

GATSAL

TEACHING

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on

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

Part IV

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8. The Buddha taught that the unendurable suffering of the lower realms is the fruit of non-virtuous actions, therefore never to act unvirtuously even at the cost of one's life is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

So this verse is dealing with karma. Now it seems that karma for some people is a problem. Actually I was shocked when I was in America attending a conference of Western Buddhist teachers of all the various schools. At one point the question was asked "How many of you believe in karma and rebirth? How many believe in other realms of being?" Less than half of these Buddhist teachers acknowledged a belief in rebirth or karma! But if one does not even believe in rebirth it makes nonsense of the whole Buddhist path. The Dharma is basically reduced to a therapy to make this life more tolerable. With such narrow vision there is no place for bodhichitta.

Simply stated, the Buddhist view is that - at the conventional level - we have all experienced thousands if not millions of rebirths in every possible realm we can imagine. Not just as humans but as animals, in the spirit realms, in higher realms and lower realms. We should remember that if we met ourselves in our last lifetime, we wouldn't know ourselves at all. It's not me that gets reborn.

If we could see ourselves in the next lifetime, who would that be? I will be a completely different being. But that being is also thinking "me". So we don't have to cling too tightly to our personal identity, there is just a stream of consciousness going forward which as long as we do believe in an "I", it will be endless. Somebody one time said, "Well, how can we ever end it, since we are always doing actions with our body, speech and mind?" The master explained with a mala or rosary of beads. Taking a bead, he said, "All right, we do this act, thinking 'I did this' and then that bead pulls the next bead which pulls the next bead, they just keep following, one after the other after the other. So what to do? Well, obviously we need to cut the thread,

then we pull one bead but the other beads don't move. They are just left behind. The thread is the belief in an 'I' who did the action."

As long as we believe *I* performed this, *I* did this, *I* said that, then that's the thread which keeps the karma coming along with us. This is important because it is the reason why in Buddhism we can be liberated. Once we realise the emptiness of our false identification with a sense of *me* and *mine* - the spider in the middle of the web - once that is gone, then although one may act beautifully and appropriately and spontaneously as buddhas and the great bodhisattvas do, there is no centre of *I* in there. So karma is not being made. Karma or action depends on an *actor*. So long as we believe "I" am doing something, there are seeds which are being sown, and if we think of all of our past endless lifetimes, we've done everything: good, bad and indifferent. You name it.

We've taken on so many roles, in so many lifetimes, and all the seeds of our intentional actions of body, speech and mind have been accumulating in what is called the substratum consciousness, so when the time comes, when the causes and conditions come together, certain seeds will sprout. We don't know which seeds nor when or how. But it's never arbitrary, there are always causes and conditions there, which was something we did at some point. So that's why bad things happen to good people and fantastically good things happen to really awful people. It's not that there is someone up there judging us and meting out rewards and punishments. It's just that at certain times certain things will come up in dependence on past causes.

We can't do much about that. We can do some purificatory practices, but there are endless seeds to be purified. Perhaps the best purificatory practice is to take whatever happens onto the path. Moment to moment we are creating our future in dependence on how we respond to what is happening in this moment. So it's like a tapestry which we are endlessly weaving.

Sometimes as a result of responding positively to

difficult circumstances, we turn what looks like something negative into something positive. From a very simplistic point of view we say good and bad, because we think good is when things go according to our wishes and bad is when they don't. But actually from a more expansive point of view, it's hard to know what is good and what is bad.

Often people look back at their lives and see the times of most difficulty and challenge, like sickness or losing a loved one or being made redundant: and they realise that that was often a wake-up call. That was when they got their inner strength to deal with the situation, and looking back later, they can see that they learned so much from that time and they are grateful for it now.

Whereas, during all the good times, although that is very nice, still one tends to free float and not make much effort to change. It's often harder to take the good times onto the path than the bad times. Therefore even the higher celestial realms are considered spiritually to be a dead end, simply because there is no challenge. When everything is already so nice, why bother to strive?

So therefore, when the text talks here about good karma and bad karma we have to understand this is also in a very conventional sense. Nonetheless it is considered that when difficulties come, especially sickness and poverty and the many problems that appear in our life, this is the result of negative actions which were performed in this life or former lives. Now those seeds have come up so then we need to respond skillfully and take this on the path. Then that negative karma transforms into good karma.

I had a friend who was an Australian nun, quite young, and she had breast cancer of which she subsequently died. She said that one time she was sitting feeling very sorry for herself thinking "Why did this happen to me?" She had led a healthy life and eaten all the right foods, had all the right thoughts, so why was this happening? Then she said she had a kind of waking vision, in which she was male and felt she was a crusader, wearing a white tunic garment with a big red cross, and she was standing over the body of a prostrate soldier, the enemy, and she had a big sword pointed at his heart. He was begging for his life. She knew she had a choice: she could forgive him or she could kill him. Then she thrust the sword straight down into his heart. She came back into everyday consciousness and felt her question was answered. Now, whether or not it was so, the fact is that through the ages, there are thousands or even millions of people who have killed other people and animals. From a karmic point of view we have to accept the results of those actions.

The important thing therefore is not to worry what is going to happen to us, but to create the inner strength so that whatever does happen we can deal with it. We will be able to take it on the path with us. So something which outwardly looks very negative, can inwardly be exactly what we need as a real help and aid to our practice.

This is so important, and this is what this text is all about. How we should be dealing with all the nasty things which

can happen to us. It's like going to a gymnasium because we are out of condition. There are all these exercise machines designed to challenge our muscles. If it's too easy, we adjust the machine to make it more difficult, to make it more challenging, otherwise how are we going to get strong?

Any trainer when they see us will immediately evaluate : your arms are Okay, but your legs are really weak, and so let's do some the exercises for developing your legs and get them strong!" We don't think, "Well since my legs are weak, it's no use going to the gym." We go to the gym *because* our legs are weak.

So we practice the Dharma because we need to get strong. It's no good telling ourselves "Oh this is impossible, I can't do this, I'm too weak." It's because we are weak that we need these texts to help us develop those inner spiritual muscles, so that whatever happens to us, we can deal with it. Then there is no hope and fear because whatever occurs, we would take it on the path.

This is what *lojong* is all about: developing the confidence and the qualities so that whatever happens to us in our lives, we will gratefully use it as our practice. Instead of moaning and complaining and feeling sorry about ourselves, we appreciate that this is our opportunity to practice properly. It is pointless to be a fair weather Buddhist: when the sun is shining we can practice, as soon as it starts storming, we run for cover.

The Buddha taught that the unendurable suffering of the lower realms is a fruit of non virtuous actions,

The lower realms of course are the hell realms, the realms of unsatisfied spirits, and the animal realms. The hell realms are as Shantideva pointed out in the *Bodhicharyavatara*: "Who created the red-hot floors and the demons who torture the beings there? All these are created by the perverted mind."

We live in a world of our own projections. When we are happy, everything is sunny. When we are depressed, the brightest day is gloomy. Since we have an apparent physical basis, which according to quantum physics is neither physical nor as apparent as we assume, our projections are not totally subjective. As humans we are all equipped with certain kinds of sense organs and consciousness so there is a general consensus about how things are, despite the distortions of our emotional reactions. Two people might go to the same place and experience a completely different version of the situation depending on their mental state.

But in the non-physical realms, which includes the hell realms, everything depends on our state of mind, which means that our psychic state is projected outwards and then we react to that.

Actually sometimes if one reads certain sutras it seems as if for everything we do there is a hell realm! One time I went to my Lama and I said, "Well it's impossible! There is a hell realm for everything!" Khamtrul Rinpoche laughed

and replied: "Oh well, we just write like that to frighten people into being good!" He said that it is actually difficult to get into the hell realms because they depend on a mind state which delights in cruelty, delights in hurting others. There are people who take pleasure in evil and the suffering of others and who enjoy inflicting pain. They are very far from their original buddha-nature. So when they die, they project all the darkness and cruelty inside their minds which returns back to them. Then they react angrily and fearfully, creating more hallucinations in an endless cycle. This is why it is so difficult to get beyond those states, because one is trapped in endless paranoia, anger and fear.

Now the average person is not like that. Most people are basically good-hearted. We have our good qualities and our failings. However when we die we are likely to encounter circumstances which correspond to our usual way of thinking while alive. So it is important to be careful what we think about and how we respond to situations now when we have some choice, because this is what we could meet with and experience in the afterlife. We don't want to create more problems for ourselves in the future so we should be careful of our actions right now. Even at the cost of our life, not to do anything which is non-virtuous. Non-virtuous basically means anything which harms others. Just don't harm anybody, with our body, speech or mind. It makes sense.

10. If all the mothers who have loved me since beginningless time are suffering,

What is the use of my own happiness?

So, with the aim of liberating limitless sentient beings,

To set my mind on enlightenment is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The first level of aspiration is seeing that samsara is impermanent and understanding that outer acquisitions are not going to make us happy. Since everything is impermanent, therefore we should strive for liberation or nirvana. Get me out! When really in the depths of our heart we recognize the uncertainty, the insecurity in samsara, no matter where we are, then, like being trapped in a prison house we search for the key to escape.

Verse 9 dealt with striving for the supreme level of unchanging liberation. So we are aiming for nirvana in order to escape from samsara. However there is a problem here. The traditional example is a burning house. The house is on fire, there is a huge blaze but we have managed to get out. However our parents, our children, our loved ones, our cat, are still in the burning house. Can we just walk away? No. We have to go back in and try to get them out of that burning house. We wouldn't just leave them inside burning. We would take the fact that we ourselves are out as the reason to help pull them out too.

Another example is that we are all drowning in the swamp of samsara, but we have finally managed to get on to dry land. Now we are on firm ground, but looking back we

see our loved ones who are all drowning. Who would say, "You're drowning! Sorry about that, but I'm on dry land, so you swim hard, and take me as an example. I hope you can soon reach firm land too. Bye!"

How would one do that? In fact one would say, "Okay, now that I am on dry land, I must get some rope or use my hands to draw these people out too. Come a bit closer, I'm going to pull you out!" We can use that firm land to help pull everybody else out. We wouldn't let our mother drown in front of us if we could prevent it. Or our children, our partner, our friends, or anybody! Even a street dog we would try to rescue. Of course we would.

So this introduces the next level of motivation, which is called bodhichitta. Bodhi means enlightenment or awakening, and chitta means the heart or mind. So bodhichitta means of mind of enlightenment or spirit of awakening. That awakened heart quality which helps us to travel the spiritual path, not just so that I will feel better, but to enable us to help others to feel better. Through wisdom and compassion one is in the position to benefit beings in a very meaningful way.

Just as if we ourselves have been sick then when we see other people who are ill, we are sensitive and we wish to dedicate ourselves to helping others gain health. Therefore we aspire to become a doctor. When we graduate from medical school, it is not because we want to cure just ourselves, but we gain medical knowledge so that we can benefit and heal others.

Likewise, on the spiritual path, our motivation is that if we could understand things more clearly; if we could deal with our negative emotions; if we could have a deep insight into the nature of reality, then we would be in a position where we could really benefit all these other beings who so desperately need to be helped.

Considering how many billions of people there are in the world, it seems that in this lifetime we are connected to just a very few. Just our parents, our siblings, our children, family members, then the people with whom we come into contact such as a friends, colleagues and so forth. A very small number. But if we look back through all the endless panorama of past lives, then how many beings have we actually had a close relationship with? But we have completely forgotten.

So even when we meet again, we don't know them anymore. Sometimes we meet somebody for the first time and we immediately feel an empathy with them, as if we've known them before. Other times we can be with people for years and we still don't feel any particular connection. However from the point of view of opening the heart, the usual focus is on the role of the mother, because frankly without our mother, none of us would be here. It doesn't matter what our mother was like, she could have been an angel or a devil, but she gave birth to us. If she had aborted us then we wouldn't be here now.

What do little babies do? They suckle, they shit, they cry a lot, they keep their parents awake at night, and

occasionally they smile. Their mother would give her life for that. Babies don't hold stimulating conversations, they are totally focused on their own needs and wants and demands, but the mother doesn't get fed up and throw her baby out. No, the mother loves the child, more than her own life.

It's unfortunate that we don't consciously remember that one time in our life when we were most cared for and nurtured. Anybody who has to take care of children knows that it's a full time job. Especially when children are small and the mother has to maintain an endless round of washing them, feeding them, changing their diapers, cuddling them and putting them to sleep. All of us went through that with our mothers but we don't remember. Yet without that, we wouldn't be here now. So that debt of gratitude that we owe, especially to our mother, since she bore us for nine months in her own body, with all the discomfort and the morning sickness, and then the pain of birth. She suffered so much for us.

Now that debt of gratitude can never really be repaid. However many difficulties we might or might not have had with our families later, the very fact that our mother bore us and gave us life is the greatest gift she could have ever given us. We are here because of our mother.

From a Buddhist point of view, throughout our endless lifetimes - most of which we do not remember - many births were not human. We might for example have had a mother who was a spider, who had hundreds of little children, but nonetheless, she took care of them when she got them. Well, some species might kill the male, but they don't kill their babies. One time I saw a scorpion, and on her back she was carrying dozens and dozens of tiny little scorpions. There they were, all riding on mummy's back. We might not think of scorpions as being loving mothers, but there you are.

So therefore the mother is the symbol, the example of the extreme gratitude which we owe to other beings. Of course in every lifetime there are many beings that we feel gratitude towards. For example the farmers or all the people who make the myriad things we use, we could just go on and on forever, because we are all so dependent and interconnected with other beings.

Therefore we have a debt of gratitude to repay. The greatest, the most final way of repaying that debt, is to attain enlightenment in order to be able to liberate others - all our endless mothers. So according to this aspiration, we are not just practicing to make ourselves feel better. We are practicing so that in this lifetimes or future lifetimes we may be in the position to genuinely help beings, who are so desperately in need of help, whether they realize it or not. That's the motivation.

What finer gift can one offer to repay the kindness of beings than to aid them in their liberation? Right now we can aspire but we can't actually do much. It's like an armless mother watching her child being swept away by the river. We are helpless. We can't even help ourselves, what to speak

of other sentient beings! But the aspiration is there. We may not be able to help effectively now, but we will from now onwards use our time to really create the causes and conditions, so that in the future we can genuinely be able to help in a deep and meaningful way.

This means not just humans, but also animals and insects; all the creatures living in the seas, in the oceans, in the lakes; all the birds, all the spirit realms, hell realms, heaven realms: there are a lot of sentient beings out there. So the bodhisattva vow is not a small thing. After taking refuge, to enter the Mahayana path one receives the bodhisattva vow, which is the vow to strive spiritually, not just for one's own liberation, but in order to attain enlightenment so that in time all beings will be benefited.

Of course, as the Vajracchedika [Diamond Cutter] Sutra says, even though we vow to liberate all sentient beings, ultimately there are no sentient beings to be liberated and no one to liberate them anyway. Since the belief in an autonomous 'being' is what prevents our liberation in the first place. But nonetheless, even while ultimately it is a whole different story, on a relative or conventional level, which is where we are living, this aspiration completely transforms one's own motivation. I am not doing this for me, but for all those beings who don't know what to do. Also when we do something virtuous, and dedicate the merit, it is because other beings do not know how to do this. So we are doing it on their behalf. We are their representative.

We perform the action and then we dedicate the merit for them. So that all beings may rise as we rise. It's like putting yeast in the heavy dough of life, so that everything rises, not just the yeast. So if all the mothers who have loved me since beginningless time are suffering, what is the use of my own happiness? How can I be happy escaping from the burning house, if my mother is still burning? So my own liberation doesn't make sense unless it is a direct cause for the liberation of all beings.

So, with the aim of liberating limitless sentient beings, to set our mind on enlightenment is the practice of a bodhisattva. Because only enlightenment will give us the power, the wisdom and the compassion to liberate all beings. Nothing else will do. So that is the aim.

Thogme Sangpo has now set up the aim, so what are we going to be doing for the rest of this text? Now we have to get enlightened! The only way to get enlightened is to make use of everything that happens to us, and especially the adversities which befall us, by transforming and taking them on the path. If we discard anything, then it probably won't work.

We have to take whatever comes to us as it comes and make use of it. Then we advance. Otherwise if we can only practice when all the outer conditions seem very nice but not when people are noisy, or when there are problems or we're feeling ill, or something adverse comes up, then we don't know how to practice. We have to learn how to use our life, everything in our life, as our practice. That's it.