



The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

*composed by Ngolchu Thogme Rinpoche
with some commentary by His Eminence Garchen Rinpoche*

Introduction

*“All suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness,
Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others.”*

The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva was a text written by Ngolchu Thogme Rinpoche (1295-1369 CE) on the Mahayana practice of developing *bodhicitta* and living one's life as a Bodhisattva. Along with the translation of Thogme's work, a transcription of His Eminence Garchen Tripul Rinpoche's oral commentary on the first ten stanzas of the text (delivered at the Ratnashri Dharma Centre Malaysia, translated into English by Archaya Tamphel and transcribed by Tenzin Choedrak) is included.

His Eminence, before beginning the teaching, advised for students to read Thogme Rinpoche's text once daily and reflect on the meaning of these practices of a bodhisattva. **The root text is in maroon color.**



**I pay homage through my three doors,
To my supreme teacher and protector, Chenrezig,
Who while seeing all phenomena lack coming and going,
Makes single-minded effort for the good of living beings.**

**Perfect Buddhas, source of all well-being and happiness,
Arise from accomplishing the excellent teachings,
And this depends on knowing the practices,
So I will explain the practices of Bodhisattvas.**

In these opening stanzas, the essence of all phenomena neither comes nor goes as it is explained. This means, that when the Buddhas realize the nature of everything, when they recognize the true nature of all phenomena, they find no distinction. From that point of view there is ultimately no difference between buddhas and sentient beings. For those who dwell in the state of Buddhahood, there is no concept that one is going somewhere out of *samsara*, or going back into *samsara*.

However, in order to operate on the relative level and to appear to us (in order to teach and enlighten sentient beings), there is a distinction between Buddhas, who appear in *samsara* to aid us out of compassion, and sentient beings, who are still wandering in *samsara*.

(Chenrezig is the Bodhisattva of Compassion and therefore represents the totality of Thogme Rinpoche's work being commented on here).

**1. Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune,
Hear, think and meditate unwaveringly night and day
In order to free yourself and others from the ocean of cyclic existence
--This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

In the first stanza, the preciousness and richness of human life is elaborated on. It is only with a precious human life that one can most effectively practice the dharma very well.

**2. Attached to your loved ones you are stirred up like water.
Hating your enemies you burn like fire.
In the darkness of confusion, you forget what to adopt and discard.
Give up your homeland -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

Enlightened masters such as the Buddhas, or even like Jetsun Milarepa through his songs, expressed that sentient beings wander about in the world. They remain stuck in samsara due to hatred for enemies and attachment to those who are near and dear to us.

When one lives and keeps cycling in this chain of attachment and aversion, one will remain in samsara and continue to experience much suffering. In order to be released from this cycle of samsara, it is necessary to abide in the state of equanimity. This means one is not attached to either our nears and dears, and neither are we angry and hateful towards enemies.

We might not literally be leaving, or quitting our association with, a homeland altogether. But we can at least recognize attachment and anger as something afflicting and negative. Once we have this knowledge and are aware of it during our life, it is quite similar to renouncing the homeland. Someone who is not aware of this profound wisdom will remain ignorant and continue to wander in samsara.

**3. By avoiding bad objects, disturbing emotions gradually decrease.
Without distraction, virtuous activities naturally increase.
With clarity of mind, conviction in teaching arises.
Cultivate seclusion -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

This third stanza is easy to understand, it just takes practice and hard work to gain virtue and stable meditation practice without distraction. Therefore, Rinpoche did not elaborate further here.

**4. Loved ones who have long kept company will part.
Wealth created with difficulty will be left behind.
Consciousness, the guest, will leave the guesthouse of the body.
Let go of this life -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

This fourth stanza concerns the truth of impermanence. Everything we possess in our life is impermanent, the nature of everything is transitory. Material objects, wealth, friends, and relatives are all ultimately going to be separated from us. Our life is like an illusion and its occurrences are very temporary. These facts have to be contemplated, recalled and held in the mind of the Mahayana practitioner again and again.

**5. When you keep their company your three poisons increase,
Your activities of hearing thinking and meditating decline,
And they make you lose your love and compassion.
Give up bad friends -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas**

The fifth stanza concerns one's connections and associations with companions. Attachment and anger are always defected, always negative; they cannot be positive at all. Even if an individual criticizes your master or guru, one should not develop anger and hatred towards him or her. Hatred is the cause of suffering, and no matter what reason or excuse there is for harboring it, the consequence will always be bitter.

In everyday life, we should learn how to overcome anger. Nowadays, boys and girls live together as friends; of course, this is the result of their karma. However, later on when they find mistakes and see defects with each other, they develop anger. Then, in order to get rid of that anger and the painful consequences of their relationship, the boy and girl will accuse each other of wrongdoing. This is not the solution!

You can only solve a defective situation if you can change your mind from anger to love. By converting one's

mind from anger to love, the practitioner begins to understand that anger is the root of all problems. In complicated relationships, one should view one's partner as someone who can teach you patience; when the relationship becomes irritating, practice patience. Do not harbor hatred and anger.

If people practice in this way, problems can be transformed into something positive; this will help one progress spiritually. It is like a poison being transformed into medicine.

**6. When you rely on them your faults come to an end
And your good qualities grow like the waxing moon.
Cherish spiritual teachers even more than your own body
--This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

This sixth stanza is quite easy to understand. One's teachers and gurus should be respected and taken care of even more than oneself, one should never turn one's back on them.

**7. Bound himself in the jail of cyclic existence,
What worldly god can give you protection?
Therefore when you seek refuge, take refuge in
The Three Jewels which will not betray you --This is the practice of Bodhisattvas**

The seventh stanza concerns refuge, spiritual refuge. Supreme refuge is in the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; no other source of refuge is better. There are many gods and protectors out there, but they are not superior to the enlightened and supreme qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Only deities who are trans-worldly, have gone beyond samsara, like particular protectors and individuals like the Buddha, can we take spiritual refuge in.

**8. The Subduer said that all the unbearable suffering of bad rebirths
Is the fruit of wrongdoing.
Therefore, even at the cost of your life, never do wrong
--This is the practice of Bodhisattvas**

The eighth stanza concerns *karma*, one's actions or deeds, and the result or consequence of them. In this life, all the suffering and miseries individuals experience are results of the ten unvirtuous deeds. These unvirtuous deeds are killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct which occur at the physical level; lying, slandering, using harsh words and talking nonsense which are the four negative actions that arise from speech; then, covetousness and the intention to harm others which are mental wrongdoing.

These negative deeds, actions and thoughts lead to our experience of suffering. In the Buddhist scriptures, it teaches that what we did in the past can be judged by the present condition of our life, and what we are going to experience in the future can be judged by what we are doing now.

For example, if one committed a lot of killing in past lifetimes, one will have a short human life. If in past lifetimes one was a miser and very tight or stingy when it came to generosity, one will take birth and live as a poor person. If in past lifetimes one indulged in deceitfulness, greed and jealousy, then sickness and other consequences will arise as the karmic result.

As, for these reasons, it is obvious that our own afflicting emotions cause our own suffering, we should right away work with them and try to dispel them from the mind.

The Three Lower Realms (of Animals, Hungry Ghosts and Hell Inhabitants) undergo enormous suffering, and these lower realms reflect the three basic afflicting emotions: Anger, Attachment and Ignorance. If we wish to avoid taking birth in these states of existence, we have to dispel these three afflicting emotions from our mind.

The great yogi of Tibet, Jetsun Milarepa, stated that anger is the root and cause of the lower realms. Even at the cost of one's life, one should not develop anger in the mind. At this point, of course, many questions arise from practitioners, such as what happens then if someone tries to kill me. Should I protect myself or just sit, letting someone murder me?

The fact is that, if one has the karma to be killed, no matter how much anger one expresses or develops, no matter how much one's charges at one's enemy, no matter how mentally anguished one becomes, one is going to die. And, if one does not have the karma to die, then one will not be killed.

So, there is no real or practical point with developing anger. When arises in the mind, it destroys all the merits and good seeds we have accumulated over many lifetimes as good practitioners; anger destroys bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is the string by which we hold onto until enlightenment is reached. But, anger cuts that thread and we fall down then. The moment anger arises, it disconnects all our spiritual practice.

For this reason, anger should never be allowed to arise in the mind. If one recognizes anger as poisonous, let it subside. This stanza of Thogme's work is very meaningful; special reflection and emphasis should be placed on it. Anger destroys the root of virtue.

What is the root of virtue? It is love, compassion and bodhicitta.

In our life, we live with parents, friends and children, and grow to have love for the family. But once anger arises in one of us, that love is destroyed in the family. This is how anger ruins the root of virtue and merit. The most supreme type of merit and virtue is developing the relative and ultimate forms of bodhicitta. Only through training oneself in the relative bodhicitta which is love and compassion, can one realize the ultimate bodhicitta which the enlightened ones have attained.

The ego, our constant reaffirmation of the existence of a permanent self which must be satisfied, is the total opposite of love and compassion; it is the opposite of the Mahayana path. As long as one's mind is occupied by the ego's games, love and compassion will not fully arise in the mind.

This can be understood with a simple example. If a mirror is dusty and full of dirt, no reflection can be seen in it. So, if one wipes off all the dust and dirt from this mirror, it has now been made clean. Everything can now be reflected in this mirror.

Similarly, if one fails to diligently cultivate love and compassion for all sentient beings, the ultimate form of bodhicitta cannot be realized by a practitioner. One is like a dead person, spiritually for sure, if there is a complete lack of love, compassion and bodhicitta.

One's body is literally useless, even if it has all the limbs and sense organs, when it is just a dead corpse. Likewise, one's spiritual practice and accomplishment is meaningless, there will be no realization, without bodhicitta.

This ego, which contaminates the mind, can only be wiped out by the love and compassion which aims at benefiting others. For many of us, ordinarily, anger and attachment arise in the mind often. But, if the practitioner is able to recognize and notice it immediately, and at the moment you see it as something negative, it then is no longer a "big deal." That anger and attachment will die and simmer down once one begins to understand they are the roots of unhappiness. This is the beginning of the supreme qualities of bodhicitta. Even if anger arises, love and compassion can recognize it and continue to be active.

**9. Like dew on the tip of a blade of grass,
pleasures of the three worlds
Last only a while and then vanish.
Aspire to the never-changing supreme state of liberation --
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

In our world, we try to derive pleasure and joy from indulging in sensual pleasures and objects. This type of joy and pleasure is merely temporary, being attached to these external forms will ruin you. In the first place, these so-called pleasures are so temporary that they are not worth even being attached to. It like life is really a dream, in our dream state while sleeping we experience a happy moment and, being confused, we actually perceive it as something true, real and authentic.

The same type of attitude we carry-on while supposedly awake during the day. We experience numerous pleasures and like to indulge in the five senses. We then believe them to be real, and become attached to them (and develop hatred for that which disrupts the pleasures our five senses and mind feels).

This is a mistake, since the nature of these external objects and pleasures are impermanent, like an illusion or dream.

All pleasures we derive from sensual objects will end in suffering. If one eats something sweet and poisonous, it definitely will be tasty and sweet to the tongue. But, it is going to damage you after it's eaten.

All the worldly pleasures are quite convincing and interesting in the beginning, but in the end ignorant sentient beings expect happiness out of attachment to sensual pleasures. This is like if one has a skin disease, one scratches and rubs the skin really hard so there is a temporary relief. But this is only going to worsen the disease!! Similarly, if we go for temporary worldly pleasures, and try really hard to get them, then this will just cause more faults. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not expect happiness out of worldly pleasures.

Right now, we have been born as human beings and have many pleasures and happy moments. But if one expects too much and is attached to them, we will suffer because essentially this life is not free from birth, old age, sickness and death, along with the suffering of hunger and thirst.

If we were to think about the pure realms of the Buddha, where practitioners aspire to be born into, one's dharma practice happens spontaneously. One is free from birth, old age, sickness, death and suffering there. Compared to the happiness experiences in the pure realms, worldly happiness is definitely inferior; worldly happiness has no use compared to this happiness.

One should, while human, get use to non-attachment to delicious taste. Delicious and not-delicious are just habits. For some people chili is very tasty because they are use to chili. But the same exact food is painful for so many people; it is not eatable and the taste is too hot.

So the chili itself is not delicious or disgusting, it is our own habits which cause the labeling. Our tongue feels the delicious taste and then we want it. After the food passes away from our tongue and goes down into our stomach, there is no taste at all!

If you are able to develop this type of non-attachment and understanding, then at the moment of death you will not be attached to your wealth and everything which you derive temporary pleasures from. One can have a relaxed death, be non-frustrated and not attached throughout the bardo and into one's next rebirth.

Delicious and not delicious, tasty and not tasty, pleasurable and not pleasurable, these are all conceptualizations; these are no more than your habits. Once you understand this, it will reduce a great deal of attachment to sensual pleasures such as beautiful sights, smells and touch, etc.

The habit of smoking and drinking is very harmful. If one is addicted to smoking drugs and drinking strong alcohol, it eventually kills you. But, the habit is so strong that even though one might know smoking and drinking damages health, one continues to consume until one is dead.

This habit is very much like an animal who is ignorant. One is too ignorant and too stupid when our habit is strong, we consider it tasty and go for it blindly. Once one understands this, then the practitioner can train oneself to get rid of these negative things.

Smoking and drinking makes our precious human body useless, one's future is destroyed. Smoking is not good for the next life either. It contaminates the central energy channel, called the channel of wisdom in our body. It is like when fire in a wooden stove creates so much smoke, it causes the exhaust pipe to become black or even blocked. If one smokes, the energy channels in the body become blocked and this is why a practice such as *phowa* (the transference of consciousness to the pureland) will not be affective to those who are smoking.

It is quite ironic. Normally, all of us like good smells, fragrances and perfumes. But, when it comes to the habit of smoking, we are willing to accept the bad smell. We go on, even though it smells filthy.

Therefore, whenever one wishes to smoke, immediately realize this is harmful, not beneficial and totally unnecessary. One should be mindful and aware of the uselessness and harmfulness of cigarettes; the time will then come when one is able to quit.

**10. When your mothers,
who have loved you since time without beginning,
Are suffering, what use is your own happiness?
Therefore to free limitless living beings,
Develop the altruistic intention -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

This tenth stanza deals with developing love and compassion for all sentient beings. We have a special love, particularly, for our mother and similar affection should be felt for all sentient beings. But, all sentient beings at one time or another have been our mother in our past lives (this was stated by the Buddha himself in the sutras).

When we meet somebody, whether we are close to them or they are a stranger, and even a tiny insect, one should feel immediately that this person was my mother in a past lifetime. Once one is able to think this way about sentient beings, as your mother again and again, a time will come when you can really feel pure love and compassion for them.

So, this tenth stanza is about developing bodhicitta, in relation to understanding the kindness, help and support of the mother.

In order develop bodhicitta, one has to hear about it and then recall the kindness of one's mother until there is a feeling of a high level of love and compassion in the heart and mind for her. Then, we should go further, recognizing that all sentient beings have been our mother in one or another life. They have also been similarly kind and helpful, and in this way one generates equal love and compassion for all sentient beings.

When no sentient being is excluded from your sense of love and compassion, it is bodhicitta. Besides one's mother, two other objects of love and respect are one's teachers and leaders in the country.

Although our parents give birth to our body, if we do not have a teacher to teach us the ways of life, we are like animals. It is the teacher who gives us the eye to see things in order. For this reason, it is necessary to be affectionate towards the teachers from whom who receive teachings from.

Also, one lives a very good life due to having a country with leaders who enact rules, regulations and the necessary disciplines. We have hospitals, roads and everything necessary due to these leaders, so one should be grateful to them.

When one pays taxes, do it with gratitude. One should not be a miser, but instead understand that by paying tax you get all the facilities you need in your life. You alone cannot make the highways, airports, hospitals, and railroad stations; but because one pays taxes and follows the law, these facilities are made possible and peace and harmony is brought in the country.

If one pays taxes with a good heart, it becomes generosity; it is like accumulating merit. But, by not having good thoughts or intentions when paying taxes, one's money is wasted then. So, this is how your mind can change things (Bodhicitta is definitely about changing one's mental attitude).



**11. All suffering comes from the wish for your own happiness.
Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help others.
Therefore exchange your own happiness
For the suffering of others -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**12. Even if someone out of strong desire
Steals all of your wealth or has it stolen,
Dedicate to him your body, your possessions
And your virtue, past, present and future -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**13. Even if someone tries to cut off your head
When you have not done the slightest thing wrong,
Out of compassion take all his misdeeds
Upon yourself -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**14. Even if someone broadcasts all kinds of unpleasant remarks
About you throughout the three thousand worlds,
In return, with a loving mind,
Speak of his good qualities -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**15. Though someone may deride and speak bad words
About you in a public gathering,
Looking on him as a spiritual teacher,
Bow to him with respect -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

16. Even if a person for whom you have cared
Like your own child regards you as an enemy,
Cherish him specially, like a mother
Does her child who is stricken with sickness -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

17. If an equal or inferior person
Disparages you out of pride,
Place him, as you would your spiritual teacher,
With respect on the crown of your head -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

18. Though you lack what you need and are constantly disparaged,
Afflicted by dangerous sickness and spirits,
Without discouragement take on the misdeeds
And the pain of all living beings -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

19. Though you become famous and many bow to you,
And you gain riches to equal Vaishravana's,
See that worldly fortune is without essence,
And do not be conceited -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

20. While the enemy of your own anger is not subdued
Though you conquer external foes, they will only increase.
Therefore with the militia of love and compassion
Subdue your own mind -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

21. Sensual pleasures are like saltwater:
The more you indulge, the more thirst increases.
Abandon at once those things which breed
Clinging attachment -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

22. Whatever appears is your own mind.
Your mind from the start is free from fabricated extremes.
Understanding this, do not take to mind [inherent] signs of subject and object.
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

23. When you encounter attractive objects,
Though they seem beautiful
Like a rainbow in summer, do not regard them as real, and give up attachment.
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

24. All forms of suffering are like a child's death in a dream.
Holding illusory appearances to be true makes you weary.
Therefore, when you meet with disagreeable circumstances,
See them as illusory -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

25. When those who want enlightenment must give even their body,
There is no need to mention external things.
Therefore without hope of return or any fruition
Give generously -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

26. Without ethics you cannot accomplish your own well-being,
So wanting to accomplish others' is laughable.
Therefore without worldly aspirations
Safeguard your ethical discipline -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

27. To Bodhisattvas who want a wealth of virtue
Those who harm are like a precious treasure.
Therefore towards all cultivate patience
Without hostility -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

28. Seeing even Hearers and Solitary Realizers, who accomplish only their own good,
Strive as if to put out a fire on their head,

**For the sake of all beings make joyful effort
Toward the source of all good qualities -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**29. Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed
By special insight with calm abiding,
Cultivate concentration which surpasses
The four formless absorptions -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**30. Since five perfections without wisdom
Cannot bring perfect enlightenment,
Along with skillful means cultivate the wisdom which does not conceive the
Three spheres [as real] -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**31. If you do not examine your errors,
You may look like a practitioner but not act as one.
Therefore, always examining your own errors,
Rid yourself of them -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**32. If through the influence of disturbing emotions
You point out the faults of another Bodhisattva,
You yourself are diminished, so do not mention the faults
Of those who have entered the Great Vehicle -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**33. Reward and respect cause us to quarrel
And make hearing, thinking and meditating decline.
For this reason give up attachment to the households of
Friends, relations and benefactors -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**34. Harsh words disturb the minds of others
And cause deterioration in a Bodhisattva's conduct.
Therefore give up harsh words
Which are unpleasant to others -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**35. Habitual disturbing emotions are hard to stop through counter actions.
Armed with antidotes, the guards of mindfulness and mental alertness
Destroy disturbing emotions like attachment at once, as soon as they arise --
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**36. In brief, whatever you are doing,
Ask yourself, "What is the state of my mind?"
With constant mindfulness and mental alertness
Accomplish others' good -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**37. To remove the suffering of limitless beings,
Understanding the purity of the three spheres,
Dedicate the virtue of effort to enlightenment -- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.**

**For all who want to train on the Bodhisattva path,
I have written The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas
Following what has been said by excellent ones
On the meaning of sutras, tantras and treatises.
Though not poetically pleasing to scholars
Owing to my poor intelligence and lack of learning,
I have relied on the sutras and the words of the excellent,
So I think these Bodhisattva practices are without error.**

**However, as the great deeds of Bodhisattvas
Are hard to fathom for one of my poor intelligence,
I beg the excellent to forgive all faults,
Such as contradictions and non sequiturs.
Through the virtues from this may all living beings**

**Gain the ultimate and conventional altruistic intention
And thereby become like the Protector Chenrezig**

**Who dwells in neither extreme -- not in the world nor in peace.
This was written for his own and others' benefit by the monk Togmay, an exponent of
scripture and reasoning, in a cave in Ngulchu Rinchen.**



[copyright © Simhanada . All rights reserved.](#)

Reproduction by permission *only*.