

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

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If you're chanting using the tune, italicized lines are where the tune changes. In most cases, the italicized lines are also capsule summaries of the verse that could be memorized in lieu of memorizing the entire verse (doesn't apply to most of the bodhisattva boot camp verses, and a few others). For the tune, visit www.yeshechodron.com.

The preliminaries: preparation for the path (1-7)

1: To study, contemplate, and meditate

This precious human life so hard to find, / its freedoms and resources like a boat
To navigate samsara's endless sea / and set myself and other beings free –
*Without distraction, always, day and night / to study, contemplate, and meditate:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

2. To leave my homeland

While those I love can stir up a tsunami, / and those I hate can burn me up like fire,
When I don't care I lose my moral compass / and dark delusion permeates my mind.
*To leave behind my habits and reactions, / this homeland where I've dwelt from life to life:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

3: To rely on solitude

When I avoid conditions that disturb me, / emotional afflictions lose their strength.
When there are no distractions to engage me, / my dharma practice grows to fill the space,
Awareness-knowing-rigpa clarifies, / and certainty in Dharma dawns and thrives.
On solitude and silence to rely: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

4. To let go of attachment to this lifetime

Old friends I've known as long as I remember, / one day we'll have to go our separate ways.
Material possessions I've worked hard for / will be enjoyed by someone else one day.
This consciousness, a guest, will leave my body, / the guest house where for all my life it's stayed.
To let go of attachment to this lifetime: This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

5. To give up negative friends

When I'm with friends who strengthen the three poisons, / reflection, study, meditation fade;
Kindness and compassion are forgotten, / and I'm caught up again in worldly aims.
Not following the friends who harm my practice: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

6. To rely on spiritual friends

When I rely on spiritual friends, / my faults and negative behaviors wane;
Constructive qualities and skills expand / just like the brilliance of the waxing moon.
*To hold authentic dharma friends more dear / than even my own physical welfare:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

7. To seek refuge in the Three Jewels

Whom can the worldly deities protect, / themselves imprisoned in samsara's jail?
The three jewels, which embody freedom's path: / reliable protection without fail.
To seek refuge in buddha, dharma, sangha: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

The main teachings, illuminating the path (8-37)

The three levels of motivation for dharma practice (8-10)

8. To refrain from harm at all costs (aspiring to freedom from suffering, the higher realms)

The suf-fer-ings of the three lower realms, / these states of mind so difficult to bear,
According to the teachings of the Sage / are the result of actions that cause harm.
*Therefore, even with my own life at stake, / from harmful actions always to refrain:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

9. To strive for unchanging freedom (aspiring to freedom from samsara)

Like drops of dew upon each blade of grass / the three realms' happiness evaporates.
In contrast, the supreme and highest state / of liberation doesn't ever change.
To strive, in all our efforts, to be free: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

Aspiration bodhicitta

10. To liberate all beings (aspiring to full buddhahood)

My mothers, each and every sentient being, / since time without beginning cared for me.
How can I be happy while they're suf-fering? / I must get to work to set them free.
To cultivate the mind of full awake-ning:/ This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

Action bodhicitta (11-30)

11. To exchange my happiness for others' suffering

The source of every single suf-fer-ing / is wishing for my happiness alone,
While focusing on others' benefit / gives rise to buddhahood, awakening.
*To fully and wholeheartedly exchange / my happiness for others' suffering:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

Bringing all experiences onto the path, aka bodhisattva boot camp (12-21)

12. To repay theft with generosity (how to use loss on the path)

If someone driven by intense desire / steals all my wealth or instigates the theft,
*To dedicate to them from all three times / my wealth, good deeds, and merit, everything:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

13. To repay harm with compassion (how to use suffering on the path)

Though I've not done the slightest thing that's wrong, / without a cause someone cuts off my head.
*To generate compassion in my heart / and take upon myself all their misdeeds:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

14. To repay slander with love (how to use disgrace on the path)

If someone slanders me and spreads the word, / maligning me throughout the universe,
*To pay them back I fill my heart with love, / extolling their good traits and character:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

15. To repay humiliation with respect (how to use disparagement on the path)

If someone tells a crowd my hidden faults, / and speaks of me with undisguised contempt,
*To see them as my spiritual friend / and bow sincerely with respect to them:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

16. To repay ingratitude with affection (how to use being wronged in return for kindness)

If someone I've cared for as my own child, / turns on me as their worst enemy,
*Then like a mother when her child is ill / to shower them with more love than before:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

17. To repay disrespect with reverence / (how to use humiliation on the path)

If someone, my in-fer-i-or or peer, / through pride disparages and puts me down,
*To honor them as I would my teach-er / and place them reverently on my crown:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

18. To maintain resolve when all goes wrong (how to use ruin on the path)

When I've lost everything; and everyone / abuses me and treats me with contempt,
I'm stricken by disease and very sick; / on top of that, a demon's in my head,
*To take on all the suf-fer-ing of beings / completely free of all dis-cour-age-ment:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

19. To maintain focus and humility when all goes right (how to use prosperity on the path)

Though I've achieved the pinnacle of fame / and the whole world bows down to me in awe.
I'm rich beyond my very wildest dreams; / whatever money buys, I have it all.
*To see that there's no essence in success / and never think I'm better than the rest:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

20. To conquer my own aggression (how to use objects of hatred on the path)

If I don't tame my inner enemy, / the poison of aggression, anger, hate,
Then outer enemies just multiply / no matter how, to vanquish them, I fight.
*To tame my own mind with an army of / the forces of compassion, kindness, love:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

21. To abandon attachment (how to use objects of desire on the path)

Sense pleasures and de-sire are like salt water – / the more I drink them in, the more I crave.
*Therefore, the moment that attachment stirs / to drop it right away without a pause:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

Ultimate bodhicitta (22-24)

22. To remain free from subject-object fixation

All appearances are my own mind; / mind's nature from the start is concept-free.
*To know my own mind's nature and refrain / from grasping onto subject-object signs:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

23. To give up attachment to positive experiences

When I encounter something that's delightful / such as a rainbow on a summer day,
*To give up all attachment to its beauty / and never cling to it as truly real:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

24. To regard adverse circumstances as delusion

All forms of suf-fer-ing are just like dreaming / that my belov-ed child has passed away.
Appearances like these are just delusions / to take them as true drains my energy.
*When I encounter adverse circumstances / to see them as delusions of my mind:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

The six paramitas or transcending actions (25-30)

25. To engage in generosity

If, wishing to attain awakening, / I need to give even my body up,
Then doesn't it go also without saying, / that this applies to mere external stuff?
*Without hope for reward or benefit / to generously give away a gift:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

26. To guard ethical conduct

If, through a lack of ethical conduct, / I can't accomplish my own benefit,
Then any aspiration to achieve / the benefit of others is a joke.
*To keep and guard my ethical conduct / completely free from worldly in-flu-ence:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

27. To cultivate patience

For bodhisattvas wishing to accrue / a wealth of wholesome virtue and good deeds,
All harm is like a precious treasure trove, / from other people or adversity.
*To cultivate a patient attitude, / not feeling irritated or abused:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

28. To persevere with joyful diligence

If listeners and solitary buddhas, / in striving just for their own benefit,
Are seen to focus with the same resolve / as putting out a fire on their head,
*Since my aim is to benefit all beings, / and effort is the source of all good traits,
I must engage with joy-ful perseverance: / this is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

29. To attain complete and stable meditation

To vanquish my emotionality/ I need insight based in tranquility.
*To understand this and to cultivate / a stable, focused meditative state,
Not getting stuck in the four formless realms: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

30. To unite wisdom with skillful means

The five perfections, lacking inner wisdom, / are not enough for full awakening.
*To cultivate the wisdom of true knowing / united with the path of skillful means
And not conceive the three parameters: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

The four instructions taught in the sutra (31-34)**31. To examine and give up my own confusion**

If I don't look into my own confusion, / I could be just a Buddhist counterfeit –
A person who has all the outer trappings / but doesn't act the way the Buddha taught.
*To always analyze my own confusion / and then take measures to abandon it:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

32. To avoid discussing the faults of bodhisattvas

If I, compelled by reactivity, / relate another bodhisattva's fault,
It undermines my own integrity / and I myself decline as a result.
*To never speak of faults or of mistakes / of someone on the Mahayana path:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

33. To give up attachment to worldly domains

When I am swayed by honor and reward, / I may fall prey to quarrels and discord,
And motivation may disintegrate / to study, contemplate, and meditate.
*Abandoning attachment to domains / of benefactors, relatives and friends:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

34. To refrain from harsh speech

Harsh words, besides upsetting other people, / impair my bodhisattva practice too.
*To give up speech that's harsh, rude, or abrasive, / unpleasant for recipients to hear:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.*

Training in mindfulness and vigilance (35-36)

35. To use mindfulness and alertness to crush emotional reactions as soon as they arise

Once reactivity becomes a habit / it's hard to turn its energy around.
To overpower it without delay / by wielding mindfulness and vigilance
The moment a reaction first begins, / attachment or another poison:
This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

36. To use mindfulness and vigilance to benefit others

To sum it up, whatever I am doing, / in all my conduct and my practices,
Through constant mindfulness and vigilance / to monitor the state of mind I'm in,
Directing it to others' benefit: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

Dedicating the merit (37)

37. To dedicate all merit

In order to dispel the suffering / of beings numberless as space is vast,
To dedicate the merit of my practice / to everyone's complete awakening,
With wisdom purified of three domains: / This is the way a bodhisattva trains.

Dedication/aspiration from Shantideva's dedication chapter:

(Supplementary, not part of the 37 practices)

As long as sky and space exist / and beings are still wandering,
For just as long may I remain, / dispelling all their suffering.

Suggestions for memorization:

- ❖ All 37 verses – it just takes joyful perseverance (verse 28)!
- ❖ Just verse 1, the mother of all the 37 practices, and a powerful reminder
- ❖ Verses 1, 35, and 36 (“the core practices” per Lama Chodron)
- ❖ The italicized lines in each verse, which summarize each practice (not available yet for all)
- ❖ Bodhisattva boot camp (12-19 or 12-21) for handy reference in adversity
- ❖ Just the titles: verse 1 is to study, contemplate, and meditate, etc.
- ❖ Whichever verse(s) resonate the most with you – even one would be very beneficial