

37 PRACTICES OF ALL BODHISATTVAS by Tokme Zangpo

Commentary by Daniel Scharpenburg

INTRODUCTION

A Bodhisattva is one who strives to attain enlightenment.

Bodhisattva is a sanskrit word that means “Enlightenment Being.” It has multiple definitions:

Bodhisattva:

1. an enlightened person
2. one who is on the path to enlightenment
3. one who enlightens others.

Mahayana Buddhism rests entirely on the Bodhisattva ideal. We have innate wakefulness—we are enlightened already—but we are also on the path to realizing the fact that we are awakened and our true nature is not separate from bringing others to awakening along with us. Helping others is helping ourselves and helping ourselves is realizing what has always been true.

This text “the 37 practices of a Bodhisattva” is a concise text written by a Tibetan teacher in the 14th century named Togme Zangpo who was a member of the Sakya lineage. It’s a summary of how we should behave as we are on the path to awakening. It’s a Tibetan Mahayana teaching. Togme Zangpo describes 37 practices we should adopt on the Bodhisattva path.

Even if we don’t have the lofty goal of being Bodhisattvas, these teachings can still help us deal with the ordinary problems in our lives. We can learn to handle our lives better by following these methods.

Togme Zangpo is well respected as a scholar in the Tibetan lineages. His parents died when he was a child and he entered monastery living at the age of 9. Not much is known about him, but he studied and practiced for decades and decades and is considered an important figure in the history of Tibetan Buddhism and he’s known for deeply studying the Way of the Bodhisattva and Lamrim teachings.

Togme Zangpo was thought of as a Bodhisattva and his teachings are studied by all the various lineages in Tibetan Buddhism.

He was a specialist in the Bodhisattva path.

This work, the 37 practices is one that means a lot to me. I hope you like it too.

I’m using several different versions for this project, but primarily Ken Mcleod’s translation, which can be found here:

[Unfettered Mind: 37 Practices](#)

I'm going to present the introductory verses here.

Homage to Lokeshvaraya

***You who see that experience has no coming or going,
Yet pour your energy solely into helping beings,
My excellent teachers and Lord All Seeing,
I humbly and constantly honor with my body, speech, and mind.***

***The fully awake, the buddhas, source of joy and well-being,
All come from integrating the noble Way.
Because integration depends on your knowing how to practice,
I will explain the practice of all bodhisattvas.***

Lokeshvaraya is another name for Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion. In referencing him, the text is declaring that this is a teaching based cultivating compassion.

Zangpo starts by sublimating our egos by paying homage to teachers and Bodhisattvas. And he has described integration of the dharma as the goal of our practice.

Through the teachings of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas we gain the benefits of instruction on entering the path.

It starts with humility and compassion, as many Mahayana texts do. I hope you'll enjoy exploring it with me.

1

***Right now, you have a good boat, fully equipped and available — hard to find.
To free others and you from the sea of samsara,
Day and night, fully alert and present,
Study, reflect, and meditate — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

Zangpo starts with telling us how significant it is that we were lucky enough to be born into a human life, into a situation where the Dharma is available. It's because we are fortunate enough to be born into the situation that we're in that the Dharma is available to us and we are able to practice.

The fact that we are able to share this teaching in this way shows that we are in a fortunate situation. We have access to the Dharma, more access than anyone has ever had in the past. Zangpo refers to this life as a great ship.

Just as a ship can take us from one shore to another, our human life can take us from the shore of suffering to the shore of Enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva path is dedicated to freeing ourselves and others, and that's what he's talking about here. Being fully alert and present is our cultivation of awareness and mindfulness.

Studying, reflecting, and meditating are the three tools we are using to guide us on the path.

2

*Attraction to those close to you catches you in its currents;
Aversion to those who oppose you burns inside;
Indifference that ignores what needs to be done is a black hole.
Leave your homeland — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is a description of the three poisons.

These are said to be the three negative emotions that cause us the most suffering. They are the ones that prevent us from realizing our enlightened true nature.

They are usually called Greed, Hatred and Delusion and sometimes they're called Attachment, Aversion, and Ignorance.

The three poisons are caused by ignorance of our true nature and ignorance of our enlightenment. Coming from ignorance, these poisons motivate us to make mistakes and act in ways that are outside our own interest and cause harm to ourselves and others. Many of our actions are tainted by these poisons. They exist within us lust, craving, anger, jealousy and confusion. These poisons can ruin us.

The teachings of the Four Noble Truths really tell us that when we come to understand suffering and the causes of suffering, that's when we can suffer less. We can take the steps necessary to overcome these causes.

Greed is our selfishness. Our desire, attachment and yearning for happiness and satisfaction from external sources. It is our impulse to always want more. We want the objects of our desire, regardless of what those are, to bring us permanent satisfaction so we can feel complete. It helps to think about the accumulation of wealth. Money is made up of numbers and numbers never end, so we can chase that forever if we are obsessed with how much is in our bank account.

When we believe that our fulfillment is dependent on what we have, then we come to realize that we don't really get the same satisfaction we were expecting. We always want more. Greed can affect our relationships, our jobs, and everything else.

Greed can also manifest as a lack of generosity.

Hatred is our anger, aversion toward things we don't want, whether that be unpleasant people, circumstances, or even toward ourselves. It can manifest as anger, but also as impatience, ill-will, annoyance and hostility. We habitually resist and avoid feelings, circumstances, and people that we don't like. We really want everything in our lives to be pleasant. This is nothing but a

reinforcement of our illusion of duality and separation. Hatred puts us in a cycle of always finding something wrong.

When we are carrying hatred, our minds are frantic. We can't be calm. We have a very easy time getting obsessed with whatever conflicts we are in. We can also have a conflict within, a hatred for our own feelings that we don't like. With hatred we create enemies out of those around us and out of ourselves.

Delusion is our confusion and our misperception of reality. This is our lack of ability to understand the nature of things as they are—free of our labels and preconceptions. Under delusion we aren't in harmony with the world around.

Without right perception, we don't understand the way things are interdependent and impermanent. Because of this we are always looking outside ourselves for satisfaction. Because of our delusion we don't understand our true nature.

The teachings of the Buddha tell us that our true nature is *enlightened*—that this will be realized if we can just see through our layers of ignorance. The goal of our practice is to free ourselves from these three poisons so we can see our true nature.

To overcome these poisons we have to first learn to notice them when they arise. When we are mindful and aware, we can recognize these things coming into our minds.

Leaving your homeland refers to just putting the past in the past instead of holding onto it. Our pasts have shaped who we are and we are often just lost in the things that have happened to us, letting them color all of our perceptions.

3

Don't engage disturbances and reactive emotions gradually fade away;

Don't engage distractions and spiritual practice naturally grows;

Keep awareness clear and vivid and confidence in the way arises.

Rely on silence — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Disturbances refers to things that we're really attached to, or things that really bothers us. When we can put down our feelings about these things, then they don't harm us as much. Slowly these disturbances can fade, or at least their hold on us can.

If we can put down these things that disturb us, whether we want them too much or we want to get rid of them too much, then our practice can flourish. In this way our awareness and our confidence in the Dharma can grow.

4.

You will separate from long-time friends and relatives;

You will leave behind the wealth you worked to build up;

The guest, your consciousness, will move from the inn, your body.

Forget the conventional concerns — this is the practice of a bodhisattva

When we think in terms of impermanence, this is obvious. Ken Mcleod says: “We and our loved ones are like leaves falling from a tree that are blown by the wind.”

We are going to part, sooner or later, from everyone we care about. This is sad, but obviously true.

Shantideva said: “As giving away all comes together (with death), it’s best to give (now) to others.”

I’m reminded of a t-shirt I saw that said: “He who dies with the most toys...still dies.” I think that’s an important message. Don’t get so caught up in accumulating things. You can’t take it with you.

[Ikkyu](#) said: “This world is but a fleeting dream, so why be alarmed at it’s evanescence?”

When become more aware of how fleeting this human life we have is, how temporary everything is, then maybe we can realize we don’t need to be so pre-occupied with everything all the time. Because of this we can take advantage of this opportunity, this precious human life, this chance to put the Dharma into practice.

5

***With some friends, the three poisons keep growing,
Study, reflection, and meditation weaken,
And loving kindness and compassion fall away.
Give up bad friends — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This brings us to the topic of having good friends, friends who are a good influence on us. This is what [Sangha](#), or spiritual community, is all about. It’s important to have the right kind of support in our practice.

Friends who lead us away from the Dharma, or away from a virtuous life, are friends we need to limit our time with. Not to say that we should only be friends with Buddhists but, it’s important that we not let the people we associate with lead us away from the Dharma. In a very real way we become similar to the people that we spend the most time with.

6

***With some teachers, your shortcomings fade away and
Abilities grow like the waxing moon.
Hold such teachers dear to you,
Dearer than your own body — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

Teacher can also be used to mean ‘spiritual friend’. It’s someone who is in contrast to the friends who have a bad influence on us. When we have a good spiritual friend, their impact on us is positive.

Although this often refers to spiritual teachers, who teach and inspire us, it does include regular Dharma friends as well. Not just the friends who go to the same temple with us, but friends who we can get together with to meditate or to study and discuss the Dharma with, someone who encourages and motivates us in our practice.

But the main emphasis is on having a teacher or spiritual mentor. If we spend time with a good teacher we will not only learn a lot, but also develop good qualities. Our love and understanding will grow.

To hold them dear to us is to be devoted to our teachers. There are many bad teachers and many mediocre ones too. If we find a good one, we should really appreciate them.

7

Locked up in the prison of their own patterning

Whom can ordinary gods protect?

Who can you count on for refuge?

Go for refuge in the Three Jewels — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

This is about [refuge](#) vows, our initiation into Buddhist practice. The prison we are in is the world of suffering. The “ordinary gods” references that there is no one to save us. We have to save ourselves.

To take refuge is to strive for freedom.

We take refuge in the [Buddha](#) as our example.

We take refuge in the Dharma as our journey.

We take refuge in the Sangha as our companionship.

Our goal is to develop as people on the Buddhist path, dharmic people. We want to realize the illness of our suffering and to try to attain the health of the other shore, enlightenment. We can develop wisdom and discipline in order to overcome our delusions and habitual patterns.

Through study and practice the path can become clear to us.

Taking refuge is committing ourselves to the Buddhist path. To take this kind of initiation is to realize our Buddha Nature and to strive to avoid harming others. We should try to exemplify equanimity and tranquility whenever we can. In taking refuge we are liberating ourselves.

Taking refuge is about transformation. We want to transform into the best possible versions of ourselves. We want to renounce the suffering and delusion that is present in our lives. Through our meditation practice we can see how suffering can be transcended.

Taking refuge is seeking shelter.

Buddha: the Buddha is our example. We can realize our Buddha nature, as he did, and find inner peace. He realized the middle way and abandoned extremes. He worked on himself in a way that we can emulate. We are worthy and we can do the same thing. We are capable of becoming awake.

Dharma: The Buddhist path becomes our journey. This is where we are dedicated to understanding and trusting the path that we are on. We want to reverse the course of ordinary suffering and attain freedom from it.

Sangha: friendship with brothers and sisters in the dharma. Sitting and practicing together is the best friendship. These are true friends. We want to enter the community without reservation and to be harmonious.

This is what taking refuge means.

8

*The suffering in the lower realms is really hard to endure.
The Sage says it is the result of destructive actions.
For that reason, even if your life is at risk,
Don't engage in destructive actions — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

A lot of our suffering is caused by our own destructive actions. Destructive actions are those things we do that harm others. When we cause harm, it often comes back on us in all sorts of ways. It's best to do good, not just to make ourselves feel better, but also to make the world a better place. When we do good we make the world a little bit better for everyone, including ourselves.

9

*The happiness of the three worlds disappears in a moment,
Like a dewdrop on a blade of grass.
The highest level of freedom is one that never changes.
Aim for this — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is about equanimity. Equanimity is learning to weather the storm of life, learning how to accept loss and gain, success and failure. It's certainly hard to keep an even mind when things aren't going well. It can be so easy to get overwhelmed and discouraged.

Whatever measure of happiness we find in life is fleeting. It can be gone at any moment, like a dewdrop.

Equanimity is the highest level of freedom, it's what allows us to really get through life with an even mind.

10

*If all your mothers, who love you,
Suffer for time without beginning, how can you be happy?
To free limitless sentient beings,
Give rise to awakening mind — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is the justification for the [Bodhisattva's](#) wish to save all beings. If we believe that we all have the same true nature, then it just stands to reason that helping others on the path is important. All beings are connected to us. Zangpo is saying we should regard them all as our mothers. So, we aren't on the path for selfish reasons. We want to help others.

The awakening mind is called [Bodhicitta](#). It's a state of mind that's cultivated with love and compassion. Love is the wish for everyone to be happy. This doesn't just apply to people we like. No one is left out. Compassion is the wish for everyone to be free from suffering. And this includes taking responsibility to help others get out of suffering.

Relative Bodhicitta is engaging the world with compassion in a normal way. Being kind, giving to charity, helping others, teaching the dharma. It's the manifestation of our basic goodness.

Ultimate Bodhicitta is based on engaging the world without a self. This is helping in a way that isn't dependent on a giver or receiver. It's foundation is Emptiness, based on dissolving the boundaries between self and other.

Bodhicitta combines emptiness, compassion, and wisdom. To engage wisdom we have to work out overcoming our attachment to ourselves. To engage compassion we have to work on overcoming our possessiveness and aggression. To engage emptiness we have to learn to relate to our basic goodness in a way that is direct and complete.

Bodhicitta is central to Mahayana Buddhist teachings. It is the basis of being awake and freeing our minds.

We don't really cultivate the awakened state as something separate from ourselves or as something new. We are trying to realize that we already have this basic goodness as part of our being. It has always been there. Dwelling in Bodhicitta brings us greater vision and potential. It brings us to boundless compassion for ourselves and others.

When we engage Bodhicitta we stop being so afraid of and controlled by our suffering. We gain new levels of patience and diligence. We also develop a kind of bravery. We are like spiritual warriors, willing to see the suffering of the world and face it in order to save ourselves and others.

This is the way of the bodhisattva.

11

*All suffering comes from wanting your own happiness.
Complete awakening arises from the intention to help others.*

***So, exchange completely your happiness
For the suffering of others — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

[Shantideva](#) said, “When happiness is something equally liked, both by myself and others, what’s so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone?”

It’s difficult to think of the happiness of others as equally important to our own, indeed more important. That’s what Zangpo is asking us to do.

He’s talking about those things that arise out of pure self-centeredness; jealousy, hatred, etc. These things don’t make us happy. We awaken ourselves by loosening our attachment to our egos a bit. Obsessing about what we want, constantly engaging that state of mind that says I-Me-Mine doesn’t serve us very well. We should try to expand our compassion instead.

If we can expand our hearts in a way that sees others as not separate from us, then we can bring them happiness whenever possible and also share in that happiness. When we help others we’re making the world a better place for everyone, including ourselves. No one is left out.

12

***Even if someone, driven by desperate want,
Steals, or makes someone else steal, everything you own,
Dedicate to him your body, your wealth, and
All the good you’ve ever done or will do — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

Give, give, and keep giving. This is hard to put into practice, I’m sure. These verses are really about responding with kindness, even when we’re harmed. As bodhisattvas we don’t want to get angry when people wrong us. Anger is the opposite of what we’re trying to do. Anger is like wishing someone harm and we’re trying not to do that. We want to cultivate patience instead and try to face such situations with understanding.

13

***Even if you have done nothing wrong at all
And someone still tries to take your head off,
Spurred by compassion,
Take all his or her evil into you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This is a little extreme, isn’t it? The message is to face everything with patience. I’m going to tell you a zen story that illustrates this exact idea. It’s called the story of the Zen master and the general.

During a civil war in Japan, armies often invaded little villages. In one village everyone heard an army was coming and fled. When the soldiers arrived the village was empty...almost. One zen master had stayed to take care of the temple. The general of the army went to the temple to see what this master was like. When he arrived the master didn’t bow or grovel. He didn’t even speak to the general at all. This made the general angry. He drew his sword and yelled out, “You fool. Don’t you realize I could run you through without blinking an eye?”

*The master calmly replied, “Do you realize I could be run through without blinking an eye?”
Surprised and awed by the master, the general simply left.*

The point is that the master can face anything, even death, with equanimity.

As [Ikkyu](#) said, “The world is but a fleeting dream. Why be alarmed at it’s evanescence?”

Forgive, even at the risk of your life.

14

***Even if someone broadcasts to the whole universe
Slanderous and ugly rumors about you,
In return, with an open and caring heart,
Praise his or her abilities — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

In the “Eight Verses of Training the Mind”, Langri Tangpa said, “When others, out of envy, treat me unfairly with scolding, insults, and more, may I accept the loss upon myself and offer the victory to others.”

When people say bad things about us, it’s important not to say bad things back. When we do that, it really only makes us look worse, doesn’t it?

15

***Even if someone humiliates you and denounces you
In front of a crowd of people,
Think of this person as your teacher
And humbly honor him — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

The people that are hard to handle are the ones that we learn the most from. It’s from jerks that we learn patience. So, we can think of the people that try to humiliate us as our teachers.

I want to tell you the story of [Atisha](#) and his rude assistant.

In the 11th century, Tibetan Buddhism was beginning to renew itself, after a period of decline. Many Indian masters were invited to Tibet to give teachings. One of them was Atisha. He was a well known scholar and an expert on training the mind. He committed to staying in Tibet and teaching for a few years, but he ended up staying the rest of his life.

Among those that traveled to Tibet with Atisha was an assistant who cooked meals. The assistant was known as a very difficult person. The Tibetans that met him found him rude and unfriendly. And the Tibetans were surprised to see that the assistant was rude to Atisha too. Just a very unfriendly person. They wondered why Atisha would keep such a difficult person in his company.

But Atisha never showed anger or intolerance toward the assistant. The Tibetans knew that taking a long journey like the one Atisha and his assistant had taken from India could bring out

the worst in people sometimes and they were impressed that Atisha was able to maintain a positive attitude toward his assistant. But eventually someone asked why he would have such an awful person with him.

And Atisha replied, “He’s not just my cook. He’s teaching me [patience](#).”

With that one statement Atisha is telling us how we can transform ourselves through training our minds. How we can respond to others, even those who are causing us harm.

16

*Even if a person you have cared for as your own child
Treats you as his or her worst enemy,
Lavish him or her with loving attention
Like a mother caring for her ill child — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

People are going to betray you. Even those who we are very kind to will sometimes unexpectedly wish us harm. Even then, we can still respond with [compassion](#).

17

*Even if your peers or subordinates,
Put you down to make themselves look better,
Treat them respectfully as you would your teacher:
Put them above you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

When others put us down, it’s important to not respond in kind. Again, we should treat them as though they’re teaching us patience. Whether or not our peers and subordinates insult us, it’s still important to have an attitude of respect toward them. We’re all in this together and they are not separate from us, even if they don’t realize that.

[Shantideva](#) tells us that ignorant and enlightened beings are equal. It’s from being kind to all beings that we’re able to walk the [Bodhisattva](#) path.

He said: “When the attainment of Enlightenment is equally due to the ignorant and the enlightened, what kind of order is it that the respect shown to the ignorant isn’t the same as the respect shown to the Enlightened?”

18

*When you are down and out, held in contempt,
Desperately ill, and emotionally crazed,
Don’t lose heart. Take into you
The suffering and negativity of all beings — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

I think of the blues song “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out.” It was written by Jimmy Cox in the 1920s, but covered by Eric Clapton and made famous in 1970. It’s about fair-

weather friends, people who are around all the time when you're successful but seem to be gone as soon as things get hard, when you're desperately ill or emotionally crazed. I think about what they call hitting 'rock bottom'.

This is a reference to a practice called [tonglen](#). This is a practice where we visualize ourselves taking on the suffering of others and returning happiness to them. That's what taking in the suffering and negativity of all beings is about.

When things are going bad, when we are poor and struggling, it can be easy to develop an "oh poor me" attitude. It can be easy to get overwhelmed and give up. In this way we tend to make bad situations become worse.

If we can extend our scope of attention beyond our limited selves, then our way of experiencing these kinds of difficulties can be different. We can expand our scope by thinking in terms of exchanging ourselves for others. My happiness is your happiness.

Because we are one. If we can expand our awareness beyond just this one individual person that we call, "I" then we won't be so discouraged.

Here are tonglen meditation instructions. By the way: I didn't write these, [Pema Chodron](#) wrote them:

"On the in-breath, you breathe in whatever particular area, group of people, country, or even one particular person... maybe it's not this more global situation, maybe it's breathing in the physical discomfort and mental anguish of chemotherapy; of all the people who are undergoing chemotherapy. And if you've undergone chemotherapy and come out the other side, it's very real to you. Or maybe it's the pain of those who have lost loved ones; suddenly, or recently, unexpectedly or over a long period of time, some dying. But the in-breath is... you find some place on the planet in your personal life or something you know about, and you breathe in with the wish that those human beings or those mistreated animals or whoever it is, that they could be free of that suffering, and you breathe in with the longing to remove their suffering.

And then you send out – just relax out... send enough space so that peoples' hearts and minds feel big enough to live with their discomfort, their fear, their anger or their despair, or their physical or mental anguish. But you can also breathe out for those who have no food and drink, you can breathe out food and drink. For those who are homeless, you can breathe out/send them shelter. For those who are suffering in any way, you can send out safety, comfort.

So in the in-breath you breathe in with the wish to take away the suffering, and breathe out with the wish to send comfort and happiness to the same people, animals, nations, or whatever it is you decide.

Do this for an individual, or do this for large areas, and if you do this with more than one subject in mind, that's fine... breathing in as fully as you can, radiating out as widely as you can."

19

*Even when you are famous, honored by all,
And as rich as the god of wealth himself,
Don't be pompous. Know that the magnificence of existence
Has no substance — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

People are proud of a lot of things, a lot of times people are proud of things they have no control over, like heritage or nationality.

This makes me think of the film *Pulp Fiction*. In it the mob boss played by Ving Rhames says to the boxer played by Bruce Willis: “Pride only hurts. It never helps.”

I think he’s right. Pride is a way of separating ourselves from others, of putting ourselves on a pedestal above other people. And all the things we are proud of are fundamentally impermanent, just like everything else. I can be proud of something I’ve done, like getting a promotion at work, but in the end the results of that aren’t going to last. And it can be easy to look down on others that didn’t get the promotion I’m proud of. And at the other end of the spectrum is pride for things I have no control over. I can be proud of my nationality but...I didn’t choose that. It just happened to me.

20

*If you don't subdue the opponent inside, your own anger,
Although you subdue opponents outside, they just keep coming.
Muster the forces of loving kindness and compassion
And subdue your own mind — this is the practice of a bodhisattva*

About responding with anger, Buddhaghosa said: “By doing this you are like a man who wants to hit another and picks up a burning ember and so first burns himself.”

Like pride, anger is something that brings us a lot more harm than help.

Anger happens to all of us. Even the greatest among experience anger sometimes; regardless of how much we have cultivated love and compassion, we are still human.

In Buddhism, anger is one of the three poisons, along with greed and ignorance. The three poisons are the primary cause of our suffering. Striving to overcome our anger is essential to Buddhist practice. In Buddhism, we don’t really think of anger as ‘righteous’ or ‘justifiable’. It’s important to remember that our anger hurts us as much as it hurts whoever the target of our anger is, if not more. Anger is nothing more than an impediment to our inner peace. We might think, “this person deserves to be faced with my anger.”

But that shouldn’t be our line of thinking—instead, we should be thinking, “Is our anger helpful?”

So, we can strive to overcome our anger, but of course we will get angry sometimes, everyone does and we shouldn't feel bad for it.

First, admit you're angry. Admit that your anger is clouding your judgment and impacting your ability to deal with whatever situation is occurring. Anger can only get in the way and escalate situations. It never helps. Thinking anger is sometimes helpful is dangerous. Buddhism teaches mindfulness. Being mindful of our own emotions is part of mindfulness. We don't suppress a negative emotion or deny it; instead we acknowledge it and try to recognize that it isn't helpful and let it go.

It's also important to understand that our anger is created by ourselves.

Anger doesn't happen to us, our minds create it. We tend to think that someone else causes us to get angry, but it's our own mind that makes us angry. We do have some control over how we respond to situations.

As Buddhists, our practice is to cultivate kindness and [compassion](#) for all beings that is free from attachment. "All beings" includes individuals who make us angry.

For this reason, when we experience anger, we should take care not to act on it to hurt others and ourselves. We also must take care not to cling to our anger. If we hold onto our anger over time, it is only more damaging to us.

How do we let our anger go?

One thing we can do is cultivate patience. We can sit still with our anger and try to release it. Our meditation practice helps us strengthen our patience for this purpose.

It's hard not to act on our anger sometimes. It takes strength to acknowledge that anger is not helpful and it takes discipline to let it go.

The [Buddha](#) said, "Holding onto anger is like picking up a hot coal to throw at someone."

Even if we succeed at hurting the other person, we are hurting ourselves as well.

Is it ever really worth it?

21

Sensual pleasures are like salty water:

The deeper you drink, the thirstier you become.

Any object that you attach to,

Right away, let it go — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Worldly pleasures, those things we're attached to that we constantly try to get more of, can never really satisfy us. Because our desires are unlimited, there can never really be enough.

This is called the poison of greed.

It's our tendency toward selfishness. Our desire, attachment and yearning for happiness and satisfaction from external sources. It is our impulse to always want more. We want the objects of our desire, regardless of what those are, to bring us permanent satisfaction so we can feel complete. It helps to think about the accumulation of wealth. Money is made up of numbers and numbers never end, so we can chase that forever if we are obsessed with how much is in our bank account.

When we believe that our fulfillment is dependent on what we have, then we come to realize that we don't really get the same satisfaction we were expecting. We always want more. Greed can affect our relationships, our jobs, and everything else.

Greed can also manifest as a lack of generosity.

Thinking about what we could have steals a lot of our happiness.

22

Whatever arises in experience is your own mind.

Mind itself is free of any conceptual limitations.

Know that and don't generate

Subject-object fixations — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Everything we see is not as it really is, but through a filter of our perception. We have conceptual limitations that prevent us from seeing the whole picture and we fixate on duality, the difference between subject and object.

We have to come to understanding that we aren't seeing things as they really are.

The western mystic Anais Nin said, "We don't see things as they are. We see things as we are."

This corresponds to the poison of delusion.

Delusion is our confusion and our misperception of reality. This is our lack of ability to understand the nature of things as they are—free of our labels and preconceptions. Under delusion we aren't in harmony with the world around.

Without right perception, we don't understand the way things are interdependent and impermanent. Because of this we are always looking outside ourselves for satisfaction. Because of our delusion we don't understand our true nature.

The teachings of the [Buddha](#) tell us that our true nature is *enlightened*—that this will be realized if we can just see through our layers of ignorance.

23

*When you come across something you enjoy,
Though beautiful to experience, like a summer rainbow,
Don't take it as real.*

Let go of attachment — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Everything is fleeting. This applies to both the things we like and the things we don't like. [Ikkyu](#) called this world a fleeting dream, something we can't hold on to. I think that's important. If we think of the things we want as permanent, then we will suffer when we try to hold onto them. Nothing is permanent.

The description of the summer rainbow is important here. A rainbow is beautiful and it looks like something that really exists, but if we go try to grab it we won't be able to. It has no solidity. It's an illusion.

The best way to rid ourselves of attachment to these objects is to just understand that they aren't real and permanent.

24

*All forms of suffering are like dreaming that your child has died.
Taking confusion as real wears you out.
When you run into misfortune,
Look at it as confusion — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is the reverse. We want to get rid of things. I like to think of that old cliché, "This too shall pass." Good conditions and states of mind will come and go. Bad conditions and states of mind will come and go too. Sometimes when we're in a bad state of mind we tend to cling to it, thinking it will last forever. But of course it won't. Nothing will.

This corresponds to the poison of aversion.

Aversion is our anger, aversion toward things we don't want, whether that be unpleasant people, circumstances, or even toward ourselves. It can manifest as anger, but also as impatience, ill-will, annoyance and hostility. We habitually resist and avoid feelings, circumstances, and people that we don't like. We really want everything in our lives to be pleasant. This is nothing but a reinforcement of our illusion of duality and separation. Hatred puts us in a cycle of always finding something wrong.

When we are carrying aversion, our minds are frantic. We can't be calm. We have a very easy time getting obsessed with whatever conflicts we are in. We can also have a conflict within, a hatred for our own feelings that we don't like. With aversion we create enemies out of those around us and out of ourselves.

Verse 25 and the ones that follow detail the 6 [perfections](#).

The most important teaching for walking the [bodhisattva](#) path is the six perfections. The six perfections free us from delusion and lead us to Awakening. If we practice the six perfections in our lives, then we can dwell in Enlightenment.

The six paramitas (usually translated as perfections) are a teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. They are said to be vehicles to take us from shore of sorrow to the shore of peace and joy. We are on the shore of suffering, anger, and depression and we want to cross over to the shore of well-being and transcendence.

25

***If those who want to be awake have to give even their bodies,
What need is there to talk about things that you simply own.
Be generous, not looking
For any return or result — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This is the perfection of generosity.

People tend to think that this means just giving material things and that isn't necessarily the case. We can give all sorts of things. We can give our time, our patience, our love.

The best gift we can offer is our presence. To be there when someone needs us, to listen when someone needs to talk. Because of our meditation practice, we can be more mindfully present. Listening instead of waiting to talk, paying attention when attention is needed.

We can also give understanding. When we pay attention to what others are going through we can better understand how to interact with them in ways that are helpful.

Generosity is a wonderful practice. The Buddha said when we are angry at someone we can practice generosity toward them as a way to soften our anger.

26

***If you can't tend to your needs because you have no moral discipline,
Then intending to take care of the needs of others is simply a joke.
Observe ethical behavior without concern
For conventional existence — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This is the perfection of virtue.

The Second Paramita is something we cultivate in two ways.

One way is through mindfulness training and the second way is through precepts. I'm going to write about the five mindfulness trainings now and save the precepts for another time.

Practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings is a good way to transform our behavior in a positive way. This is a teaching created by the Zen Monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Some of these overlap with the precepts a little, so it would be repetitive to write about both here.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

- 1) Protect other beings. This applies to humans as well as other animals and plants. We should protect and help whenever possible.
- 2) To prevent the exploitation of humans and other beings. The normal way of doing things is

often to step on others in order to get ahead in life.

- 3) Be faithful in relationships.
- 4) Practice deep listening and loving speech
- 5) Be mindful about your consumption.

27

***For bodhisattvas who want to be rich in virtue
A person who hurts you is a precious treasure.
Cultivate patience for everyone,
Completely free of irritation or resentment — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This is the perfection of patience.

This represents our ability to receive and transform our suffering.

The Buddha compared acceptance to water. If you pour some salt into a glass of water it will have a big impact. If you pour it into a river it will have no impact at all.

We are the same way.

If our ability to accept is small, then we will suffer a great deal even when very minor things happen, like someone saying an unkind word or annoying us.

But if our ability to accept is large, then such things won't have quite the same impact on us. It is so easy to carry the weight of an unkind word or action with us.

The perfection of patience represents our ability to receive, accept, and transform any pain and suffering that comes our way. We often tend to make things worse for ourselves than they really need to be.

28

***Listeners and solitary buddhas, working only for their own welfare,
Are seen to practice as if their heads were on fire.
To help all beings, pour your energy into practice:
It's the source of all abilities — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

This is the perfection of diligence.

This represents our motivation on the path.

This perfection is our devotion to cultivating the other five. It's the one that really keeps us inspired to continue rather than giving up. We can recognize the things that cause suffering in ourselves and others and we should do what we can to lessen these things.

The Buddha sometimes described life in terms of watering seeds. The seeds of anger, jealousy, and despair exist in our minds and we should try to refrain from watering them if we can. This means trying to bring happiness to ourselves and others.

The perfection of diligence represents striving to water positive seeds in our minds instead of the negative ones.

29

Understanding that emotional reactions are dismantled

*By insight supported by stillness,
Cultivate meditative stability that passes right by
The four formless states — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is the perfection of meditation.

Meditation in this sense consists of two aspects.

First is stopping. Our minds run through our whole lives, chasing one idea after another. Stopping means to stop in the present moment, to settle our monkey minds and be here now. Everything is in this moment. With this meditation practice we can calm our minds. We can practice mindful breathing, mindful walking, and mindful sitting. This is also the practice of concentration, so we can live deeply each moment of our lives, touching the deepest levels of our being.

The second aspect of meditation is looking deeply to see the true nature of things. This is where we really cultivate an understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

30

*Without wisdom, the five perfections
Are not enough to attain full awakening.
Cultivate wisdom, endowed with skill
And free from the three domains — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This, the final of the six perfections, is the perfection of wisdom.

This is the highest form of understanding, free from concepts, ideas, and views. This kind of is the seed of Enlightenment within us. This is what carries us to Enlightenment.

What we can talk about is looking deeply at the nature of things. Waves have a beginning and an end. Some are big and some are small. But they're all made of water. They all come from and return to the same ocean. And, more importantly, they're never truly separate from the ocean.

If we look deeply at ourselves and the world around us, we can come to understand that we have the same nature as these waves. We share the same ground of being as all other beings.

The Perfection of Wisdom represents our understanding of the oneness of things and it's really considered the most important of the six perfections.

31

*If you don't go into your own confusion,
You may just be a materialist in practitioner's clothing.
Constantly go into your own confusion
And put an end to it — this is the practice of a bodhisattva*

This is a practice of looking deep within ourselves. Once we reach a certain point in the practice, we can't keep lying to ourselves about who we are anymore. We have to face ourselves with complete honesty. Only then can we see things as they really are.

We need to look within to see if we're doing what we need to do, instead of just looking outward to see what others are doing. If we're not really paying attention to what we're doing and why we're doing it, then we probably aren't trying very hard.

32

***You undermine yourself when you react emotionally and
Grumble about the imperfections of other bodhisattvas.
Of the imperfections of those who have entered the Great Way,
Don't say anything — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

When we talk about the faults of others we are reinforcing duality. We are suggesting that we are better than them. You're moving away from a good practice of the Dharma if you're always finding fault in other people practicing.

I think there's a cliché of people going to church and judging the clothes that other families are wearing, as in "we need to wear our Sunday best so we look better than them." That's the kind of view we're talking about here.

We can't pull ourselves up by tearing others down.

This doesn't mean we can't make suggestions for how someone could be doing better, as long as those suggestions are constructive and helpful. This verse isn't about trying to help. It's just about destructive criticism.

33

***When you squabble with others about status and rewards,
You undermine learning, reflection, and meditation.
Let go of any investment in your family circle
Or the circle of those who support you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.***

Don't get attached to titles and status.

If we think too much about being the number one student or having the best reputation at the temple, that isn't helpful to us. I'm reminded of the story of Shantideva.

[Shantideva](#) was a monk that lived alongside many many other monks in a big monastery. He developed a kind of reputation. The other monks thought he wasn't trying very hard. That he was just using life in the monastery as an excuse to not go into the world and work. They thought he didn't really care about the Dharma at all.

So they played a trick on him. They set him up for failure by asking that he give a teaching. And Shantideva agreed to do it. He went before all of the assembled monks and preached *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, a text that is now revered throughout Buddhism. They were all blown away by his great insight. And then he left the monastery, never to return.

The point of this story is this: Shantideva didn't care about his bad reputation. He wasn't squabbling about status and rewards. He was just living in the monastery and practicing.

34

*Abusive language upsets others
And undermines the ethics of a bodhisattva.
So, don't upset people or
Speak abusively — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Just be nice with your words. This is Right Speech.

Right Speech can sometimes be the most difficult part of the Eightfold Path.

In its simplest form, Right Speech can be defined as not using language to harm ourselves or others. Easier said than done. How often do we say things that hurt people's feelings? How often do we gossip or tell little white lies?

Too often.

And this doesn't just apply to Buddhist practice. All religious traditions seem to emphasize honest and positive communication. So, this is a case where talking about a fundamental part of Buddhist practice can be of benefit to everyone.

So, here are some guidelines to keep us on track.

1) Tell the truth.

Don't tell a falsehood. Just as importantly, don't tell lies by omission. There is far too much dishonesty in the world. If we were all just honest with one another the world would be a very different place. Dishonesty is an attack on trust between individuals.

2) Be compassionate in your speech.

Like we were told as kids. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. We should use our voices to bring kindness into the world.

3) Encourage others.

Sometimes just an encouraging word can bring endless joy to someone. If you see the opportunity to encourage someone, do it.

4) Be helpful.

Our words can help others in many ways. We can explain things they want to learn or just spread positivity and kindness.

Too often we use communication to tear each other down. Verbal attacks are much too common. We can just use our words for kindness.

35

*When reactive emotions acquire momentum, it's hard to make remedies work.
A person in attention wields remedies like weapons,
Crushing reactive emotions such as craving
As soon as they arise — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is using mindfulness and alertness to avoid getting ourselves into trouble. It's seeing something we really want, but realizing in the moment that we shouldn't go after it. Mindfulness and alertness are usually thought of as passive things that we're cultivating. Here they are described like weapons that crush our weaknesses.

36

*In short, in everything you do,
Know what is happening in your mind.
By being constantly present and aware
You bring about what helps others — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

If we can just be here now, we can suffer less and help others more. That's the fundamental teaching here.

Just be here.

37

*To dispel the suffering of beings without limit,
With wisdom freed from the three spheres
Direct all the goodness generated by these efforts
To awakening — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

This is a dedication of merit. It's purpose is to remind us that we aren't doing this practice for ourselves, but for the benefit of all beings.

Thank you for going through this text with me.

It ends with the following very humble verse:

*Following the teachings of the holy ones
On what is written in the sutras, tantras, and commentaries,
I set out these thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva
For those who intend to train in this path.*

*Because I have limited intelligence and little education,
These verses are not the kind of poetry that delights the learned.
But because I relied on the teachings of the sutras and the revered
I am confident that The Practices of a Bodhisattva is sound.*

*However, because it's hard for a person with limited intelligence like me
To fathom the depths of the great waves of the activity of bodhisattvas,
I ask the revered to tolerate
Any mistakes — contradictions, non sequiturs, and such.*

*From the goodness of this work, may all beings,
Through the supreme mind that is awake to what is ultimately and apparently true,
Not rest in any limiting position — existence or peace:
May they be like Lord All Seeing.*

*Tokmé, the monk, a teacher of scripture and logic, composed this text in a cave near the town
of Ngülchu Rinchen for his own and others' benefit.*