The Bodhisattva Vow

by

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When you take the bodhisattva vow, it is very important that you are very clear what the meaning of the bodhisattva vow is, because as a Vajrayana follower you must have bodhichitta, otherwise you are not qualified for the practice of Vajrayana. We as Vajrayana teachers are not allowed to teach Vajrayana practice to those who don’t have the bodhisattva vow, that is black and white, very clear.

The bodhisattva vow means: you wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood. What is Buddhahood? Most of you know, but maybe some people might not know, so Buddhahood means each one of us has a limitless potential for freedom and liberation and we all wish to attain that freedom and liberation without any limitation. That can only be achieved if it is for the benefit of all sentient beings. You cannot have freedom and liberation without limitation only for yourself; then it is limited freedom and liberation, not limitless. So that is bodhichitta.

After you have bodhichitta you become a bodhisattva, in a way. Bodhisattvas have many vows and commitments to uphold, but the most important and most comprehensive principle that you have to follow is: you will not exclude any sentient being from your motivation of Buddhahood. Even if somebody is very bad to you and does all kind of harm to you, you will not exclude that person from your enlightenment. You wish to attain Buddhahood for your friends and enemies, for all those people who are nice to you and for all those people who are not nice to you. So, for all sentient beings. If you exclude anybody from your bodhichitta, then you break your bodhisattva vow. And breaking it is very serious. It is not like breaking a Vinaya vow, which is serious, but not the same. The bodhisattva vow, when broken, has to be repaired in the most suitable and appropriate manner; total regret, totally confess and renew it.

Bodhichitta does not mean you will not defend yourself against somebody. You will defend yourself, you will argue with others if you don’t agree, but you can never exclude anybody from reaching enlightenment. If somebody is bad enough to chop you into pieces, you will still include that person in your bodhichitta, and if there is a chance to make that person Buddha, before you can make your most loved person Buddha, you will go ahead without hesitation. That has to be your basic vow. If you can do that then you can take the bodhisattva vow.

As a practice, whatever you do has to be for that purpose. Even when you eat, you are eating to live a healthy life, and you are living a healthy life to enjoy a good life. You are enjoying a good life in order to be positive. You will be positive in order to do positive things, by which you will accumulate merit. You accumulate merit in order to accumulate wisdom, so that you reach Buddhahood. And you reach Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings to reach Buddhahood. Everything that you do has to be motivated and based on this.

It’s very simple. If you are making money, you are not making it just for yourself to abuse others. You are making money to make yourself comfortable, so that you
can make others comfortable. If you have power or are acquiring power, you are not acquiring it in order to misuse your power and abuse others, but to make things that are wrong right. Not to make right things wrong. To fix the wrong things and make them right, that is the purpose of having power.

All of these things—whatever you do, it has to be under the blessing of bodhichitta. I hope it is clear to you.

When taking the bodhisattva vow, first you stand up and do three prostrations towards the altar. Those who already have the bodhisattva vow can renew it; that is no problem.

Then you sit down on your right knee and hold your hands together. The first recitation that you recite is upgrading your refuge. You take refuge under Buddha, dharma and sangha for as long as you live. That is the basic refuge. Now you have to upgrade that to a bodhisattva refuge; that is: you take refuge in Buddha, dharma and sangha until you attain Buddhahood. That is upgrading the refuge.

Until we reach the very heart of enlightenment, we take refuge in all the Buddhas. Likewise, we take refuge in the dharma and in the bodhisattva sangha.

The second part is the actual bodhisattva recitation. A simple translation of these lines is: “Just as the past Buddhas and bodhisattvas took, practised and upheld bodhichitta, I also will take and uphold the bodhichitta.” This is very important. Just as the past Buddhas and bodhisattvas, how they took bodhichitta, in the same way we take it and uphold it. Upholding means you will never exclude anyone from your bodhichitta. Even if somebody beats you up, cheats you, misrepresents you, misunderstands you, all kinds of negative things that you can think of, you will include all of them in your bodhichitta. Even if somebody kills you by chopping you into pieces you will include them in your bodhichitta, you will not exclude them. That is very clear and that is what you have to uphold.

Just as the Buddhas of the past first resolved to reach enlightenment, and then progressed stage by stage through the different levels of bodhisattva training, so, in the same way, we also develop a mind intent upon enlightenment for the good of all beings and we also will progressively practise in that training.

Then you sit quietly for a few seconds and during that time you confirm in your mind very clearly: ‘From the Lord Buddha Shakyamuni (the Prince Siddhartha who attained Buddhahood) until today, the lineage of bodhichitta is unbroken’. That means nobody in the lineage has broken bodhichitta. I received the bodhisattva vow from my supreme master and guru, His Holiness the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. Also it was renewed many times from many great masters, but I received my bodhisattva vow for the first time in the Holy Stupa of Swayambunath in Kathmandu, Nepal from the 16th His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa when I was 16 years old. Since then until today I have done my best to keep it. I can say it loud and clear, no matter who does what to me – people have done all kinds of things to me up until today including Communist Chinese, but up until today I have done my best to uphold my bodhisattva vow. I have not excluded anybody. I had 1800 monks in my monastery in 1959 but when I went back there in 1984 there were only 60 left alive. Where did all the others go? They did not just disappear, but I hold all the people who are responsible for all of that in my bodhichitta.

Of course in India, which is my second home and the Land of the Buddha, the holy place—I respect all Indians as descendents of the Buddha—but at the same time, just as in every country there are good people and bad people. In India and Tibet also. The good people have been very nice to me and some of the bad people have not been very nice to me. Some of them are continuously not nice to me, but I keep them in my bodhichitta. Whatever they do to me, one thing they will not manage is to break my bodhisattva vow. That way you have something that you can really receive from me, because I did my best and up until now I have managed. I’m 51, so there is not too long to go. I feel I’m more than half way and I will definitely manage to keep my bodhisattva vow until the end, no matter who does what to me.

This way the bodhisattva vow is very serious and you should take it very seriously. With this, I tell you, no matter how serious a Buddhist you will be, you will never become a Buddhist extremist in the future. As long as the bodhisattva lineage is upheld you will not see a Buddhist extremist in this world forever. But without bodhichitta, I don’t think just being Buddhist makes one exempt from
all the other terrible things happening in the name of religion throughout the world.

This way I want you to be very clear, serious and wholehearted about this, and say that no matter who does what to you in this life, or all your lives to come, until you reach the Buddhahood you will not break the bodhisattva vow. Then sit for a while and try to confirm this in your heart, very seriously, not just saying it, you should mean it from the bottom of your heart.

Then the last three recitations, the first of which we call “self-rejoicing”. You recite this once and it says that you are born as a human being and now have become the offspring of the Buddha, sons and daughters of the Buddha. So if you develop yourself, you will become a king or queen, because you are born in the family of Buddha. So, you will become Buddha. If you develop bodhichitta, then the final result will be the realisation of bodhi, which is Buddhahood. For that you say this for self-rejoicing.

Now my life is fruitful—I have truly achieved a human existence. Today I have been born into the family of Buddhas. Today I have become a child of the Buddhas.

Now the second recitation you say is that you will uphold the ways of a bodhisattva. You will live as a bodhisattva; you will talk, walk, eat and think like a bodhisattva. So you will uphold the bodhisattva’s ways so you will not contaminate this pure lineage of the bodhisattva. From Buddha Shakyamuni’s enlightenment until today for more than 2500 years it was not contaminated, so you will not contaminate it, you will do your best to not contaminate it. That is the second recitation. You are making the commitment. Again I tell you, if you take somebody out from your bodhichitta then you have contaminated the bodhisattva’s image.

Now, no matter what is required of me, I will act in conformity with this my kindred family and will never do anything which might sully this faultless noble line.

Now the final recitation is rejoicing for all. You say: “In front of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas I invite all sentient beings as my guests to enjoy all the goodness, glory and positiveness, wisdom and knowledge, whatever ability that I will develop until my Buddhahood and the Buddhahood itself, it is for all. So from heaven to hell everybody enjoy it.”

Finally you dedicate the merit of the bodhisattva vow for the benefit of all sentient beings.

I have tried to explain the bodhisattva vow as clearly as possible because it is very serious and we cannot take it just for trying it and for having an experience. I am not enlightened, I am not a Buddha, I am none of those things but I can tell you one thing: I did not break my bodhisattva vow, and I do not intend to. That way, if you are serious and sincere you will get the bodhisattva vow.

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