

GATSAL

TEACHING

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on

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

Part III

Deer Park Institute
Easter Weekend - April 2012

6. Through reliance on a true spiritual friend one's faults will fade

And good qualities will grow like a waxing moon -

To consider him even more precious

Than one's own body is the practice of a bodhisattva.

So the verse five dealt with people who are bad company for us and then this next verse is dealing with good friends. Now of course the ultimate good friends are like the Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas and one's spiritual teachers. They are obviously the kind of company we should hang out with. But it doesn't mean just that. It also means other companions on the path, whichever path they are going on, if it is a good path, and who can therefore demonstrate for us genuine goodness.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama again and again talks about cultivating a good heart and this is what we are trying to do here. We are trying to cultivate the good heart. So therefore we should try to associate as much as possible with people who are good-hearted. Because then that reminds us. When we're not feeling so very good hearted, we recognize that these good friends would not have acted like that. Then we can improve ourselves again. This is about changing and improving. So we have to encourage ourselves and one of the ways is to be surrounded as much as possible, - or at least associate with whenever possible - with people who exemplify what we are trying to aim for. To remind us that's how it can be.

It is very helpful to be with people who value the things we value and are sincerely striving towards overcoming their negative qualities and cultivating the positive qualities. Especially to associate as much as possible with those who are much further along the path than we ourselves are. This will be a big inspiration for us all.

Why does everybody love the Dalai Lama? Because he so completely exemplifies what a genuine human being should be like. He's just how everyone wishes they could be, if only.... Because he's a man not only of great wisdom and compassion, but also of great integrity. As he walks by a line of people, he looks into their eyes, he takes their hand for two seconds and their lives are transformed! Because in that moment not only have they met with a genuine bodhisattva in the flesh, but they have been looked at by someone who totally accepts them as

they are, and loves them unconditionally. Whoever they are, they know that. His Holiness doesn't care who you are. He just looks straight into your Buddha nature, and acknowledges that. That's why even a brief encounter is so powerful, even though they only meet him for two seconds. Other people we can be with for hours but so what? But His Holiness and great Lamas or other spiritual beings of that calibre, that's the effect they have on people. Because they are so genuine.

The Buddha said, "What I think I say, and what I say I do. This I can say for myself," such perfect integrity! So as much as possible, we should not only try to exemplify that in our own life, but also associate with good friends, because they will always remind us of our own potential and where we're going. Sometimes just reading these things in books, it all becomes a bit distant, far away. But when we actually see somebody who embodies these qualities, then we recognize it's possible. They're human beings; I'm a human being. Why not?

When the Tibetans first arrived in exile in India there were many great Lamas who had been trained in Tibet. Of course they were very traditional. They didn't speak English and most of the Westerners who came to see them at that time didn't speak Tibetan. So there wasn't much you could do. You just sat there. But that was all that was needed. People would meet these masters and think, "Well I don't know what you believe, but I'm going for it," because these Lamas were the personification of a perfect human being. Here was the embodiment our own great potential sitting in front of us, smiling away. Not saying anything. Not doing anything, but just being. And that was enough.

The Indians have the custom of darshan, which means "seeing." So you just go in, you sit there and you look at the guru. The guru doesn't do anything. He just sits there, being the guru. If it's a genuine master, then that is enough. Of course there are a lot of charlatans too.

"Through reliance on a true spiritual friend one's faults will fade, and good qualities will grow like a waxing moon." This means that if we are under the guidance of a genuine teacher, then that teacher will help by pointing out our faults and encouraging our virtues. They might not necessarily speak about our faults, but in some way they will create situations where our faults come to the surface and we can see them. In

that kind of nurturing atmosphere it's very much like being in a hot house where plants will grow much better because they are in a conducive environment set up exactly for their growth.

But even if we don't happen to have any particular spiritual teacher at this time, still one can cultivate meeting with people who are an inspiration and who genuinely embody the teachings. Even if we don't have a personal relationship, nonetheless just to be in their presence is very helpful. Again, on a more relative level, to also try to be selective with our ordinary friends and to be as much as possible with people who share the same values. Because otherwise, as I say, we get very badly influenced and can get ourselves into a lot of trouble.

The spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism is considered very important. One reason is because, as with any skill, if we want to learn properly, it's better if we have a teacher. If we want to be a musician, learn football or cricket, understand computers, it's obviously better if we have a trained teacher who is going to tell us what to do and what not to do. Not only does it make learning quicker, but also by ourselves we might pick up all sorts of bad habits which we're not conscious of, and which later down the road will create a big obstacle to really mastering our skill. Whereas, if at the beginning we have a good teacher, then they can say, "No, don't do it that way. Look, do it like this." Or encourage us when we do things right. So, in this way, it's very helpful. We don't make so many mistakes and we make much quicker progress. Also because we develop more confidence that we are doing it right.

So if this is true for learning practical skills, what to speak of truly understanding and transcending the conceptual mind. We need guidance to intuit the nature of the mind and then to stabilize that realization. Also not to be carried away when experiences come up and we think we're already enlightened! For that we need a teacher. It's very hard to do it on our own actually, or just to learn from books. Books can get us started and they can be very helpful and nowadays a lot of teachings can be downloaded off the internet. But it can never replace a personal relationship if we can get it. The problem is getting it. Finding teachers who are genuinely qualified is not so easy. Even if they are a genuine teacher, then they've usually got a whole organization around them to protect them from seeing anybody and they are running around the globe constantly setting up their Dharma centers. So, it's actually quite a challenge. Many people come to me complaining because they do not have a teacher. Then the other half come along complaining because they do have a teacher!

So it's difficult, it's quite a minefield. But for those who are genuinely serious, it's very helpful to have personal guidance on the path if you can find it, because without a teacher it is an incredibly difficult process to turn our ordinary samsaric mind into a Buddha mind, in fact it is almost impossible. But in the meantime that doesn't mean that we have to sit around waiting for the perfect Lama to appear. I often say to people that with an untamed mind, what can anybody do? Even if the Buddha himself were sitting in front of us, all he could say is "practice." That we can all do.

Imagine that the mind is like a wild horse. Absolutely wild but we can see the potential in that horse. It's a good horse only it's wild. We want it to go this way, so it goes that way. We want it to go up, so it goes down. Anybody who's sat in meditation for five minutes knows what we're talking about. The mind is a

wild horse. But it has great potential to be trained. However it cannot be trained until it is tamed. We cannot train a wild horse. First we have to tame it. Taming it means that the horse quiets down, becomes trusting and interested in what we want it to do. It becomes friendly, cooperative, amenable. Then we can start to train it. We can teach the horse to do anything within the capacities of what is possible for a horse. Once the horse has agreed within itself that it wants to cooperate. But as long as it does not want to collaborate, we cannot train it.

So likewise with the mind, we start with Shamatha practice to allow the mind to quieten down and become calm and single-pointed. In Tibetan it's called Lesu-rungwa, which means "workable." Make the mind workable, flexible, cooperative. Nobody can do that for us and it wastes your teacher's time to wait while we try to get our mind into some kind of condition where he can really teach us. This we can do for ourselves. Get the mind calmed down, more clear, more conscious. Develop the qualities of being mindful and being inwardly vigilant, alert, knowing what's going on in the mind. Having the power of attention that if we want to stay here, the mind will just rest here, instead of going off everywhere else. This takes time with patience and perseverance. So whether or not we have teachers, all of us can learn to tame the mind. Once the mind is tamed, then it can be trained.

Practising even the highest Anuttara yoga tantras with a distracted mind is a waste of time. Sorry but it won't get us anywhere. In order for our practices to work, the mind has to completely merge with the practice and become one with it. Otherwise there's the practice and the mind trying to make contact for a few seconds and then the attention goes off again. Then it's not going to accomplish much.

So step one is to learn how to make the mind workable. That alone is a huge step forward. We can do this, but nobody else can do it for us. We all of us have to struggle with that. However as one great Lama said, "If you have good shamatha practice, then the rest of the Dharma is in the palm of your hands." Because the rest of the Dharma, whatever we want to do - we can do it. The mind will merge with what we're doing and become one with it. So then the results will come very quickly. Otherwise, as the books say - if we don't have a concentrated mind, then even if we recite mantras for a million aeons, the results will not come. Which is obvious, if we think about it. Everybody is so interested in all these high practices which we can't do properly because the base is not there. It's like wanting to build a golden roof when there are no foundations and no walls.

*7. Whom can worldly gods protect,
Themselves imprisoned in samsara?
To take refuge in the Three Jewels
Who never fail those they protect is the practice of a bodhisattva*

So, the first verses were basically presenting us with the problem and now comes the solution. This is the situation we're in, so how do we get out?

In many parts of the world there are two levels of devotion for the people. There is the official religion and then there is what most people actually believe in. You see it here also in India, for example in Hinduism where there are the Higher Gods such as Shiva, Krishna, Saraswati and so forth and then there are what are called the local gods.

Actually Himachal Pradesh is full of local gods which we may or may not see. Every village has its local god. For example in the town of Mandi at the time of Shivratri (the nights of Shiva) all the local gods, about 150 of them, gather from the local villages into Mandi. All these gods are usually related to each other, they are cousins, brothers, sisters, so they are very happy to meet each other. They are carried on palanquins something like a stretcher with the poles borne on the shoulders by the male devotees. The deities themselves are just faces made in bronze. Sometime special ones are in silver. The faces are usually peaceful, occasionally slightly wrathful. The main deities and the attendant deities are wrapped up in silks and brocades. These palanquins sometimes sway and jump around as though animated by the devata. The village men carry long horns which they blow and sometimes people are dancing. Anyway, these are devatas. These are the local lower deities who are vowed to protect the various villagers, especially those who have faith in them. Usually the devata has somebody who acts as a medium and channels them, so that people go to them with questions and problems. They respond and if they can, they give advice, protection or benefits.

However ultimately, what can they do? They are themselves trapped in samsara. They can try to give some mundane benefits, if they are propitiated and pleased. They can also get very angry. When we first started our nunnery, for the first few years we had several cases of our nuns becoming possessed by the local spirit of their village who did not like them to be Buddhist nuns and they were really in a bad state.

For example, one nun had had a difficult birth with complications, so her family had made offerings to the local devata and as a result she was born safely. Then the devata said "Now she belongs to me, so she should serve me." So she had to go there and help with the pujas and then she left and became a nun, so the local god was very upset. He said that she couldn't go to the Buddha because she belonged to him. Then apparently he would possess her, and she would act very strangely and this created a lot of problems. In the end we had to do a ceremony for propitiating the devata and finally we sent her home.

There are a lot of these lower gods and it's not that they are spiritually superior. They are superior insofar as they don't have a body and do have a certain amount of clairvoyance but they are often jealous and proud, they get angry easily. In fact they are very temperamental, attached to those they like and nasty to those they don't like. In other words, they are very samsaric beings.

The reason people honour them is because they are easy to contact. It is not hard to build up a relationship with them, whereas it's very difficult to make contact with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or Shiva and Vishnu or even Jesus Christ, because they are so far beyond us. It's more difficult to feel their care. Whereas these local deities are quite close to us. So, we can have a relationship with them. In Thailand also, every garden has a spirit house for the local devata and I'm sure in South America, Africa or Australia, people have relationship with these entities, it's a worldwide phenomenon. But they are samsaric beings.

So to place our refuge - our hopes and trust - onto a samsaric being like that is a big mistake, because they cannot help us get beyond samsara. All they can do is sometimes help us, depending on our karma, in worldly matters. Both in India and in Tibet there are many of these local spirits who

could be propitiated.

Where I lived in the Himalayas it was the case that in the monasteries built high on the hills, everybody was doing Buddhist ritual. But down in the villages below they were performing the shamanic rituals of their own local spirits and gods. So therefore this is not just something which was relevant 800 years ago but not anymore, because still people rely on practices which look like giving quick returns. The Three Jewels seem like something very remote. But we must remember the Three Jewels are not there just to help us pass our exams or to make our sick relations better. Beyond that, they are to get us out of samsara. Only beings who are themselves beyond samsara can help us to likewise go beyond. Beings still trapped in samsara cannot do that. So therefore:

*Whom can worldly gods protect,
Themselves imprisoned in samsara?*

These worldly gods are already imprisoned, they are not free, so how can they give us the key to get out when they themselves are still locked inside?

*To take refuge in the Three Jewels
Who never fail those they protect
is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

"Never fail those they protect" doesn't mean that if we're having trouble with our business and we pray to the Three Jewels, we're going to hit the right market. It doesn't mean that. What it means is that if we sincerely believe in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and we sincerely practice, this Refuge won't let us down. Our practice will definitely flourish. Our ability to come closer and closer to a liberated mind will definitely happen. It's not that the Dharma - itself being truth - can let us down, but our own practice of it can let us down.

The Dharma itself cannot fail us, because it is how things really are. So therefore it's not that we go so far and then think: "Oh, this is just a lot of nonsense." It won't fail us. So the protection which the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha gives is to the mind. It protects our mind. How it protects our mind is what is explained in the verses to follow. These are concerned with how to use the adverse circumstances which we are likely to meet in samsara and transform those into our opportunities for practice. That's where the mind is protected, because it can never be crushed. Because we have the methods by which we can always surmount, transcend and transform the difficulties which we meet with. This is one way that the Three Jewels are a protection for our own mind.

If we sincerely practice from our heart, we will be able to cope with even the most awful thing that could happen to us. In fact it might be the opening that we have all been looking for. The Buddha himself is not going to appear waving a sword to defeat all our enemies, but if we ourselves transform our mind from within, we don't have any enemies. In that way, we are protected. So therefore the foundation of the Buddhist path is to take Refuge. Of course nowadays many people practice Buddhist techniques, especially meditation, tonglen meditations, and they read many Dharma books without actually becoming Buddhist. This is also good, because one of the beauties of the Buddhist path is that it can be adapted to individual needs -

even in order to lower blood pressure, reduce stress levels and make one feel a bit better. That's wonderful, but that's not what the Dharma is all about.

The Dharma is not just to make us feel better, in fact it might make us feel worse initially. But the Dharma helps us to overcome the inner poisons of our mind and to connect with our true nature and so become free. To become liberated, so that we are really able to benefit other beings. It helps us to get beyond this egoistic self-absorption in which most of us are drowning. So, although Buddhist ideas can be used as a good therapy, they can also be used as a boost for other people's spiritual paths. Many Christians (including priests and nuns) practice Buddhist meditation, and it makes them better Christians. This is wonderful.

This is why we all rejoice. This helps us become better people and that's what is important. Nonetheless, from a Buddhist perspective, the first step is the belief and trust in the Buddha Dharma Sangha. What does this mean? Well, traditionally the Buddha is considered to be the supreme physician, the ultimate doctor, because we are all poisoned by our negative emotions, especially our greed and attachment, anger and aversion, our jealousy and pride, and the underlying quality of our delusory lack of understanding. We don't recognize who we really are. We will go into this more later, but this underlying grasping at a false identity - who we are not - and not recognizing who we really are, is the cause of all these other poisons. So we're sick with afflictive emotions and that's why we are not always endlessly bubbling over with happiness. Because we are ill.

Then the Buddha says, "Yes you have a big crisis but there's a reason why you're so sick." The underlying cause is the grasping, clinging, attached mind based on our wrong perception of our identity, which creates a lot of problems. The Buddha said that suffering is birth, old age, sickness and death; not getting what we want and getting what we do not want. In fact it is the whole quandary of living tossed up and down in the ocean of existence called samsara. If the Buddha had left it at that saying "Well it's your problem, because you're grasping too much," then indeed Buddhism would be very pessimistic.

But, of course, he didn't. He then said: "Good news! Ultimately you are perfectly healthy, and what is more, there is a cure!" There is a therapy we could follow and then we would become so healthy, we won't believe it. The therapy is the Noble Eightfold Path which basically encompasses the whole of Dharma. So the Buddha is like the doctor. If we are really sick, we don't want to go to a doctor who says there's nothing wrong with us, because we know there's something wrong, otherwise we wouldn't have gone to a doctor.

But if the doctor tells us the reason why we're sick, and assures us there is a cure and that if we follow the treatment we are going to be healthier and healthier, then we are very grateful to that doctor. Here the Dharma is the medicine which we take, and that helps to cure us.

Basically there are three levels of meaning to the word Sangha. Here it means the Arya or Noble Sangha, comprising those - whether monastics or lay people - who actually have had a genuine perception of reality. In the Tibetan tradition this is realization of emptiness or shunyata. At that point one becomes an Arya, which means a noble one. That is the Sangha to whom we go for refuge because they know what

they're doing. They are like nurses who have been trained, they are not qualified as doctors, but they have experience and they can help with our treatment.

The second level of the Sangha is the monastic Sangha which means all those who are ordained and receive vows as monks or nuns. The third level is the Maha Sangha or Great Sangha. The Buddha talked a lot about the fourfold Sangha and said that in order for a country to be a genuine Buddhist country, it had to contain the fourfold Sangha which comprises the community of fully ordained monks, fully ordained nuns, of laymen and laywomen. When there is both the monastic Sangha together with the lay followers, then that is stable like a table with four legs.

One of the arguments for introducing the full ordination of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism as well as in Thailand, Burma and so forth, is that according to the Buddha's own classification, these are not really Buddhist countries, because they only have three of the four constituents needed to make a Maha Sangha, a great Sangha. They don't have fully ordained nuns. Therefore they are not, as far as the classification is concerned, genuine Buddhist countries.

So going for refuge to Buddha Dharma Sangha is a ceremony which has existed since the time of the Buddha himself. Again and again in the Pali canon when people came to the Buddha and he gives a discourse and answers their questions, the text ends by having them say: "From here until life ends, I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha." In all Buddhist countries until now, the threefold refuge is always still recited usually at the beginning of any ceremony.

So in Buddhism we take refuge, and this can remind us to place the Dharma at the centre of our life, instead of being at the periphery when we have a bit of spare time. We are practising the Dharma whatever we are doing. So considering that, this text is very beautiful and useful because it's dealing with the kind of situations which come up in everyday life and how to transform them into a Dharma practice. So it's a very valuable text. This is not something abstract dealing with higher philosophy nor the advanced levels of meditation. It's just dealing with everyday kind of problems and challenges where we need to know how to respond in a way which is genuinely skillful and can help us to transform our heart-mind.

This kind of teachings came from Jowo Atisha who came to Tibet in the 11th century. Atisha was a Bengali scholar or pandit who was invited into Tibet to help restore the Buddha Dharma which had become corrupted and weak due to previous persecution. He saw that advanced tantric teachings were probably not so appropriate for the kind of minds Tibetans had in those days. What they needed was to get back to the basic principles again and work on their attitudes and motivation. Therefore he very much emphasized refuge and bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is the aspiration to attain enlightenment so that one can be of real benefit and use for other beings. Atisha founded the Kadampa tradition and subsequent teachers also emphasized these basic principles again and again. It is like a heavy piece of dough that we have to knead continually until it becomes soft and flexible and is ready to be used. Our minds are like that heavy dough and we need to keep practising until the mind lightens up and becomes flexible and pliant.