

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

A Summary of How an Awakening Being Behaves
by Tokmé Zong-po (1245-1369)

Namo Lokesvaraya

You who see that experience has no coming or going,
Yet pour your energy solely into helping beings,
My excellent teachers and Lord All Seeing,
I humbly and constantly honor with my body, speech, and mind.

The fully awake, the buddhas, source of joy and well-being,
All come from integrating the noble Way.
Because integration depends on your knowing how to practice,
I will explain the practice of all bodhisattvas.

1

Right now, you have a good boat, fully equipped and available — hard to find.
To free others and you from the sea of samsara,
Day and night, fully alert and present,
Study, reflect, and meditate — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

2

Attraction to those close to you catches you in its currents;
Aversion to those who oppose you burns inside;
Indifference that ignores what needs to be done is a black hole.
Leave your homeland — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

3

Don't engage disturbances and reactive emotions gradually fade away;
Don't engage distractions and spiritual practice naturally grows;
Keep awareness clear and vivid and confidence in the way arises.
Rely on silence — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

4

You will separate from long-time friends and relatives;
You will leave behind the wealth you worked to build up;
The guest, your consciousness, will move from the inn, your body.
Forget the conventional concerns — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

5

With some friends, the three poisons keep growing,
Study, reflection, and meditation weaken,
And loving kindness and compassion fall away.
Give up bad friends — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

6

With some teachers, your shortcomings fade away and
Abilities grow like the waxing moon.
Hold such teachers dear to you,
Dearer than your own body — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

7

Locked up in the prison of their own patterning
Whom can ordinary gods protect?
Who can you count on for refuge?
Go for refuge in the Three Jewels — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

8

The suffering in the lower realms is really hard to endure.
The Sage says it is the result of destructive actions.
For that reason, even if your life is at risk,
Don't engage in destructive actions — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

9

The happiness of the three worlds disappears in a moment,
Like a dewdrop on a blade of grass.
The highest level of freedom is one that never changes.
Aim for this — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

10

If all your mothers, who love you,
Suffer for time without beginning, how can you be happy?
To free limitless sentient beings,
Give rise to awakening mind — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

11

All suffering comes from wanting your own happiness.
Complete awakening arises from the intention to help others.
So, exchange completely your happiness
For the suffering of others — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

12

Even if someone, driven by desperate want,
Steals, or makes someone else steal, everything you own,
Dedicate to him your body, your wealth, and
All the good you've ever done or will do — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

13

Even if you have done nothing wrong at all
And someone still tries to take your head off,
Spurred by compassion

Take all his or her evil into you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

14

Even if someone broadcasts to the whole universe
Slanderous and ugly rumors about you,
In return, with an open and caring heart,
Praise his or her abilities — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

15

Even if someone humiliates you and denounces you
In front of a crowd of people,
Think of this person as your teacher
And humbly honor him — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

16

Even if a person you have cared for as your own child
Treats you as his or her worst enemy,
Lavish him or her with loving attention
Like a mother caring for her ill child — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

17

Even if your peers or subordinates,
Put you down to make themselves look better,
Treat them respectfully as you would your teacher:
Put them above you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

18 When you are down and out, held in contempt,
Desperately ill, and emotionally crazed,
Don't lose heart. Take into you
The suffering and negativity of all beings — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

19

Even when you are famous, honored by all,
And as rich as the god of wealth himself,
Don't be pompous. Know that the magnificence of existence
Has no substance — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

20

If you don't subdue the opponent inside, your own anger,
Although you subdue opponents outside, they just keep coming.
Muster the forces of loving kindness and compassion
And subdue your own mind — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

21

Sensual pleasures are like salty water:
The deeper you drink, the thirstier you become.

Any object that you attach to,
Right away, let it go — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

22

Whatever arises in experience is your own mind.
Mind itself is free of any conceptual limitations.
Know that and don't generate
Subject-object fixations — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

23

When you come across something you enjoy,
Though beautiful to experience, like a summer rainbow,
Don't take it as real.
Let go of attachment — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

24

All forms of suffering are like dreaming that your child has died.
Taking confusion as real wears you out.
When you run into misfortune,
Look at it as confusion — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

25

If those who want to be awake have to give even their bodies,
What need is there to talk about things that you simply own.
Be generous, not looking
For any return or result — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

26

If you can't tend to your needs because you have no moral discipline,
Then intending to take care of the needs of others is simply a joke.
Observe ethical behavior without concern
For conventional existence — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

27

For bodhisattvas who want to be rich in virtue
A person who hurts you is a precious treasure.
Cultivate patience for everyone,
Completely free of irritation or resentment — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

28

Listeners and solitary buddhas, working only for their own welfare,
Are seen to practice as if their heads were on fire.
To help all beings, pour your energy into practice:
It's the source of all abilities — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

29

Understanding that emotional reactions are dismantled
By insight supported by stillness,
Cultivate meditative stability that passes right by
The four formless states — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

30

Without wisdom, the five perfections
Are not enough to attain full awakening.
Cultivate wisdom, endowed with skill
And free from the three domains — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

31

If you don't go into your own confusion,
You may just be a materialist in practitioner's clothing.
Constantly go into your own confusion
And put an end to it — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

32

You undermine yourself when you react emotionally and
Grumble about the imperfections of other bodhisattvas.
Of the imperfections of those who have entered the Great Way,
Don't say anything — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

33

When you squabble with others about status and rewards,
You undermine learning, reflection, and meditation.
Let go of any investment in your family circle
Or the circle of those who support you — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

34

Abusive language upsets others
And undermines the ethics of a bodhisattva.
So, don't upset people or
Speak abusively — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

35

When reactive emotions acquire momentum, it's hard to make remedies work.
A person in attention wields remedies like weapons,
Crushing reactive emotions such as craving
As soon as they arise — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

36

In short, in everything you do,
Know what is happening in your mind.
By being constantly present and aware
You bring about what helps others — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

37

To dispel the suffering of beings without limit,
With wisdom freed from the three spheres
Direct all the goodness generated by these efforts
To awakening — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.

Following the teachings of the holy ones
On what is written in the sutras, tantras, and commentaries,
I set out these thirty-seven practices of a bodhisattva
For those who intend to train in this path.

Because I have limited intelligence and little education,
These verses are not the kind of poetry that delights the learned.
But because I relied on the teachings of the sutras and the revered
I am confident that The Practices of a Bodhisattva is sound.

However, because it's hard for a person with limited intelligence like me
To fathom the depths of the great waves of the activity of bodhisattvas,
I ask the revered to tolerate
Any mistakes — contradictions, non sequiturs, and such.

From the goodness of this work, may all beings,
Through the supreme mind that is awake to what is ultimately and apparently true,
Not rest in any limiting position — existence or peace:
May they be like Lord All Seeing.

Tokmé, the monk, a teacher of scripture and logic, composed this text in a cave
near the town of Ngülchu Rinchen for his own and others' benefit.