

The
Bodhisattva
Vow

Also by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

Meaningful to Behold
Clear Light of Bliss
Heart of Wisdom
Universal Compassion
Joyful Path of Good Fortune
Guide to Dakini Land
Heart Jewel
Great Treasury of Merit
Introduction to Buddhism
Understanding the Mind
Tantric Grounds and Paths
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GESHE KELSANG GYATSO

The
Bodhisattva
Vow

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO HELPING OTHERS



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Illustrations

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Through the merits created in producing this work, may all living beings find the happiness they seek.

*Roy Tyson,
Administrative Director,
Manjushri Kadampa
Meditation Centre,
July 1995.*

Introduction

The subject of this book is the Bodhisattva's moral discipline. The Sanskrit term 'Bodhisattva' is the name given to anyone who, motivated by great compassion, has generated bodhi-chitta, which is a spontaneous wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. Since everyone has within their mental continuum the seeds of great compassion and bodhichitta, and since everyone can at some time meet a Mahayana Dharma Teacher, it is possible for everyone to become a Bodhisattva by training in the Mahayana teachings.

The Bodhisattva's moral discipline is a higher moral discipline, and it is the main path that leads to the ultimate happiness of great enlightenment. In general, moral discipline is a virtuous determination to abandon any non-virtuous action. For example, if on seeing the disadvantages of killing, stealing or sexual misconduct we make a firm decision to refrain from such actions, this is moral discipline. Similarly, the determination to refrain from lying, divisive speech, hurtful



Buddha Shakyamuni

Golden in colour, right hand touching the earth and left hand in meditative equipoise holding a bowl filled with nectar; he abides in this Unforgetting World, and purifies all the negative actions accumulated over 10,000 aeons

speech, idle chatter, covetousness, malice and holding wrong views is also moral discipline.

In *Pratimoksha Sutra*, Buddha says that it would be better for us to die than to break our moral discipline, because death destroys only this one life, whereas breaking our moral discipline destroys our opportunity to experience happiness in many future lives and condemns us to experience the sufferings of lower rebirths over and over again.

In Buddhist countries, moral discipline is regarded as very important, and it is for this reason that monks and nuns are held in such high esteem. However, it is not only monks and nuns who need to practise moral discipline; everyone needs to practise moral discipline because it is the root of all future happiness. Even if we are a very learned scholar, if we ignore the practice of moral discipline our spiritual activities will be unsuccessful and we shall experience many problems in the future. On the other hand, if we conscientiously observe moral discipline, we can solve all our human problems and complete our spiritual practices.

The practice of moral discipline is the main cause of rebirth as a human. If we practise generosity without moral discipline, we shall experience some good results in the future, but not in a human body. For example, we may be reborn as a pet cat or dog that is well cared for. The reason why some animals receive great care from humans is that they practised generosity in previous lives, but the reason why they have taken a lower rebirth is that they broke their moral discipline in previous lives.

If we practise moral discipline by abandoning negative actions, such as killing, with the motivation to obtain human

happiness, this moral discipline will protect us from lower rebirth and cause us to be reborn as a human being in the future. If we practise moral discipline with a sincere wish to attain liberation for oneself, or full enlightenment for the sake of all living beings, this is higher moral discipline. There are three types of higher moral discipline: Pratimoksha moral discipline, Bodhisattva moral discipline and Tantric moral discipline. These types of moral discipline are distinguished by the motivation with which they are practised and the particular downfalls that they oppose. Pratimoksha moral discipline is motivated mainly by the aspiration to attain personal liberation, Bodhisattva moral discipline mainly by bodhichitta, and Tantric moral discipline mainly by special Tantric bodhichitta.

Not every practice of moral discipline entails taking vows. For example, if we realize the many faults of killing and, as a result, make a strong decision to abstain from killing, we are practising moral discipline even if we have not taken a vow. A vow is a virtuous determination to abandon particular faults that is generated in conjunction with a traditional ritual. Just as there are three types of moral discipline, so there are three types of vow: Pratimoksha vows, Bodhisattva vows and Tantric vows.

'Pratimoksha' means 'personal liberation', and so a Pratimoksha vow is a vow that is motivated mainly by the wish to attain personal liberation. There are eight types of Pratimoksha vow:

- (1) Nyen-nay vows – one-day ordination vows
- (2) Genyenma vows – vows of a laywoman

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- (3) Genyenpa vows – vows of a layman
- (4) Getsulma vows – vows of a novice nun
- (5) Getsulpa vows – vows of a novice monk
- (6) Gelobma vows – preliminary vows taken before becoming a fully ordained nun
- (7) Gelongma vows – vows of a fully ordained nun
- (8) Gelongpa vows – vows of a fully ordained monk

The first three are lay vows and the remaining five are ordination vows. Buddha gives extensive instructions on the Pratimoksha moral discipline and the Pratimoksha vows in the *Vinaya Sutras*.

This book is concerned principally with the Bodhisattva vows. In *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Shantideva advises those who want to know about the Bodhisattva vows first to study *Akashagarbha Sutra*, and then, for a more detailed explanation of the daily practices of a Bodhisattva, to read *Compendium of Trainings*. Shantideva explains that those who have taken the Bodhisattva vows should know what the root and secondary downfalls are, how to prevent the vows from degenerating, how to purify downfalls, and how to complete the practice of the Bodhisattva vows. All these are explained in this book.

Once we have taken the Bodhisattva vows, we should strive to prevent them from degenerating by retaking our vows several times each day, and then avoid incurring root or secondary downfalls by relying upon mindfulness, alertness and conscientiousness.

There are four main causes of the degeneration of the Pratimoksha, Bodhisattva or Tantric vows, which are known as

the 'four doors of receiving downfalls'. These are: not knowing what the downfalls are, lack of respect for Buddha's instructions, strong delusions and non-conscientiousness.

To close the first door, we should learn what the downfalls are and how they are incurred. This can be done by listening to teachings on the subject or by reading authentic commentaries, such as the instructions given below.

To close the second door, we should try to overcome disrespect by contemplating the following:

Since Buddha is omniscient, knowing all past, present and future phenomena simultaneously and directly, and since he has great compassion for all living beings without exception, there is no valid reason for developing disrespect towards his teachings. It is only due to ignorance that I sometimes disbelieve them.

To close the third door, we should try to subdue our strong delusions by practising the meditations described in *The New Meditation Handbook*. If, by practising Lamrim, we are able always to maintain good intentions such as love, compassion and bodhichitta, there will be no basis for incurring Pratimoksha or Bodhisattva downfalls; and if, by practising generation stage and completion stage, we overcome ordinary appearances and ordinary conceptions, there will be no basis for incurring Tantric downfalls.

We can close the fourth door, non-conscientiousness, by repeatedly bringing to mind the disadvantages of incurring downfalls and the advantages of pure moral discipline. In this way, we become more conscientious.

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In brief, the method for preventing our vows from degenerating is to train in renunciation, bodhichitta, the correct view of emptiness, generation stage and completion stage. By sincerely practising these, we overcome our ordinary attitudes and control our mind, thereby removing any basis for downfalls.



Complete Subduer with the Essence of Vajra
*Blue in colour, with both hands in meditative equipoise
holding a vajra; he abides in Essence in Space above
this world, and purifies all the negative actions
accumulated over 10,000 aeons*

End of preview

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