

# *The Bodhisattva Vows*

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# The Bodhisattva Vows

## *Wishing Bodhichitta*

The commitments of having taken the vows to develop wishing bodhichitta are divided into two sections:

1. How to guard the vows from degenerating in this life
2. How to maintain and enhance your practice in future lives

## *I How to guard the vows from degenerating in this life*

A. To develop inspiration, contemplate the advantages of bodhichitta:

1. It is the only door to the Mahayana path
2. You will be called a child<sup>1</sup> of the buddhas
3. You will surpass in brilliance even the Hinayana arhats
4. You will become an object of highest respect and offering
5. You will easily complete the extensive collections of merit
6. The obstructions of your negative karmic impressions will quickly be purified
7. You will be successful in whatever you attempt and you will be without need
8. You will not be overcome by either harm or interference
9. You will be an inexhaustible source of comfort and happiness for sentient beings
10. You will quickly attain all the realizations of the path to enlightenment

B. To strengthen one's bodhichitta, contemplate it and recite the prayer three times a day and three times at night. It is very heavy negative karma to give up bodhichitta because you promised to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment; it is heavy negative karma to break your promise and to abandon bodhichitta. You should never be disheartened even if it seems that it will take such a long time to receive enlightenment. Instead of becoming dismayed, complete the benefits and advantages and revive your vows by saying the prayer of wishing bodhichitta:

O buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gurus, please listen to what I now say from the depths of my heart. Just as all the buddhas of the past have developed the thought of enlightenment, true bodhichitta, then practiced its stages of graded development, following the trainings for all buddhas' children<sup>1</sup>, so may I too, for the sake of all beings, develop bodhichitta and follow the trainings, exactly as all bodhisattvas have done.

C. Do not give up bodhichitta because of the mischievous deeds of sentient beings. This happens when you think that you will not work for the welfare of a particular sentient being who has harmed you.

D. Work to accumulate the two collections of merit and wisdom. In the beginning, you can acquire extensive merit by making offerings to the poor and to the Three Jewels; and wisdom by contemplating emptiness. This will help to strengthen your bodhichitta.

## 2 How to maintain and enhance your practice in future lives

### *A Abandon the four negative dharmas:*

1. Knowingly confusing one's abbot, guru, or other holy beings with lies, such as changing the subject when your guru asks you to do something, or not telling your guru of your negative actions because you are afraid of him scolding you.
2. Discouraging others from practicing virtuous actions, or causing them to regret virtue that they have created, such as saying, "It is good but it will be difficult for you to maintain that practice," when someone is practicing renunciation. You cause them to doubt their virtuous practice. Even if they do not regret their virtuous action, your encouragement to do so is a negative dharma.
3. Abusing a bodhisattva out of anger. Even if a bodhisattva is at fault, if your abusive words are heard by others, you create this negative dharma.
4. Putting on an air of having selfless thought, but having ulterior motives other than the pure wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, such as pretending to be a scholar or concealing your shortcomings.

### *B Practice the four positive dharmas that oppose the four negative ones:*

1. Abandon deliberately lying to any sentient being, whether for the sake of humor or even at the cost of your life.
2. Do not discriminate amongst sentient beings. (This opposes the fourth negative dharma).
3. Abandon criticizing bodhisattvas. Since you do not know who

is a bodhisattva and who is not, it is best to treat all sentient beings as bodhisattvas and buddhas.

4. Take upon yourself the responsibility to establish all sentient beings in the Mahayana path by:
  - encouraging their enthusiasm for the Mahayana path. Even if you are not successful, you must always try to do this.
  - rejoicing in the virtues of others instead of being jealous of their wish to attain enlightenment.
  - cultivating love and compassion in all your actions.

This opposes the second negative dharma.

The result of practicing these wholesome dharmas and avoiding the negative dharmas is never to be separated from bodhichitta.

## *Engaging Bodhichitta*

The commitments of having taken the vows to develop engaging bodhichitta are divided into two sections:

1. eighteen root vows
2. forty-six branch vows

### *I The Eighteen Root Vows*

You must abandon:

1. Praising yourself or belittling others out of attachment to receiving offerings or admiration.
2. Even though you are able, not giving material aid to others through miserliness; or not teaching Dharma to those who are suffering and without a protector because you want to amass knowledge just for yourself.
3. Not forgiving others but harboring a grudge and holding it even when they apologize.

4. Abandoning the Mahayana teachings by saying that some parts of the teachings (pitaka) are not teachings of the Buddha and propounding your own fabricated or perverted doctrine.
5. Taking back offerings to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha or taking them by robbery or devious schemes; using for your own purpose material dedicated to the Sangha.
6. Abandoning or despising the holy Dharma by criticizing the scriptures or practices of any of the three vehicles of the shravakas, the pratyekabuddhas, or the bodhisattvas; if you have an inclination for tantra, criticizing the Paramitayana; if you are inclined towards the Mahayana, criticizing the Hinayana and vice versa. You should not criticize the difference in various teachings because Buddha taught with skillful means, in various ways, to guide disciples with different dispositions. This criticism is heavier than destroying all the stupas on earth.
7. Harming an ordained person, inflicting violence on them, stealing their robes, or causing them to lose their vows.
8. Committing any of the five heinous actions (to kill your mother, your father, or an arhat, to cause disunity amongst the Sangha, and to wound a buddha).
9. Cultivating and holding wrong views such as sectarianism, denying the existence of the Three Jewels, or denying the existence of the law of cause and effect.
10. Destroying any town or country, such as by fire, bombs, pollution, black magic, and so forth. This includes destroying any place that is inhabited by others, such as houses.
11. Teaching voidness to those who are untrained or not ready to understand it. This could be harmful due to causing fear and

causing one to abandon bodhichitta, thus, falling to the level of Hinayana.

12. Turning someone away from working to attain enlightenment and encouraging him to work merely for his own liberation. For example, if someone is training in bodhichitta, saying to that person, “If you practice this, you will never attain enlightenment. Would it not be better to train in Hinayana? At least you will be free from samsara.”
13. Encouraging others to abandon their pratimoksha vows. For example, if someone is abiding by his vows, saying, “What is the use of that? Would it not be better to train in bodhichitta whereby your nonvirtues of body, speech, and mind will automatically subside?” If that person abandons his or her pratimoksha vows, you have created a transgression. Saying that the pratimoksha vows are not necessary for Mahayana practice is wrong. They are the best working basis for tantra.
14. Causing others to hold the incorrect views that you might hold regarding the Hinayana teachings, such as saying that by practicing the Hinayana, one can never give up attachment, or be released from suffering and delusions. If the other person believes you, it is a transgression.
15. Proclaiming false realizations of voidness. Although you have not understood emptiness, teaching others, “If you meditate on this, you will be like me and you will understand emptiness directly.” This cheats others through pretension. If the other person believes you have realized emptiness, it is a transgression.
16. Accepting as gifts material you know has been stolen or embezzled from the Three Jewels or from a bhikshu.

17. Taking material from someone who is meditating on calm abiding and giving it to someone who merely recites texts. Such an action may cause the meditator to abandon his or her practice.
18. Abandoning bodhichitta by thinking, “I cannot help sentient beings,” or “I do not want to help this particular sentient being.”

### *The Four Conditions*

Except for vows 9 and 18, four conditions are required to completely transgress the major vows, in which case, you will need to take the vows again in order to restore them.

1. You fail to regard the action as wrong; or you know that you are breaking a vow, but you do not care. Because you lack faith in karma, you think that doing a negative action (or breaking a vow) does not matter. Due to ignorance you may not think that the action is negative, and so you act contrary to the vow. Recognizing that the action is negative makes the transgression incomplete.
2. Not abandoning the thought to do the action again. If you do not regret the action and generate the wish to avoid it in the future, or if you have the wish to do the action again, then this contributes to a complete transgression. If you wish to never commit such an action ever again, then the transgression is incomplete.
3. Rejoicing or admiring yourself for having done the action. For example, if you break the first vow and then think, “How good it was that I could show off my good qualities.” If you feel upset or regret the action, the transgression is incomplete.
4. Having no shame or consideration for others. You do not care about the consequences of the action for yourself or for

others. You are careless in karma, you do not feel that the action has anything to do with your karma.

### *If Vows Are Broken*

If any of the eighteen root vows are broken, you lose all of your bodhisattva vows, and, therefore, should retake them as soon as possible. If the vows are not broken from the root (i.e. all four factors are not present, but one, two or three of them are), your vows—while not lost—have still degenerated. It is important to purify any transgressions through applying the four opponent powers<sup>2</sup> and restore the full strength of the vows in your mind-stream by taking them again.

You can retake the bodhisattva vows with a qualified master or by yourself, in front of an image of the Buddha. Visualize the image as one with your guru and repeat the prayer for taking the bodhisattva vows three times (*see page 21*) with strong intention to retake or restore them.

## *2 The Forty-Six Branch Vows*

You are to abandon the following actions:

*Vows 1–7 are in connection with the perfection of generosity*

1. Not making offerings everyday to the Three Jewels with your body, speech, and mind, by making prostrations, offering praises, and meditating on their qualities.
2. Without trying to oppose your greed or dissatisfaction with what you have, following the mind that strives to accumulate more.
3. Not showing respect for your elders—those who have taken these vows before you. You should not think that you are equal to or compete with them. It is better to make offerings

to them. If you respect masters and elders, it increases your knowledge and brings prosperity to the place.

4. Through hatred or laziness, not answering or giving wrong or distorted answers to sincerely asked questions that you are capable of answering.
5. Not accepting invitations or offerings of food or clothes from others because of either anger—wanting to hurt the other person’s feelings; pride—considering yourself of too high a rank to be seen with humble people; or jealousy—thinking that others of a higher rank than yourself will look upon you with scorn if you are with humble people.
6. Not accepting gifts of money, gold, and so forth from others, such as a sponsor, because of anger, pride, jealousy, laziness, or harboring a grudge. Not accepting because of compassion, seeing that the person will be short of that item, is not a transgression of this vow.
7. Out of hatred, laziness, jealousy, miserliness, a grudge, or negligence, not giving teachings to someone who is interested and sincerely approaches you for Dharma. You should not think of your own hardship in giving teachings.

*Vows 8–16 are in connection with the perfection of morality*

8. Ignoring, belittling, not forgiving, and not helping those who have broken their moral discipline by cultivating the ten immoralities, defiling their pratimoksha vows, committing the five uninterrupted crimes or breaking a root bodhisattva vow. Instead of being hateful and disdainful, you should generate compassion.
9. Not instilling faith in those who follow a path that is not your own practice or your main interest. For example, if a follower of the Hinayana desires that kind of teaching, it should be

given so that he develops faith in that path. If you refuse to give a requested teaching that you are qualified to teach, it is a transgression.

10. Performing actions which are of lesser benefit to others because of rigidly adhering to the vinaya. By preoccupying yourself with small activities, you may miss an opportunity to help sentient beings. If you have an opportunity to immaculately benefit others, you transgress this vow by rigidly adhering to the vinaya and the seven virtues of body and speech, even though it hinders your opportunity to help.
11. Not committing one of the seven nonvirtues of body and speech to benefit others out of compassion. If circumstances deem it necessary, a bodhisattva is allowed to commit one of these nonvirtues and must do so. However, you must be very careful. Without having actualized bodhichitta, it is difficult to transform into virtue the seven nonvirtues of body and speech.
12. Accepting material that has been gained by yourself or others through one of the five wrong livelihoods:
  - flattery: praising others to gain something for yourself
  - hinting: such as saying, “The gift that you gave before was so nice,” thereby implying that you want more
  - bribery: giving a small thing to receive a larger one
  - extortion or blackmail: pressuring somebody so that he has no choice
  - hypocrisy: changing your usual actions to make a good impression so that others will give you something
13. Having your main interest be in idle gossip and frivolous activities, such as dancing, playing sports, listening to the radio, drinking, or involving others in frivolous talk. All of these cause your mind to wander, and you waste time that could be used to practice Dharma.

14. Wrongly thinking that as bodhisattvas remain in samsara for three countless great eons and are not afraid of delusions, it is not necessary to try to abandon delusions and achieve nirvana. This is incorrect thinking. Bodhisattvas come to this world to benefit sentient beings, but they have an even greater renunciation of samsara and wish for nirvana than Hinayana practitioners. However, through their great compassion, they will happily take birth in the *naraks* if this would benefit just one sentient being. It is mistaken to not cultivate the opponents to the delusions and try to achieve nirvana, and also a mistake to dissuade others from trying to attain nirvana because of the above wrong view.
15. Not trying to avoid a bad reputation or not abandoning the bad habits of body and speech that are the cause of your bad reputation. In order to be more effective at helping others, you need to abandon notoriety. You must try to stop a bad reputation, whether it is deserved or not, so that you can benefit others. Any other motivation is part of the eight worldly dharmas.
16. Not correcting the deluded actions of others when you are capable of doing so, that is, not pointing out somebody's negative habits of body or speech. When wrathfulness would be beneficial, not punishing a nonvirtuous person to correct him because you think it would hurt his feelings or because of fear of his anger.

*Vows 17–20 are in connection with the perfection of patience*

17. Becoming angry and retaliating with your body, speech, or mind when you are insulted or blamed, beaten, the object of somebody's anger, or when your shortcomings are exposed to others.

18. Rejecting someone who is angry with you. Through harmful intent, anger, or just laziness, ignoring the angry person and not trying to relieve the situation that made him angry by explaining why you acted, pacifying him, or apologizing to him.
19. Refusing to accept the sincere apologies of others out of anger or laziness. This differs from the third root vow because the four conditions are not needed to transgress it.
20. Following your anger and not trying to abandon it; feeding your anger by thinking that you acted rightly. Instead, you should contemplate the disadvantages of anger.

***Vows 21–23 are in connection with the perfection of perseverance***

21. Giving teachings, having disciples, building monasteries, or gathering people for the purpose of receiving reputation, profit, or remuneration. You should have Dharma gatherings with the intention to benefit others and make them receive enlightenment.
22. Not eliminating laziness, procrastination, delusions of incapability, and sleep (during the day or during the first and final periods of the night)—which are detrimental to your practice; and wasting time and energy on the trivial matters of samsara. You should avoid sleeping late or irregularly.
23. Passing time by frivolously talking about objects of attachment.

***Vows 24–26 are in connection with the perfection of concentration***

24. Not making an effort to study the means of attaining samadhi through requesting teachings. If you desire to meditate, you

must approach a qualified teacher for instruction. The transgression is to not do this because of laziness, evil intent, arrogance; or meditating on samadhi without having received proper instruction.

25. Not trying to eliminate the obstacles that hinder your attainment of samadhi. The five obstacles in particular are attachment to the desire realm and the five sense objects; harmful intent; sleep and foggy-mindedness; regret and agitation, and doubt.
26. Attachment to the bliss of remaining in samadhi without doing any other virtuous activities, or deliberately concentrating for the sake of this bliss. Thinking that samadhi is a special kind of knowledge, and thus not having the strong wish to progress further.

*Vows 27–34 are in connection with the perfection of wisdom*

27. Looking down on Hinayana scriptures and saying the study of them is not necessary for Mahayanists.
28. Studying Hinayana discourses and practices to the extent that it compromises your study and practice of the Mahayana.
29. Making an unnecessary study of non-Buddhist scriptures, thus neglecting to study the Buddha's teachings. Although such study is permitted and is advantageous for understanding and helping others, you should not use excessive time and energy in studying non-Buddhist tenets.
30. Favoring, becoming attached to, or cultivating interest in non-Buddhist teachings even in cases when you have to study them. You are allowed to study non-Buddhist texts so that you can refute wrong views, or to better understand those

you are trying to help; but instead of doing this, you become attracted to these scriptures.

31. Casting aspersions on the Mahayana teachings, the author, or the subject, such as saying a scripture is poor in subject matter, composition, or power to help sentient beings, or that the subject is boring.
32. Praising yourself or belittling others out of anger or arrogance.
33. Not attending discourses, debates, discussions, pujas, or ceremonies because of arrogance, laziness, or anger.
34. Not respecting but abusing the guru who gives teachings and shows the path, seeking only his words without contemplation of their meaning.

*Vows 35–46 are in connection with the perfection of the morality of helping others*

35. Not helping those in need of help when you have the capacity to do so. Eight types of sentient beings in need of help are specified:
  - Not helping someone doing purposeful work who asks for help. You make excuses or are lazy.
  - Not helping someone on a journey, who needs help carrying things or needs protection, due to laziness.
  - Not teaching language and Dharma if asked.
  - Not doing work which may not be Dharma, but which concerns Dharma, if asked.
  - Not helping protect another person's possessions if you have the time and ability, if asked.
  - Not unifying a couple, if asked.
  - Not going to a meal, if you have the time and ability, if asked.
  - Not going, if invited, to create merits, such as to a puja if you have the time and ability.

36. Not helping sick persons with materials or service because of hatred or laziness.
37. Not working to alleviate suffering but instead avoiding to help eliminate it through anger, laziness, or negligence. This refers to people such as the blind, deaf, paralyzed, those with missing limbs, those with difficulty in breathing, travelers on a difficult journey, people having the five obstacles (see no. 25), those in mental distress, those who are paranoid, who have lost their authority or position, or have been abused by others.
38. Through anger or laziness, not exhorting, correcting, or activating a lazy person or a person who does not know virtuous from nonvirtuous actions. If you see a person engaging in frivolous activities, you should give timely advice in appropriate situations and under proper circumstances so that person can avoid those actions and engage in virtue.
39. Through anger or laziness not repaying the kindness of someone who has helped you materially or morally.
40. Through harmful intent or laziness not consoling those who are grieving because of separation from their dear ones or possessions.
41. Through harmful intent or laziness not giving food, clothes, or other necessities to the poor and needy if you are asked and if you have enough to spare.
42. Through hatred or laziness not working for the welfare of your disciples and attendants, or not giving teachings and/or materials.
43. Failing to get along with others. Being self-assertive and not acting in accordance with the wishes or feelings of others.

Through lack of consideration, you do not act according to the level of their mind when you are capable of doing so. The actions that practitioners can do differ according to their level of mind. If you have actualized bodhichitta, it is difficult not to transform negative actions of body and speech into virtue. But if your mind is not capable, you cannot do these actions even if others request you to do them. However, you can act in small ways to help others according to the level of their minds. By being well mannered, you please them and encourage them in the Dharma. Transgressions of this vow occur if you are a Dharma practitioner and you lie down in comfort without being concerned about others. Or you may be with worldly people and use bad manners, which cause them to become angry or lose their devotion.

44. Not praising those deserving praise, or not rejoicing in others who praise learned and realized beings.
45. Not preventing those doing harmful actions from continuing their actions by whatever means is necessary according to the circumstances. The boastful may need to be looked down upon; the violent punished physically; those harmful to society banished. Out of laziness or attachments to those people, you do not act when you have the authority to do so. Abbots and disciplinarians should punish or reprimand those who are misbehaving. Transgression consists of having the power to do something and not doing it because you do not care about the harmful person himself or about those he is harming, or because you are lazy.
46. If you possess psychic powers, not using them in a time of need, such as to frighten someone who is about to do a nonvirtuous action so that he will stop, to enhance others' faith, or to subdue them.

# *Verse to Restore the Bodhisattva Vows*

O buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gurus, please listen to what I say  
now from the depths of my heart.  
Just as all the buddhas of the past have developed the thought of  
enlightenment, true bodhichitta,  
Then practiced its stages of graded development, following the  
trainings of all buddhas' children,  
So may I too, for the sake of all beings, develop bodhichitta and  
follow the trainings, exactly as all bodhisattvas have done. (3x)

# Prayer to Generate Bodhichitta

*by His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

With the wish to free all beings  
I shall always go for refuge  
To Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha,  
Until I reach full enlightenment.

Inspired by wisdom and compassion,  
Today, in the Buddha's presence,  
I generate the mind of full awakening  
For the benefit of all sentient beings.

As long as space remains  
As long as sentient beings remain  
Until then may I too remain  
And dispel the miseries of the world. *(all three verses 3x)*

## Colophons

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Compiled by His Holiness the Dalai Lama for the teachings *Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment*, in Los Angeles, California 2000. These verses were provided to help ensure that our practice of bodhichitta does not degenerate. His Holiness stated, "It would be very beneficial for you to recite and think about the meaning of these three verses on a daily basis." These verses are intended to be recited three times through, each morning and evening.

## Notes

1. It has been suggested to change "son" to "child." However, according to Lama Zopa Rinpoche: "The term 'son' is not used in dependence upon the characteristics of the body, but of the mind. This term is used because it is normally the son who becomes the king. The daughter becomes the queen, but does not become the king."
2. The four opponent powers are: (1) power of the basis: refuge and bodhichitta; (2) power of regret; (3) power of the remedial action (such as Vajrasattva or other practices of purification; and (4) power of restraint (not to do the action again for a specific period of time).



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