be able to understand and make that distinction because in our society we believe that the more we are attached the more loving we are. But it is simply not true. Attachment is a tricky one but basically attachment means *I want you to make me happy and to feel good* and love says *I want you to be happy and feel good*. It doesn't say anything about me. If being with me makes you feel happy and good, wonderful, if not then so be it. The important thing is that love allows us to hold things very gently instead of grasping tightly. It's an important difference, really it's a very important difference.

Therefore I tell again and again the story of my mother. My father died when I was two, so he was out of the picture and my mother brought up my brother and me by herself, Then my brother was in the Royal Air Force in Malaysia, so there was only me left at home and my mother and I got along very well. She also was interested in Buddhism and happy to entertain whatever Lamas or monks that were in London at that time. We would go to Dharma meetings together. Then when I was nineteen I got a letter from India telling me that there was work for me and to come. I remember running through the streets to meet my mother who was coming from work, and saying to her "Oh, I am going to India!" And she replied "Oh yes dear. And when are you leaving?" She didn't gasp "You're going to India! How can you leave me, your own poor mother! I'll be all by myself with no-one to take care of me and look after me as I'm getting old!" Nothing of that - she never said that ever. That's not because she didn't love me but because she *did* love me and she wanted what was right for me, even if it did not include her. And afterwards when I was in India, every *ten* years she would write, "If I send you a return ticket, will you come back for a month?" and so every ten years, I went back for a month, saw my mother and came back again. She also came to India for one year, she *loved* India – it was very different from now. She loved it, she loved the Indians, loved the Tibetans, but she got sick from the food so she had to go home to England. But that was love.

There's an Australian cartoonist called *Leunig* and he did a series on how to respect and show love for others and one of his examples was holding a day old chick in your hands that you hold very carefully, very gently because if you grasp it - no more chick! So it's like that.

Love is this outpouring of caring and wishing well, wishing the other to be happy, but not with yourself stuck right in the middle of it. Not grasping: *I want you to be happy but that's only if it includes me*.

So therefore because we get so caught up especially with our families and it is very hard to be unattached to family, then it is given as the example for leaving the homeland. However it doesn't necessarily mean that we have to leave home. What it does mean is that we have to start thinking in a different way about our loved ones. In a way that *genuinely* cherishes them and wishes them well but allows them to be who they are without trying to manipulate them or make them say and do what *we* want them to do because that would make *me* happy. Just allowing them to be who *they* are, giving them the freedom to have *their* life, whether or not that includes us.

So we start with those we are close to, this is who we practice on. We practice on those that we love and those that we are close to, how to love them without grasping, how to *genuinely* love them, *as they are, whatever they are*. I remember when I was 15 or 16 my mother one day out of the blue, she just said to me 'I want you to know that there is *nothing* you could ever do that would cause me not to love you.' That's love. I wasn't *doing* anything but I appreciated the thought and I knew it was true. Whatever we do, our mother is there for us but without trying to manipulate, just allowing us to be who we are and loving that.