

The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas
Translation by A. Pearcey from Lotsawa House with Outlines Added



Gyalse Tokme Zangpo

The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas
by Gyalse Tokme Zangpo

Namo Lokeśvaraye!

The Opening of the Text

Expression of Worship

You see that all things are beyond coming and going,
Yet still you strive solely for the sake of living beings—
To you, my precious guru inseparable from Lord Avalokita,
I offer perpetual homage, respectfully, with body, speech and mind.

The Oath to Compose

The perfect buddhas, who are the source of all benefit and joy,
Come into being through accomplishing the sacred Dharma.
And since this in turn depends on knowing how to practise,
I shall now describe the practices of all the buddhas' heirs.

The Preliminaries: The Way to Enter the Dharma

1. The Activities to Make the Leisures and Endowments Meaningful

Verse 1 – Precious Human Life

1. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to study, reflect and meditate,
Tirelessly, both day and night, without ever straying into idleness,
In order to free oneself and others from this ocean of saṃsāra,
Having gained this supreme vessel—a free, well-favoured human
life, so difficult to find.

2. Abandoning One's Homeland

Verse 2 – The Circumstances Most Conducive for Taking Advantage of a Precious Human Life

2. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to leave behind one's
homeland,
Where our attachment to family and friends overwhelms us like a
torrent,
While our aversion towards enemies rages inside us like a blazing
fire,
And delusion's darkness obscures what must be adopted and
abandoned.

3. Abiding in Isolation (Staying in Seclusion)

3. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take to solitary places,
Avoiding the unwholesome, so that destructive emotions gradually
fade away,
And, in the absence of distraction, virtuous practice naturally gains
strength;
Whilst, with awareness clearly focused, we gain conviction in the
teachings.

4. Abandoning Concern for This Life

Verse 4 – Death and Impermanence

4. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to renounce this life's
concerns,
For friends and relatives, long acquainted, must all go their

separate ways;
Wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left behind;
And consciousness, the guest who lodges in the body, must in time depart.

5. Abandoning Harmful Friends

Verse 5 – The Importance of Having Proper Friends

5. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid destructive friends,
In whose company the three poisons of the mind grow stronger,
And we engage less and less in study, reflection and meditation,
So that love and compassion fade away until they are no more.

6. Relying on a Virtuous Friend (Teacher)

6. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cherish spiritual friends,
By regarding them as even more precious than one's own body,
Since they are the ones who will help to rid us of all our faults,
And make our virtues grow ever greater just like the waxing moon.

7. Taking Refuge

Verse 7 – Safe Direction (Refuge)

The Main Instructions: Explaining the Paths of the Three Scopes

7. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take refuge in the Three Jewels,
Since they will never fail to provide protection for all who call upon them,
For whom are the ordinary gods of this world ever capable of helping,
As long as they themselves are trapped within saṃsāra's vicious cycle?

The Main Instructions: Explaining the Paths of the Three Scopes

The Path of the Small Scope

Verse 8 – Refraining from Destructive Behaviour

8. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to commit a harmful act,
Even though not to do so might put one's very life at risk,

For the Sage himself has taught how negative actions will ripen
Into the manifold miseries of the lower realms, so difficult to
endure.

The Path of the Middle Scope

Verse 9 – Working for Liberation

9. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to strive towards the goal,
Which is the supreme state of changeless, everlasting liberation,
Since all the happiness of the three realms lasts but a moment,
And then is quickly gone, just like dewdrops on blades of grass.

The Path of the Great Scope

The Thought: Generating the Supreme Bodhicitta

Application: Meditating on the Two Types of Bodhicitta

A. Meditating on Relative/Conventional Bodhicitta

Verse 10 – Developing a Bodhicitta Aim

10. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to arouse bodhicitta,
So as to bring freedom to all sentient beings, infinite in number.
For how can true happiness ever be found while our mothers,
Who have cared for us throughout the ages, endure such pain?

The Practice During Meditative Equipoise: Meditating on Exchanging Self and Others

Verse 11 – Exchanging Self with Others

11. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to make a genuine
exchange
Of one's own happiness and wellbeing for all the sufferings of
others.
Since all misery comes from seeking happiness for oneself alone,
Whilst perfect buddhahood is born from the wish for others' good.

The Practice Post Meditation Session: How to Transform Adverse Conditions into the Path

1. Transforming the Four Unwanted Things into the Path

a. Transforming Not Obtaining What One Seeks into the Path

Verse 12 – Bodhisattva Behaviour: Dealing with Harms

12. Even if others, in the grips of great desire, should steal,
Or encourage others to take away, all the wealth that I possess,
To dedicate to them entirely my body, possessions and all my merits
From the past, present and future— this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

b. Transforming Suffering into the Path

13. Even if others should seek to cut off my head,
Though I've done them not the slightest wrong,
To take upon myself, out of compassion,
All the harms they have amassed—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

c. Transforming Infamy into the Path

14. Even if others should declare before the world
All manner of unpleasant things about me,
To speak only of their qualities in return,
With a mind that's filled with love—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

d. Transforming Blame/Abuse into the Path

15. Even if others should expose my hidden faults or deride me
When speaking amidst great gatherings of many people,
To conceive of them as spiritual friends and to bow
Before them in respect—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

2. Transforming the Two Things Difficult to Bear into the Path

a. Transforming Ungratefulness (failure to repay kindness) into the Path

16. Even if others whom I have cared for like children of my own,
Should turn upon me and treat me as an enemy,
To regard them only with special fondness and affection,
As a mother would her ailing child—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

Transforming Defamation into the Path

17. Even if others, equal or inferior to me in status,
Should, out of arrogance, disparage me,

To honour them, as I would my teacher,
By bowing down my head before them—this is the practice of all
the bodhisattvas.

3. Transforming Success and Failure into the Path

a. Transforming Failure into the Path

Verse 18 – Two Critical Situations Requiring Dharma Practice

18. Even though I may be destitute and despised by all,
Beset with terrible illness and plagued by evil spirits,
Still to take upon myself all beings' ills and harmful actions,
Without ever losing heart—this is the practice of all the
bodhisattvas.

b. Transforming Success into the Path

19. Even though I may be famous and revered by all,
And as rich as Vaiśravaṇa, the god of wealth himself,
To see the futility of all the glory and riches of this world,
And to remain without conceit—this is the practice of all the
bodhisattvas.

4. Transforming Attachment and Aversion into the Path

a. Transforming Objects of Aversion into the Path

Verse 20 – Overcoming Hostility and Attachment

20. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to subdue the mind,
With the forces of loving kindness and compassion.
For unless the real adversary—my own anger—is defeated,
Outer enemies, though I may conquer them, will continue to
appear.

b. Transforming Objects of Attachment into the Path

21. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to turn away immediately
From those things which bring desire and attachment.
For the pleasures of the senses are just like salty water:
The more we taste of them, the more our thirst increases.

B. Meditating on Ultimate Bodhicitta

During Meditative Equipoise, To Abandon Grasping at Conceptual Thoughts

Verse 22 – Developing Deepest Bodhicitta, the Realization of Voidness

22. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to entertain concepts,
Which revolve around dualistic notions of perceiver and perceived,
In the knowledge that all these appearances are but the mind itself,
Whilst mind's own nature is forever beyond the limitations of ideas.

Post Meditation Session: To Abandon Grasping at Objects of Attachment and Aversion as Truly Existent

1. Attachment

23. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to let go of grasping
When encountering things one finds pleasant or attractive,
Considering them to be like rainbows in the summer skies—
Beautiful in appearance, yet in truth devoid of any substance.

2. Aversion

24. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to recognize delusion
Whenever one is confronted by adversity or misfortune.
For these sufferings are just like the death of a child in a dream,
And it's so exhausting to cling to delusory perceptions as real.

Training in the Instructions to do that

a. Training in the Six Perfections

The Perfection of Generosity

25. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to give out of generosity,
With no hopes of karmic recompense or expectation of reward.
For if those who seek awakening must give even their own bodies,
What need is there to mention mere outer objects and possessions?

The Perfection of Ethics

26. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to observe ethical restraint,
Without the slightest intention of continuing in saṃsāric existence.
For lacking discipline one will never secure even one's own

wellbeing,
And so any thought of bringing benefit to others would be absurd.

The Perfection of Patience

27. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate patience,
Free from any trace of animosity towards anyone at all,
Since any potential source of harm is like a priceless treasure
To the bodhisattva who is eager to enjoy a wealth of virtue.

The Perfection of Joyous Effort

28. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to strive with enthusiastic
diligence—
The source of all good qualities—when working for the sake of all
who live;
Seeing that even śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, who labour for
themselves alone,
Exert themselves as if urgently trying to extinguish fires upon their
heads.

The Perfection of Concentration

29. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate concentration,
Which utterly transcends the four formless absorptions,
In the knowledge that mental afflictions are overcome entirely
Through penetrating insight suffused with stable calm.

The Perfection of Wisdom

30. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate wisdom,
Beyond the three conceptual spheres, alongside skilful means,
Since it is not possible to attain the perfect level of awakening
Through the other five pāramitās alone, in wisdom's absence.

From the Sutras, to Train in the Four Dharmas

Having Recognized Them, Abandoning One's Own Problems

A Bodhisattva's Daily Practice

31. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to scrutinize oneself
Continually and to rid oneself of faults whenever they appear.
For unless one checks carefully to find one's own confusion,
One might appear to be practising Dharma, but act against it.

Avoid Speaking of the Faults of Bodhisattvas

32. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to speak ill
Of others who have embarked upon the greater vehicle,
For if, under the influence of destructive emotions,
I speak of other bodhisattvas' failings, it is I who am at fault.

Abandoning Attachment to the Homes of Sponsors

33. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to let go of attachment
To the households of benefactors and of family and friends,
Since one's study, reflection and meditation will all diminish
When one quarrels and competes for honours and rewards.

Abandoning Speaking Harsh Words

34. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid harsh words,
Which others might find unpleasant or distasteful,
Since abusive language upsets the minds of others,
And thereby undermines a bodhisattva's conduct.

Training in the Method to Abandon Disturbing Emotions

35. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to slay attachment
And the rest—mind's afflictions—at once, the very moment they
arise,
Taking as weapons the remedies held with mindfulness and
vigilance.
For once the kleshas have become familiar, they'll be harder to
avert.

Mindfully Training in Accomplishing the Welfare of Others

36. In short, no matter what one might be doing,
By examining always the status of one's mind,
With continuous mindfulness and alertness,
To bring about the good of others—this is the practice of all the
bodhisattvas.

Dedicating the Merit

37. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to dedicate towards
enlightenment
All the virtue to be gained through making effort in these ways,
With wisdom that is purified entirely of the three conceptual

spheres,
So as to dispel the sufferings of the infinity of beings.

Conclusion

Here I have set down for those who wish to follow the bodhisattva path,
Thirty-seven practices to be adopted by all the buddhas' heirs,
Based on what is taught in the sūtras, tantras and treatises,
And following the instructions of the great masters of the past.

Indicating the Infallibility of the Practice

Since my intellect is only feeble and I have studied but a little,
This is not a composition likely to delight the connoisseurs,
Yet since I've relied upon the sūtras and what the saints have taught
I feel these are indeed the genuine trainings of the buddhas' heirs.

Guarding Against Pride and Requesting Forgiveness

Still, the tremendous waves of activity of the bodhisattvas
Are difficult for simple-minded folk like me to comprehend,
And I must therefore beg the indulgence of all the perfect saints
For any contradictions, irrelevancies or other flaws this may contain.

Dedicating the Merits of Composition to Enlightenment

Through whatever merit has here been gained, may all beings
Generate sublime bodhicitta, both relative and absolute,
And through this, come to equal Lord Avalokiteśvara,
Transcending the extremes of existence and quiescence.

*This was composed in a cave near Ngulchu Rinchen by the monk Tokme, a
teacher of scripture and reasoning, for his own and others' benefit.*

| Translated by [Adam Pearcey](#), 2006.

Outlines translated by Khedrup