
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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As usual let us spend some time in our meditation practice.

[Meditation]

Please generate the bodhicitta motivation for receiving the teachings.

Does everyone know what the bodhicitta motivation means? Do the newer students understand that word 'bodhicitta'?

A new student responds: I don't know the meaning of bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit word. In essence, it is the ultimate intention to benefit other sentient beings. Although this brief statement encompasses its meaning, there is, however, a much more elaborate explanation.

The material that we are studying now sits in the classification of Buddhist doctrine called the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. Mahayana is also a Sanskrit word which means 'Great Vehicle'. The literal translation of the word bodhicitta is 'mind of enlightenment', however it refers specifically to the mind that aspires to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Thus, it is an altruistic intention to benefit other beings. In order to be classified as belonging to the Great Vehicle doctrine, a practice has to be based on this altruistic intention to benefit other sentient beings, and the best way to benefit other sentient beings is to lead them to the state of ultimate happiness, where all suffering has been eliminated. This implies that one aspires to lead other beings to the ultimate state of happiness where all qualities are acquired, and all defilements or faults are completely eradicated. We call that state buddhahood or enlightenment.

When, through their altruistic practice and development an individual being experiences a genuine transformation, where their mind becomes imbued with that spontaneous and continuous aspiration to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all living beings - for the purpose of leading all other living beings to that ultimate state of happiness as well - then they become a bodhisattva.

'Bodhisattva' is generally translated as a 'noble being' who holds the mind of bodhicitta unceasingly. In brief, a bodhisattva is a being who has developed the mind of bodhicitta and engages in noble deeds, such as the practices of the six perfections of generosity, morality, patience, joyous effort, concentration and wisdom.

In the text that we are studying, *The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, we have covered the explanation of how to generate the aspirational mind to achieve enlightenment, and now the text further explains that it is

not sufficient to merely develop an aspiration to achieve enlightenment. As a means of further developing and strengthening this aspiration, one must progress to developing engaging bodhicitta. So, the text now presents the vows of engaging bodhicitta. More specifically, it is a presentation of the way to develop engaging bodhicitta by taking the engaging vows.

Engaging instructions

Manner of taking engaging vows (cont.)

The three subheadings here are:

- The suitable life form for taking the vows, [which is also translated as 'suitable basis'].
- The object from whom one is receiving the vows
- The ceremony of taking the vows

You can see here the very logical sequential presentation of the material. First there is a description of the suitable life form or basis necessary to take the vows. Then comes the description of the object from whom one takes the vows, and finally there is the actual explanation of the ritual of taking the vows.

The suitable life form for taking the vows

The following verse in the root text explains the suitable basis for taking vows:

20. *Those who maintain any of the seven kinds
Of individual liberation vows
Have the ideal (pre-requisite) for
The bodhisattva vow, not others.*

The commentary explains the meaning of this verse as follows:

Regarding this, the commentary to *Twenty Vows* by Acharya Bodhibhadra states, "the individual liberation vows are the branches of the Bodhisattva vow from the perspective of the whole lot alone. Hence, the point here is that those who possess other-vows of individual liberation are suitable vessels for perfectly receiving bodhisattva vows, and receiving the precept instruction too. This means that the other ritual relating to refraining from or not refraining from killing and so forth, alone is not presenting here as a suitable vessel for receiving bodhisattva vows."

Having quoted from *Twenty Vows* by Acharya Bodhibhadra, our commentary explains that:

The meaning of this statement is briefly mentioned in the self-commentary. Those who possess permanently or until their last breath any of the actual seven individual liberation vows from full layperson vow to full ordination vow or any common vows of refraining from natural misdeeds, have the fortune to take upon bodhisattva vow but not others.

That is what the verse means. As presented here, the seven individual liberation vows are the full layman's vows, the full laywoman's vows, the probationary nuns' vows, the vows of novice nuns and novice monks, the full ordination vows of monks and the full ordination vows of nuns. These are referred to as the seven practices of self-liberation vows.

Natural misdeeds are naturally occurring misdeeds or negativities such as taking the life of others, stealing, and sexual misconduct, for example. Anyone engaging in these deeds will incur negativity regardless of whether they have taken vows or not, or whether they are

ordained or not. There are also misdeeds in relation to decree. These are misdeeds in relation to the vows or precepts the person has taken. When a lay person engages in certain activities that are prohibited for the ordained for example, it will not be a misdeed because they have not taken such vows.

The commentary emphasises that any of the seven individual liberation vows taken for life will be a basis for receiving the bodhisattva vows.

Then the commentary mentions that:

Since the individual liberation vow is other than bodhisattva vow, it is referred to here as other vow.

This refers back to the seven questions that were raised by Nagtso earlier, although we didn't go through all of them. The third question related to whether a self-liberation vow has to precede the bodhisattva vow or not. The answer is, as explained here, strictly speaking one does not need to have taken a self-liberation vow in order to receive the bodhisattva vows. However, in order for it to be an excellent basis for receiving the bodhisattva vow then it is necessary to have first taken the self-liberation vows. Having either of the self-liberation vows provides a perfect base for receiving the bodhisattva vows. This accords with the sequential presentation of the vows. An individual with lay person's vows, for example, can take the *getsul* or novice vows and then at an appropriate time they can take the full ordination vows. Based on the earlier vows, such an individual would be an excellent basis on which to receive the bodhisattva vows.

As the commentary indicates:

Moreover, the purpose of the bodhisattva vow is to benefit others and for (fulfilling) this, it is imperative to prevent harm and its basis towards others, ...

The 'harm' refers to the three non-virtues of the body and the four of speech, i.e. killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, divisive speech, harmful speech and idle gossip. These are the seven non-virtues that cause harm. The 'basis' for these seven are three non-virtues of the mind i.e. covetousness, harmful intent and wrong views. These ten are referred to as the harm and the basis for bringing harm to others.

As specified here, *it is imperative to prevent* any of these ten which cause harm to others. Thus, avoiding these ten forms a suitable basis on which to take the bodhisattva vows. This emphasis implies that one does not need to have taken the self-liberation vows in order to receive the bodhisattva vows. However, at the very minimum, these bodhisattva vows have to be based on refraining from engaging in the seven harms and the three bases of causing harm to others.

This is logical because in the bodhisattva vows one is making the commitment to bring only benefit to other beings. So without making a strong commitment to completely refrain from harming other beings, one cannot possibly engage in the means to benefit other sentient beings. It is all quite logical. As the commentary states:

... the Self-commentary says, "that is to say a special life suited for holding moral vow."

This means that one has to have a commitment to observe the avoidance of these seven harms and three bases.

Now, why is one-day layperson vow not mentioned as the suitable basis (to receive Bodhisattva vow)? The reason is because its duration is short and it is not distant from non-virtues and desire. Therefore, it is not suitable life-basis for receiving bodhisattva vow.

Although they are part of the self-liberation vows, one-day vows are not included in the seven because they are of very short duration, as they are only taken for twenty-four hours.

The implication here is that the suitable basis for receiving and then holding the bodhisattva vows, has to be a lifelong commitment to moral conduct. A short commitment such as, 'Oh, I will avoid causing harm to others for a day or two' will not be a sufficient basis for the bodhisattva vows. As many other teachings emphasise, morality is absolutely essential for any progress in one's practice, and this is also emphasised here with an analogy. Just as the ground serves as the basis for all animate living beings and inanimate objects such as trees, plants and so on, likewise morality serves as the basis on which all other vows and realisations can be developed.

Next the commentary presents another qualm:

Since the individual liberation vow will become nullified when the death occurs, how can it be a suitable basis?

This is really a very reasonable qualm or doubt that is being raised. What it is basically saying is that the commitments of the self-liberation vows only exist until the time of death. So when death occurs one will lose any self-liberation vows that one has taken. The question here is: if one loses them then how can they be a basis for the bodhisattva vows?

As the commentary explains:

In response to this, the Great Yogi says, "a walking stick helps an old man to stand up but afterwards the stick doesn't fall because the old man holds it.

This is a very vivid analogy. An old person has to depend on a stick to stand up, but once they are actually standing up they are preventing the stick from falling down, because they are holding it up.

The commentary further explains:

Likewise, initially the individual liberation vow serves as a basis for one to receive it (bodhisattva vow), and then afterward, one is able to refrain from harmfulness or not staggered until reaching to the state of enlightenment due to bodhisattva vow."

In relation to the analogy presented earlier, the self-liberation vows basically encompass refraining from harming others and from engaging in the bases of that harm. That is then further held by the bodhisattva vows. Receiving the bodhisattva vows, and then practising them, also encompasses refraining from harming others and the bases as well. So while refraining from harming others and its bases serves as the initial basis for receiving bodhisattva vows, once the bodhisattva vows are taken, that in turn will hold and protect the self-liberation vows encompassed by those bodhisattva vows.

The commentary then states:

From this, it is obvious that in the past there was a usage of the terms a suitable or unsuitable life-basis for the vow. This explanation also presents the response to the third question of the Nagtso's system. As an implication of the special kind of life-basis (to receive Bodhisattva vow) the root text says;

21. *The Tathagata spoke of seven kinds
Of individual liberation vow.
The best of these is glorious pure conduct,
Said to be the vow of a fully ordained person.*

The commentary then raises another qualm or doubt:

As to those who have any of the seven individual liberation vows, are there any differences among them in terms of higher and lower?

In response to that, the commentary then explains:

Regarding this as mentioned in the Vinaya sutra, 'The Tathagata spoke of seven kinds of individual liberation vow,' the vow of celibacy is higher than layperson vow and then from among the vows of celibacy, the glorious and excellent one is the full ordination vow which signifies the full commitment and devotion to the Victorious Doctrine. Hence, the full ordination vow is asserted as the most desirable life-basis to receive bodhisattva vow.

As explained here, the seven classes of self-liberation vows can be categorised into layperson's vows and ordination vows. Of these two classes, the ordination vows are supreme, and within the ordination vows, full ordination vows are superior to the novice vows which are superior to probationary vows.

The reason for that is:

... the glorious and excellent one is the full ordination vow which signifies the full commitment and devotion to the Victor's Doctrine [or the Buddha's doctrine].

As a way to back up this assertion *the full ordination vow is asserted as the most desirable life-basis on which to receive bodhisattva vows as it is full commitment and devotion to the Victor's Doctrine.*

The emphasis here is on following the doctrine of the Buddha, and the self-liberation vows are the way to enter and adopt the Buddha's doctrine. There is no other way; taking full ordination vows is making a full commitment to the Buddha's doctrine.

In summary, *the most desirable or suitable life-basis on which to receive the bodhisattva vows* is the vows of a fully ordained monk or nun.

One example of the demarcation between the two types of vows is the third of the seven misdeeds, which is refraining from sexual misconduct. When a layperson takes the vow of refraining from sexual misconduct it only refers to specific forms of misconduct. When one takes the ordination vows then the sexual misconduct entails abstaining from all sexual contact, which is the vow of celibacy.

We can see here how the Buddha presented the sequence of vows in accordance with the capacity of those who take those vows. If the Buddha had required that lay people abstain from all sexual contact, then that would have made it very difficult for lay people to take those

vows. What is manageable for lay people is to refrain from sexual misconduct, not the sexual act itself.

When someone feels they have the capacity to take the ordination vows then they make a commitment to abstain from sexual contact altogether. In this way, we can see how the Buddha very meticulously and very skilfully guided disciples, so that the earlier vows serve as the basis for the later vows. It is said that the self-liberation vows are the basis for receiving not only bodhisattva vows, but they also establish a suitable basis for tantric vows.

To get a better understanding, in the self-liberation vows, beginning with the lay vows and then ordination vows, there is a commitment to **avoid taking a human's life**. This vow is not all that difficult to observe, as anyone in their right mind naturally refrains from taking another human's life. Breaking the vow means taking a human's life, so maintaining that vow is not difficult.

As mentioned earlier, for a layperson, the vow of **refraining from sexual misconduct** does not involve abstaining from sexual contact altogether, but refers to specific acts of sexual misconduct. Likewise taking the vow to **avoid stealing** is quite easy to observe for most people.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, **refraining from lying** would not be a problem for most people, however the fifth vow of **avoiding intoxicants** might be problematic for some. His own senior tutor, Ling Rinpoche, allowed those who found it very difficult to abstain from drinking altogether to have a drink occasionally. His Holiness says he follows that tradition. After giving this explanation at his teachings in Bodhgaya, which I attended, His Holiness encouraged those who were willing to take all five lay vows, since it is not too difficult to observe all five of them. However, one doesn't have to decide to take all five lay vows at the same time, as there is a tradition of choosing whichever of the five you feel confident you can observe. These are points to consider.

If, having taken lay vows, one breaks one of the five vows, such as taking the life of another person, then that can be confessed and purified. If one breaks the vow of sexual misconduct then that can again be confessed and purified, and likewise with stealing, drinking or lying. But if one were to break all five vows then one will have to retake them all again, in order to restore the vows to an intact state.

We can easily see the significance of observing these vows, as doing so will produce a more harmonious and conducive environment. This can be clearly understood when we think about the opposite when these vows are not observed. The greatest fear in any society is that one's life is under threat. Taking the life of others is taking their most precious possession. Likewise, when it is known that there are thieves in a particular area, then that also brings lots of anxiety as everyone in the area is living in constant fear. This clearly brings about so much harm.

Wherever there is any kind of area that it is known to be unsafe, with threats to one's life or one's possessions, one will have to always be cautious and on guard and uncomfortable in that area. Some of you might have had

the experience of being in an area where you have a bit of money, and it is known that there are robbers and pickpockets about. You become very anxious then, don't you? You really have to always be on guard and cautious, so you are never really comfortable. Whereas if you are in an area where there are no known thieves and robbers around, you can be very relaxed even if you do have some money and possession. This is how we can see that observing these vows of intentionally refraining from harming others brings about a very peaceful atmosphere.

In terms of refraining from lying, His Holiness says, 'Oh, you don't have to worry too much about that'. What he is saying is that the lying here refers to a very specific lie which is **lying about the attainment of superhuman qualities**. One will be breaking the vow of lying when one lies in order to deceive others by explicitly stating or implying to others that one has obtained certain kinds of realisations or attainments when in fact one has not. So it is this specific lie about the attainment of superhuman qualities which would break the vow of avoiding lying.

For example, if someone were to ask you, 'Are you clairvoyant? Can you read the minds of other people?' and you don't have that ability, then you would break your vow if you said, 'Yes, I can', or even if you nodded your head to imply that you can. According to the Vinaya text, one does not have to verbalise a lie to break this vow of lying. There are also physical gestures one could use to imply that one has clairvoyance when in fact one doesn't. This is a lie that breaks one's vow.

It is the same with calm abiding. If someone asks whether you have attained calm abiding and you imply that you have, then you have broken your vow. Sometimes others raise a question. During the Kalachakra teachings in Bodhgaya a young Tibetan who was sitting near me asked, 'Oh, Geshe-la, have you attained calm abiding?', and my response was, 'No, I have not attained calm abiding, however I do have a happy mind'. This young man was not just an ordinary Tibetan, but he had once been a monk and had studied quite extensively. As he had studied a lot of logic he did not accept my answer right away. He said, 'Well then, how does one get a happy mind?'. In response to that I said, 'When you reduce your discursive thoughts, the mind becomes clearer and then the mind naturally becomes happier'. He then spent a few minutes thinking about this point; my answer seemed to have made an impact on him.

Later, I got to know him better, and I found out that he had been a monk in a Namgyal Monastery for about eleven years, and studied the debating text quite well. That is how we got to know each other, and since then I have had other encounters with him. As we got to know each other, he really took a liking to me and wanted to introduce his wife and his two children to me after a teaching session. However, at that time, there were some others from Malaysia who were asking me questions and I was involved with them. Later he commented, 'Oh, Geshe-la, you seemed to be really busy with your disciples, so I didn't get to introduce my wife and children to you'.

There was another young monk who took it upon himself to help me with getting down from the dais, although I didn't really need any help. He also tried to help the young monks who took a liking to me. Later he said, 'Oh, that person you were having a conversation with earlier is actually very well-known. He was very good with his studies and debates and is known to be a scholar in his own right'. Later I heard that he works in America in, I think, the Tibetan National Radio Broadcasting Corporation, where he is the head of the organisation.

He was also the organiser of His Holiness' Kalachakra event in Washington and was apparently quite closely connected with Richard Gere and Samdong Rinpoche. He told me that Richard Gere can be quite miserly, 'so I didn't charge him'. Of course, he would have been saying that in jest because Richard Gere, as many of you know, has been very generous in helping the Tibetan cause; he has given a lot of his own time and money to spread awareness of the Tibetan cause.

I got to know Richard Gere a little bit when I was at Varanasi, when I met him and had some meals with him. When I said I was from Australia, he said, 'Oh, I've never been to Australia, I would like to come there some day', but he hasn't made a trip here so far. In our conversation he made comments like, 'Oh, it would be very nice if His Holiness gave a teaching on the Four Noble Truths'. I understood from this that he is interested in developing a good foundation of Dharma knowledge.

We seem to have got side-tracked from the point about the lie of deceiving others about one's realisations. We need to be very mindful of this, as these days there seem to be many self-proclaimed lamas who are engaging in this kind of behaviour.

As a way to back up the earlier points about ordination vows the commentary quotes the *Moonlight Sutra*.

"with the excellent thing (vow) of full ordination,
Cultivate the excellent noble mind of enlightenment."

Quoting from the sutra, the commentary continues:

It also says, "of the three - is the full ordination the best or mediocre?"

Here, *of the three* refers to within the three levels of ordination vows: probationary vows, novice vows and full ordination vows. It is saying that of these three, full ordination vows are the best.

"The vessel illuminating the Jewel light
Of the Victorious Doctrine
Is a saffron robed child of Shakyas clan
Displaying great austerity"

In saying *the vessel illuminating the jewel light of the Victorious Doctrine is a saffron robed child of Shakyas clan* the term 'child' is used in the sense of a king's heir. Just like a crown prince acting as a substitute for his father, a saffron-robed monk acts as a substitute for the Buddha. A saffron robed monk refers specifically to a monk who has taken full ordination vows, which is said to be a precious state. In these times, we can see that how, with his extensive deeds propagating the Buddha's doctrine, the Dalai Lama definitely represents the Buddha. This is how we need to understand the implication of these lines in the commentary.

In places where the Buddha has taught it is essential for a substitute to preserve the Buddha's doctrine and make it flourish in order to benefit other beings. In these times we need look no further than His Holiness the Dalai Lama for a substitute for the Buddha.

The commentary then presents yet another qualm:

Now if you ask, when the person with an individual liberation vow takes upon a bodhisattva vow, does his/her (former vow) change its status (into latter one) or he/she will have both the vows?

Basically, the answer is that the earlier vows do not change later vows. Rather, the individual would hold both vows. Further:

In the Nesurpa's Tenrim (The Stages of the Doctrine) it is said that Jowo holds the view of vows being added progressively that he/she will have both the vows.

The main point is that an individual can hold two separate sets of vows.

Then as the commentary further explains:

Because they both are no other than a moral sense of restraint, and that abiding in any of seven individual liberation vows characterises a moral sense of restraint, they are one. They can also be treated as separate on the ground that individual liberation vows are regarded as a substance, which enables the individual to prevent and stop harming others. However, bodhisattva vows are not regarded as a substance but it enables the individual to only benefit others.

The bodhisattva vows are not vows as understood in some of the lower schools, which assert vows to be a type of form. The main thing to remember is that one has two separate sets of vows. As the commentary also mentions, this answers the fourth of the seven questions mentioned earlier, which asks whether the vows change or transform into another vow, or maintain their own identity?

The final assertion here is that one has both sets of vows. With this understanding, we need to understand that a lay man or woman who wishes to become ordained will first take the lay vows. Then based on those lay vows, they will take the novice vows. When they take the novice vows, they still have the lay vows that they took earlier. So the earlier lay vows will still be intact and then on top of that they will have novice vows. Later when the novice takes the full ordination vows then they would have the basis of the lay vows and the novice's vows, on which they lay the full ordination vows. That is how they will have all three sets of vows in their mind.

However, one needs to be able to make the distinction between a lay person who takes the lay vows, and the novice. Although a novice will have the lay vows in their mind they are not a lay person observing the lay vows. That distinction has to be understood. The monk who has full ordination vows would have the novice vows as well but he is not a novice; he is a fully ordained monk. This distinction can be understood if one is acquainted with some form of debate, otherwise it might be a bit confusing.

It is said that the bodhisattva vows are based on the restraint of the self-liberation vows, but the self-liberation

vows are not the bodhisattva vows. They are vows of restraint but not the actual bodhisattva vows. That point also has to be understood.

This will be explained more in detail later on.

The order of taking the bodhisattva vows will be explained further on, but first one has to make some sort of pledge to observe ethics or morality. While not the actual bodhisattva vow, this forms the basis on which one will take the actual bodhisattva vow. This distinction will be explained later.

The translation of the commentary on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* called *Joy of the Blossomed Excellent* by Panchen Lobsang Choekyi Gyaltzen is used with the kind permission of Samdup Tsering.

Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version

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