

An Overview of Buddhist Ethics or Wholesome Actions

Part 1: Individual Liberation

A Commentary by Yogi Khenpo Drimed Dawa

The Four Noble Truths – the first teaching

1. Suffering (*dukkha*)/discontent (symptoms): unhappiness, dissatisfaction, pain, anxiety...
2. Delusion: ignorance of the true nature of things (causes): fetters, kleshas, poisons...(many lists!)
3. Liberation (*moksha*), awakening, realization or enlightenment (curable)
4. The Path (treatment): 8-Fold Path... and many more!

The Problem – “Fetters” – chains or bonds that shackle beings to *samsara* (world of suffering); cutting through the chains brings liberation from *samsara*. Various lists of fetters (here are a few of the main ones):

1. **The 3 Fetters:**
 - a. wrong view – (a) belief in a *permanent identity or soul*; later included a permanent self (as in “person” or ego), (b) “*a fetter of views*” (wrong views:
 - i. amoralism (no reward or punishment for actions),
 - ii. fatalism (predestined),
 - iii. materialism/hedonism (live for pleasures),
 - iv. eternalism (eternal soul),
 - v. avoid all “evil” (extreme self-inflicted “punishments” – fasting, pain, e.g., *Jainism*),
 - vi. agnosticism (suspension of judgment)
 - b. Doubt about the Buddha’s teachings
 - c. Attachment to rites and rituals (or precepts and rules) – esp. Brahmanic practices (Buddhism has its own!)
2. **The 10 Sutra Fetters** (includes the 3 above – wrong view, doubt, attachment to rites and rituals):
 - a. Sensual lust (all senses)
 - b. Ill will (harmful intent)
 - c. Lust for material existence/rebirth
 - d. Lust for immaterial existence (higher realms, gods)
 - e. Conceit (arrogance, pride)
 - f. Restlessness (lacking peace)
 - g. Ignorance (delusion)
3. **The 10 Abhidharma (Comentaries) Fetters**
 - a. Sensual lust (all senses)
 - b. Anger
 - c. Conceit
 - d. Wrong view
 - e. Doubt

- f. Attachment to rites and rituals
 - g. Lust for existence
 - h. Jealousy
 - i. Greed
 - j. Ignorance (delusion)
4. **3 Poisons** – (original) delusion, anger, greed; (later) ignorance, attachment, aversion
5. **7 fetters related to householder affairs**
- a. Destroying life
 - b. Stealing
 - c. False speech
 - d. Slandering
 - e. Coveting and greed
 - f. Anger and malice
 - g. Conceit

See **Buddhist ethics** – *Innate Happiness* pp. 65-67

“**Lay Practitioners in Early Buddhism**” (from *Buddhist Ethics*, International Translation Committee):

Lay practitioners ... are first committed to the Three Jewels and abide by the **three special precepts**. Having gone for **refuge**:

- a. One must not venerate worldly deities
- b. Refrain from injuring others
- c. Avoid close ties with religious extremists (presumably non-Buddhists)

And the **five general precepts** ...

- a. Do not renounce the Three Jewels, even for the sake of one's life or country (perhaps a later addition, a bit “extreme”)
- b. Put one's trust “exclusively” (?) in the Three Jewels
- c. Make offerings regularly to the Three Jewels
- d. Go for refuge with an awareness of the benefits and encourage others to do the same
- e. Prostrate before the buddhas and depictions of them

Last 3 part of the Tibetan Buddhist *preliminary practices*.

The Five Lay Precepts (what to avoid): all Buddhist traditions adopted these, but adapted the meanings:

1. **Killing** – abstain from “harming” living beings (pre-Vedas – humans, extended in Vedas to include animals – even insects; then all forms of harm by Buddha, including harming plants!) Killing and eating are treated differently, especially in the early tradition. (More on this below.)

2. **Stealing** – taking what is not given, including gains by immoral means. Do not take advantage of another person, be free of debts to others (“*Vinaya*” means “becoming free of debts”)
3. **Sexual misconduct** – adultery (later added “the protected” – age, engagement, disabled, etc.), rape, sexual abuse or manipulation, and other related laws; and do not over-indulge in all **sense pleasures**, i.e., “extremes”, rather use **moderation**)
4. **Lying** – includes all abuses of speech: harsh speech, slandering, or gossip that will harm oneself and others
5. **Intoxication** – drinking alcohol was probably the pre-Buddhist form. But the Buddhist text reads “excess greed”, thus “avoid the mindset of getting intoxicated by alcohol, drugs, money, power, etc.”

Over time, we are expected to expand our scope and understanding with deeper insight until they are **no longer a “set of rules”**, but a moral way to live, e.g., stop thinking of an animal as “just a thing”. There are consequences for our actions.

Some people go the other way, to extremes, for example thinking of a spider as the same as a human. Unintentional killing is not a violation. But do avoid killing for pleasure (fishing, hunting, etc.).

Just following the rules is not enough, one must “practice” – *train the mind* (meditation, contemplation...). Ethics are all about **purifying one’s mind**, to gain wisdom. Thus compassion, mindfulness, and awareness are essential.

Five types of lay practitioner (or pick specifics from the list):

1. One abstains from murder (killing)
2. One abstains also from stealing
3. One abstains also from lying
4. One abstains also from sexual misconduct
5. One abstains from all five

The “celibate” lay practitioner – renounces sexual intercourse (some say is no longer a “lay practitioner”, but also not a “renunciate” – monk or nun!)

The First Vow – Do good, or at least do not harm: *Innate Happiness* pp. 68-71

Some basic details:

- **INTENTION IS CRUTIAL.**
- These are *not* formulated as imperatives, but as “training rules” to facilitate practice.
- Some lineages include daily rituals for refuge and observing the five precepts.
- The first precept includes the lives of animals, even small insects; the Five Acts of Immediate Retribution (worst acts): killing mother, father, an arhat, drawing blood of a buddha, and creating a schism in the monastic community (killing the sangha).
- The seriousness of taking life depends on the intelligence and spiritual attainments of the one being killed, e.g., master, average human, snake, though *all* are condemned.

- Some lineages have adopted *vegetarianism*, though some texts described it as irrelevant in purifying the mind (more below).
- There are prohibitions of eating certain types of meat: human flesh, dog, horse, elephant, leopard, tiger, lion, bear, hyena, and snake. But it is OK to eat: beef, pork, chicken, and fish.
- Professions that involve trade in flesh or human beings is prohibited.
- Abortion is generally considered as killing, but circumstances may be considered.
- There are differences of opinion regarding killing animals that are suffering due to age, illness, or injury (letting them burn karma or compassion for their suffering – see Part 2). Minimally, prayers should be said.

Vegetarianism – Vegetarianism is good for many reasons. Here are some Buddhist views:

- Buddha distinguished between killing animals and eating meat and refused to require vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is considered to be a choice, as long as other rules about “killing” are followed.
- Ashoka (ca 250 BCE) promoted vegetarian diets with “no slaughter days”, banned some specific forms of meat, banned use of meat in the royal household, even prohibited killing some vermin or pests.
- Some lineages advocate vegetarianism. In some cases, it is on specific days, celebrations, or retreats.
- Mahayana generally asserts eating meat is a *violation* of compassion; others assert that it is an *act of* compassion by the animal (when seen as being a Bodhisattva in its own right – Pure View).
- Tibetans generally eat meat, had few options early on, but modern transportation has changed that, as has the diaspora.
- Buddhism asserts that sometimes killing is ethical – self-defense, defense of others, health reasons (e.g., HH the Dalai Lama does due to Hepatitis B, alternates days with/without meat).
- Vegetarianism also results in killing countless insects *and plants*. Even organic sources kill the more harmful insects. There is no “escape”. (Life itself involves eating other things, whether plants or animals; and both of those require killing harmful animals, mostly insects, and plants.)
- Other monastic rules (do not necessarily apply to lay practitioners) prohibit damaging or destroying plants, e.g., cutting or felling a tree, uprooting or cutting a flower, burning grass. Even digging the soil or pounding a stake into the ground are disallowed (possibly killing beings that live in the soil). However, one may hint, but not command, to another to do these things.

In short, **do good or at least do no intentional harm to all forms of life, as best you can!**

Part 2 – The Bodhisattva Vows

Bodhisattva – one who is committed to attaining enlightenment for the benefit of all beings...a shift from “me” to “you”.

Bodhisattva Ethics (in summary) – Do good, or at least do no harm, for the benefit of all beings.

Altruism – inherent in this path is altruistic intent – *doing good for others without expectation of anything in return*.

Like the ethics of the Path of Individual Liberation, these focus on **wholesome actions** (or “good karma”). Here, one is encouraged to go further to benefit all beings, much like the Buddha did with his teachings. (An “ideal” or goal...)

There are three traditional ways to do this (forms of “**generosity**”): (1) giving **material things** (money or other resources), (2) giving dharma – teachings and blessings, such as saying mantras or prayers, and (3) “giving **protection from fear**” explained as helping others with their **difficulty, safety, or giving companionship**. It may even involve purchase of live animals, fish, birds or other creatures to release them instead of allowing them to be killed for food or sacrifice.

The Bodhisattva Vow is often given with the Refuge Vow, but may be done separately or later. There are many versions of this vow, and countless verses that are related to it, well beyond what I can cover in this dharma talk. Je Tsongkapa (1357-1419) listed 64 different versions!

One expression is in the form of **The Four Great Vows**:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to liberate them.

However inexhaustible delusions are, I vow to extinguish them.

However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them.

However incomparable liberation is, I vow to attain it.

Not literally easy, but an ideal to follow, as best you can.

Perhaps the most popular version is taken from Shantideva’s (circa 700 CE) *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, which is often used for the **Bodhisattva Vow ceremony**:

Just as all the previous Sugatas, the Buddhas,
Generated the mind of liberation
And accomplished all the stages
Of the *Bodhisattva* training,
So will I, too, for the sake of all beings,
Generate the mind of liberation
And accomplish all the stages
Of the *Bodhisattva* training.

(The formal ceremony includes some other elements as well, but are beyond our time for today. *Bodhisattva* training is described in several forms, but are beyond this talk.)

One favorite verse often repeated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (said to be the reincarnation or a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig – the male Buddha of Compassion) is the following, which also comes from *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* by Shantideva:

As long as space endures,
As long as sentient beings remain,
May I too remain for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Shantideva's text is based upon the **Six Perfections** (*Paramitas*): **generosity, ethics, patience, persistence, meditative concentration, and wisdom**. Both *generosity and ethics* have to do with ethics on The Path of Altruism. Generosity, of course, means **giving**. We can give material things, when we have such things, they are needed, and will help. Or we can give our time, helping others as needed. We can also give through our devotion and practice so that we can help others on their path to liberation. Examples include deity yogas like Chenrezig, Tara, Medicine Buddha, prayers, mantras, etc. Among the verses that illustrate the ethical commitment of a *Bodhisattva* are these, selected from Shantideva's chapter three:

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road;
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, or a bridge.

May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall,
And a lamp for those who long for light;
For those who need a resting place, a bed;
For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wish-fulfilling jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power, and the supreme remedy.

May I be the trees of miracles, (*mythical wish-fulfilling trees*),
Enduring as the sky itself endures,
For the boundless multitude of living beings,
May I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives,
In number like the boundless reaches of the sky,
May I be their sustenance and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

These verses present an example of a **strong commitment** to benefit others! Another set of verses related to the Bodhisattva Vow that are often referenced by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the subject of several of his teachings, is the ***Eight Verses for Training the Mind***:

- 1) With a determination to accomplish
The highest welfare for all sentient beings,
Who surpass even a wish-fulfilling jewel (*same idea as the trees above*)
I will learn to hold them supremely dear.
- 2) Whatever I associate with others I will learn
To think of myself as the lowest among all,
And respectfully hold others to be supreme
From the very depths of my heart.
- 3) In all actions I will learn to search into my mind
And as soon as an afflictive emotion arises,
Endangering myself and others,
Will firmly face and avert it.
- 4) I will learn to cherish beings of bad nature
And those pressed by strong sins and sufferings,
As if I had found a precious
Treasure very difficult to find.
- 5) When others out of jealousy treat me badly
With abuse, slander, and so on,
I will learn to take all loss
And offer the victory to them.
- 6) When one whom I have benefited with great hope
Unreasonably hurts me very badly,
I will learn to view that person
As an excellent spiritual guide.
- 7) In short, I will learn to offer to everyone without exception
All help and happiness directly and indirectly,
And respectfully take upon myself
All harm and suffering of my mothers (*all sentient beings*).
- 8) I will learn to keep all these practices
Undeclared by the stains of **the eight worldly concerns**¹,
And by understanding all phenomena as like illusions,
Be released from the bondage of attachment.

These illustrate elements of what became “**extremes**” in the development of the Bodhisattva path. (Extremes were renounced by the Buddha himself, and HH the Dalai Lama also somewhat

¹ Like and dislike, gaining and losing, praise and blame, fame and disgrace.

extreme.) They go beyond what is actually expected and are primarily to illustrate the **possibilities** to encourage us to do more.

Finally, I wanted to mention another popular text related to this topic – *The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva* by Thokmé Zangpo (1245-1369), free copies are in our lobby and it is also in an appendix to *Innate Happiness*.

All of these verses are intended to **motivate us** to make a similar commitment for the **benefit of others**. They reflect the essence of the *ethical view* of The Path of Altruism. Both our **intention** and our **actions** focus on the benefit of others. But this, too, has two levels – relative and ultimate. On the **relative level** it refers to many of the activities reflected in the verses above in the form of ordinary acts of generosity and kindness toward others. At the **ultimate level**, our intention and actions focus on helping others attain liberation itself. To do this we still act on the relative level; only a fully enlightened Buddha can operate on the ultimate level.

There are **two primary actions** we can take. One is simply our own behavior as a **role model**. We can find countless examples of such actions in the literature, including those mentioned above. We act as best we can *as if we are already a buddha*. Here it is important to know that we cannot know the causes and conditions (karma) behind another’s actions, so, again, our *intention* is critical.

Some Buddhists say that because of this we should not engage in actions that might “interfere” with the karma of another. Perhaps. But the logical extension of this approach is that we do nothing! Ever! What about “do good”? Clearly the verses above state otherwise. Alternately, we can do what we believe in our heart is the best action to benefit others, as the most fundamental element in “doing good” is our *intention*. Never forget that!

The other action we can do is to **teach**. This, of course, necessitates that we engage in extensive study and practice to become qualified to do that in a formal way. However, you can still share what you do know with others from the very beginning. In doing so, keep in mind that as a rule Buddhists do not proselytize. We do not “wear our religion on our sleeve” so to speak (some do not practice Buddhism as a religion, but *secular* versions of Buddhism), but we “teach” only by responding to inquiries initiated by others. We are always delighted to share when asked, but we respect the view of others and do not attempt to impose our own. Never get into a debate or argument!

As in The Path of Individual Liberation, The Path of Altruism summarizes our ethical actions in the form of the **Ten Unwholesome Actions to avoid and the Ten Wholesome Actions to follow**. Furthermore, there is a list of **18 Bodhisattva Downfalls** (things to avoid) specifically for the Path of Altruism:

- 1) Praising yourself and denigrating others
- 2) Not giving wealth and dharma when requested
- 3) Not forgiving others who apologize
- 4) Abandoning the Path of Altruism

- 5) Taking offerings made to **the Three Jewels**²
- 6) Abandoning the dharma
- 7) Disrobing or causing disrobing of monks and nuns
- 8) Committing the **five heinous crimes**³
- 9) Holding wrong views (not believing in the dharma)
- 10) Destroying towns or other habitat
- 11) Teaching emptiness to the untrained
- 12) Discouraging others from their aspiration for full liberation
- 13) Causing someone to abandon their individual liberation vows
- 14) Denigrating the Path of Individual Liberation
- 15) Claiming realization of emptiness when not fully realized
- 16) Accepting something stolen from the Three Jewels
- 17) Showing favoritism (or attachment)
- 18) Giving up aspiration *bodhicitta*

The underlying principle is that these have been found to facilitate our progress on the path to liberation. They are not laws that must be followed dictated by some external god. In fact, for the most part we could say that they are simple common-sense guidelines. The most critical factor is our *intention*!

The Four Immeasurables: lovingkindness, compassion, (sympathetic) joy and equanimity. They are immeasurable (some say “boundless”) because there are no limits to their expression. In the *sutras*, the Buddha teaches that these practices will bring liberation. So these are **among the most important** of all of the practices in Buddhism. There are practices associated with each of these four, usually beginning with equanimity, then following the order of the remaining three. I have selected practice examples among several options for each.

- **Lovingkindness** – *metta* meditation(s)
- **Compassion** – *tonglen* (taking and giving) practice
- **Sympathetic joy** – (1) being sympathetic to someone else’s joy, (2) the wish that all beings achieve liberation (usually done as contemplation for specific individuals and circumstances, like getting a new job, getting married, retiring, winning the lottery...)

² The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

³ Killing one’s father, mother, or an *arhat* (one who has reached enlightenment), wounding a Buddha, or causing a division in the sangha

- **Equanimity** – *equalizing* self and other (we are all interdependent beings with the same essence), then *exchanging* self and other (contemplating being in the other person’s shoes and how they see things)

To summarize the first and second vows together, ***do good or at least do no harm for the benefit of all beings... always and all ways!*** Doing this will move us much closer to the goal of achieving realization of our innate happiness.

Our next talk will be on the ethical views of Tantra and Dzogchen.

Part 3 – Tantric Vows

The Third Vow – Tantra

Tantra developed in India around the 4th-6th Centuries. No one knows how it came about, so there are many theories. The classical Vedic period had ended around the 5th c BCE (time of the historical Buddha), but the new Hinduism began emerging around the beginning of the new millennium.

The culture of India was changing (1) increased role of women in society, also seen in evolving feminine influence in religious traditions as seen in art and the new “written” languages, (2) increasing trade and sharing of ideas with other cultures, and development of a “middle class”, and (3) increasing representation of deities, including female forms. There was also the beginning of a view that sex could be used in a spiritual manner, which may have emerged from practices in China (Taoism) ... or not. Tantra is often referred to as the “path of transformation”, and compared with alchemy. “Afflictive emotions” were viewed as “pure” on the path to liberation.

Tantra became included in Hinduism, Shaivism, and Buddhism. It was particularly associated with yogic branches of these traditions, but began to influence even the monastic traditions. For Buddhism, the principle shift in views was the inclusion of gods or deities (male and female).

But as a non-theistic religion, in Buddhism these “beings” were considered to be buddha-forms, rather than gods (gods were another class of beings altogether, abiding in separate “god realms”).

Buddhist ethics evolved accordingly, although the basic principles remained the same: *do good, or at least no harm, for the benefit of all beings*. The shift is in the “view”, to **Pure View** where all beings are viewed as Buddhas, all sounds as mantra, all thoughts as the wisdom of Buddha, and all phenomena as a **buddhfield** (a pureland or abode of a Buddha). Thus, our **actions** are adapted to this new view of reality, albeit still based upon the previous forms.

This changes and “elevates” our view of all other beings from “mother sentient beings” (from previous lives) to buddhas here and now! Admittedly this is not for everyone... But it is the form of Buddhism that was transmitted to Tibet in the 8th and, later, 11th-12th centuries.

Pure View also elevates the role of ethics in our meditation and daily actions. In attempting to apply these, keep in mind the Four Reliances (teaching over teacher, meaning over words, definitive over provisional, and transcendent over ordinary knowledge).

Among the most common vows or commitments are **the Fourteen Root Downfalls** (also taken by ordained lay practitioners – *Ngakpas* and *Ngakmas*) and the **Twenty-Five Branch Samayas**. In addition, you are expected to continue avoiding the **Eighteen Bodhisattva Downfalls** from the Path of Altruism and the **Ten Unwholesome Actions** from the Path of Individual Liberation.

If this all seems too much, just keep in mind the basic principles – *do good, or at least no harm, for the benefit of all beings* – and the idea that *all beings have an innate goodness*.

With that as background, let's look at the primary ethical developments in the path of Tantra.

The 14 Root Downfalls

Because there are different versions of these, these are what seem to be the most common.

Most of these are fairly self-explanatory. But if you are not sure, ask your lama. A word of caution here, we are beginning to get into some very deep levels of Buddhism that include terminology that may not be familiar or understood by beginners. At this point, it is not as important that you grasp each point, but that you get a general idea of the kinds of ethics that are part of this level of vows.

- 1) Disrespecting your vajra teacher (lama or guru): to upset, abuse, or be contemptuous of him or her physically, verbally, or mentally, including harboring wrong views about him or her. (Respect the teacher.)
- 2) Transgressing teachings of the Buddha: to disrespect and reject the teachings, even when due to lack of understanding them. (Study and practice.)
- 3) To be angry at your vajra brothers or sisters: out of anger, to speak of any fault of a spiritual brother or sister, or to strike or otherwise inflict any sort of injury, physically, verbally, or mentally.
- 4) To abandon love for all sentient beings: to resolve *never* to help a particular being and thereby give up the intention to lead him or her to awakening. (Like the Bodhisattva Vow.)
- 5) Abandoning bodhicitta (the mind of awakening) for the benefit of all sentient beings: to emit seminal essence in union with a consort (usually just visualized, but here is with an actual karmamudra), done to achieve awakening, but in this case the loss of seminal fluid is done out of ordinary desire or pleasure or in disregard of tantric vows.
- 6) Disparaging our own or others' beliefs: specifically to disparage such beliefs out of desire for "personal gain" (merit from inspiring others to follow the Buddhist tradition).
- 7) Revealing secrets of the tantra to those not ready to understand: someone not prepared for initiation to tantra practices and who would become apprehensive or disdainful of such secrets. (We can't always know that.)
- 8) Abusing your own embodied being as impure: to despise one's own body as the principle source of suffering and engaging in extreme asceticism such as self-mortification with weapons, burning it with fire, extreme fasting, or other austerities.
- 9) Indulging doubts about the pure nature of emptiness: to misconceive the *relative truth* of the interdependent arising of all phenomena as mere appearance without intrinsic reality, like the reflection of a moon on water.
- 10) To have love for the "wicked": to show affection for evil beings, such as demons, religious extremists, or arrogant challengers of the teachings, who are untamable.
- 11) Claiming to be realized when not: to reify or depreciate that which is beyond designations (existence, non-existence, both, or neither); i.e., "emptiness".

- 12) Deriding the practices of others: in general to destroy a practitioner's faith; in particular, to disrespect and, out of jealousy, attempt to destroy the faith of a *person of purity* who inwardly dwells in the pristine awareness of reality, but whose *outward conduct* is unorthodox. [A challenge of knowing the mind of another!]
- 13) Failing to accept the *pledge substances* (usually those presented during empowerments): to have doubts about and refuse the pledge substances, considering these substances to be impure (5 meats, 5 nectars⁴; but usually presented as dutsi pills⁵ and a small amount of alcohol) during any tantric activity (ritual feasts, celebrations, etc.). (Anyone who does not drink alcohol, such as one in recovery, may ask for a non-alcoholic alternative.)
- 14) Abusing or deriding a woman, the nature of wisdom: to speak disparagingly to a woman out of disrespect.

Most of these are pretty easy, even common; generally common sense is sufficient. But it is good to review them periodically nevertheless.

The Four Empowerment Vows

One of the unique features of tantric vows is that they are between you and the lama, compared with other ethical commitments, which are generally between you and all other sentient beings. Both are about “relationships”, as are all ethics.

In Highest Yoga Tantra there are four traditional vows embedded in “empowerments” that authorize one to do a particular practice. More broadly, there are three requirements for full authorization to do many of these practices. They are: (1) *Abhisheka* (empowerment) – the ritual of washing the stains of the disciple's body, speech, and mind, and their combination, and establishes an extraordinary capacity into the disciple's being (Mipham Rinpoche); (2) the *lung* or reading transmission of the text; and (3) the *tri* or explanation of the text and how to practice. The four vows are often not explained (at least in English):

- 1) the *vase empowerment*: purifies your body with water from a vase taken in your hand and swallowed; the **vow** is to cultivate the appearance of the deity, the emptiness nature, and the union of appearance and emptiness, one becomes a suitable vessel and is authorized to do the generation-stage practices (actual authorizations may vary from one lineage to another),
- 2) the *secret empowerment*: purifies your speech for mantra recitation; the **vow** is to control the breath and inner channels, resting in self-existing pristine awareness (authorized to do completion-stage practices),

⁴ Five meats: Beef, dog, elephant, horse, and human (specifically prohibited substances in the *Vinaya*); five nectars: feces, urine, blood, semen, and marrow or brain.

⁵ Generally made of medicinal herbs and other plants.

- 3) the *wisdom empowerment*: purifies your mind to prepare for realization of the ultimate truth nature of beings and phenomena; the **vow** is to practice and remain in innate pristine awareness of bliss (authorized to practice with a consort – real or imagined),
- 4) the *fourth or word empowerment*: purifies any remaining subtle obscurations, the **vow** is to rest in the utterly pure reality of bliss-emptiness (authorized to practice Dzogchen).

Specific details vary. There are a number of additional characteristics, elements, and vows beyond this specific to each empowerment. These are (usually) given by the lama during the empowerment. For example, they may include the number of mantra recitations required to complete your commitment. (Empowerments are often taken as a “blessing” in the West, without making such commitments.)

The 25 Branch Samayas (5 groups of 5, some with subsets of 5 as well)

The 25 Branch Samayas illustrate both the use of various afflictive emotions and “impure” substances that are transformed into wisdom or “pure” substances congruent with the ethical perspective of Pure View. **Everything is pure**, as it is.

This also includes a “secret” element of tantra, which led to restrictions on sharing the texts and practices, e.g., see the 7th Root Downfall above (*revealing secrets of the tantra to those not ready to understand*). Within that context and for the benefit of others, the five sets of five branch *samayas* are:

- 1) The ***five to recognize*** are to realize all the “fivefold conceptions”. This is the samaya of the view, how basic concepts can be re-defined to represent a spiritual point of view – Pure View.
 - a. the five aggregates – form, feeling, perception, thoughts and consciousness are pure,
 - b. the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space, as a mandala,
 - c. the five kayas – *nirmanakaya* - form body; *sambhogakaya* - celestial body (deity forms); *dharmakaya* - truth body, mind of enlightenment, beyond form; abhi-sambhodhi-kaya - the causal source of the previous kayas, and vajrakaya - the unchanging natural state, indestructible, transcendent body [NOTE: some lists reverse the last two],
 - d. the five wisdoms – Mirror-Like, Equanimity, Discriminating, All-Accomplishing and Dharmadhatu,
 - e. the five male and female buddhas - *Vairocana*, *Akshobhya*, *Ratnasambhava*, *Amitabha* and *Amoghasiddhi*; and White Tara, *Lochana*, *Mamaki*, *Pandara* and Green Tara (names may vary somewhat).
- 2) The ***five not to be rejected*** are
 - a. the **five poisons**: delusion, desire, anger, pride, and greed
 - b. because they become helpers on the path, i.e., the **Five Wisdoms**: *Dharmadhatu* – the sphere or space of absolute reality, *mirror-like wisdom* – a clear “reflection”

of the true nature of samsara and nirvana, *equanimity* – samsara and nirvana are equal, one-taste, neither good nor bad, *discriminating wisdom* – pure view that all are pure and equal in nature, and *all-accomplishing wisdom* – ways to benefit beings without exertion then appear to actually benefit them...when embraced by skillful means.

Here one can see that there is a way to take things that are normally perceived as “bad” and turn them around so that these very features may become beneficial for your practice and understanding. These are also an example of how Buddhism reinterpreted some of the original tantric practices, as in the next group of five.

- 3) The ***five to be undertaken*** with unselfish motives are:
- to take life, interrupt the *prana*, “the life force”, by vase breathing, or cut dualistic thinking by means of pristine awareness,
 - to take what is not given, steal “bliss” from the consort (real or imagined),
 - to engage in sexual misconduct, experience “bliss” through *tsalung* (channels, winds and drops) practice while uniting with a consort (real or imagined),
 - to lie, say that living beings are already liberated (pure view), and
 - to utter harsh words, “speak” from an “inexpressible” state (nonverbal) of spiritual accomplishment.

These five “negative actions” – those to avoid in the basic vows of lay practitioners – are applied in a positive way on our spiritual path for the benefit of others.

- 4) The ***five to accept*** are beyond “clean or dirty” because they are the pure nature of reality itself, in the form of the five aggregates are:
- to partake of the essences of red bodhicitta [blood] – form...
 - and white bodhicitta [semen] – feelings,
 - excrement – perceptions,
 - urine – thoughts (or mental formations),
 - and human flesh [or bone marrow] – consciousness ... **for the purpose of** purifying concepts of clean and unclean.

These five are a mix of what are known as the “the five meats” and the “five nectars.” Again, we see the tantric approach of taking something normally rejected and **transforming them** into something viewed as beneficial to our practice. Here what is being transformed is the very ideas of “attachment” and “aversion”, root sources of our “discontent.”

- 5) The ***five to be cultivated*** are to cultivate the five *samayas* (vows) of meditation by realizing and growing familiar with the Five Buddha Families. In this last set of five, we are simply told to cultivate our understanding of the five Buddha Families, a representation in sets of five of many of the key concepts of Tibetan Buddhism such as: the buddhas, aggregates, consorts, elements, colors, locations, symbols, mudras, poisons, wisdoms, and activities (5 of each; see *Innate Happiness* p. 325).

Part 4 – Dzogchen Vows

To complete this presentation on ethics, we need to briefly note that the highest principles of wholesome behavior transcend even those I have described before. In *transcendent wisdom* there is no right or wrong, good or bad, no attachment or aversion. Here you transcend even the concept of good or bad. I am reminded of the statement by William Shakespeare's Hamlet, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." In his treatise on the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) Nagarjuna explains this in terms of the *tetralemma* based on the teachings of the Buddha: (1) transcendent wisdom is not a thing, (2) it is not nothing, (3) it is not both, and (4) it is not neither. Think about it! He has eliminated every conceivable possibility save one – it is beyond logic, beyond thought. It simply is. Thus, we often use the word *suchness* to reference this "___" that is truly ineffable – beyond description.

This does not mean that you are free to simply do as you choose independent of the effects on others, however. We must always keep in mind the Four Reliances (see Chapter 3). We are all interrelated, interconnected and interdependent. The principles described earlier still apply, even though specific precepts may be transcended for purposes of spiritual development. Thus, Padmasambhava said, "My view is as vast as the sky; my behavior is as fine as barley flour." This asserts the difference between the ultimate and relative truths. Being without attachment and aversion is the view of *Dharmakaya*, while behaving in the manner of the other vows for the benefit of sentient beings is the *rupakaya*. These are not either/or, but both/and ... one taste.

The ethical view of the Path of Great Perfection can be a very slippery slope. In Tibet "crazy wisdom" on the part of realized yogis may have been culturally accepted. So on one hand, there are no rules! No good or bad. Any practice that can be done from Pure View is an authentic practice, including freely enjoying sense pleasures, being free from accepting and rejecting, engaging in sexual union, and so forth.

There is a set of instructions from Longchenpa (1308-1364) called the *Cloud Banks of Nectar* that illustrate the transcendent view quite well, though they may require some explanation for beginners or others not familiar with the transcendent view.

Emaho!

The intention of Great Mother *Dharmakaya*, [Samantabhadri]

The heart of the ten perfections,

Is enjoyment of profound wisdom.

By genuinely ending up here

There's no one to see appearances.

All arising is *Dharmakaya*'s play.

Illusions are the Lama's compassion.

So go ahead and stir things up!

Emaho!

The intention of Lama Kunzang, [Samantabhadra]
 The heart of the deity-yoga's result,
 Is non-fabrication in whatever arises.
 By genuinely ending up here
 There's no one to be afraid of thought.
 Whatever happens is mental projection.
 Thoughts are the Lama's compassion.
 So go ahead and stir things up!

Emaho!

The intention of Lama Pema, [Padmasambhava]
 The heart of all-embracing Ati,
 Is enjoyment of your stainless mind.
 By genuinely ending up here
 There is no one to perceive impurity.
 Stains are all *dharmata*'s play.
 All ways of seeing are the Lama's compassion.
 So go ahead and stir things up!

Emaho!

The practice of the woman Tsogyal, [Yeshe Tsogyal]
 The heart of secret mantra,
 Is the single taste of joy and sorrow.
 Since genuinely ending up here,
 There is no one to parse what's good and what's bad.
 They both just enhance experience.
 Whatever appears is the Lama's compassion...
 So go ahead and stir things up!

Emaho!

This short text points out how these Dzogchen practices result in transcending a sense of “self,” as well as the concepts normally brought on as a result, which of course lead to our discontent. On the other hand, with transcendent wisdom, we are no longer bound by those concepts, so we are free to “stir things up” as they will no longer result in “suffering.” Of course, as pointed out below, we must beware of the slippery slope of assuming that we can rationalize any behavior we choose, even though it may be harmful to others. That is not the intention. Nevertheless, the ideas expressed here can be very liberating for those who truly understand.

In addition, Padmasambhava gave instructions to his consort Yeshe Tsogyal that are helpful in a more complete understanding this view.⁶

⁶ From *Treasures from Juniper Ridge: The Profound Treasure Instructions of Padmasambhava to the Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal*

Your realization of the view's nature may be like an ocean,
 But still guard the relative cause and effect down to the finest detail.
 You may have understood the vast ocean of *dharmata*'s nature,
 But still keep an undistracted training like a pillar of gold.

You may have realized the natural state of open mind,
 But still protect your samayas and precepts, stable and undamaged.
 You may have gained a realization of the oceanlike *dharmata*'s nature,
 But still respect sublime masters as you would the crown of your head.

Your loving heart may be free of partiality,
 But still fulfill the wishes of your companions and all your *dharma* friends.
 You may have seen the equal nature of the buddhas and all beings,
 But still avoid like poison the ten unwholesome deeds and their results.

You may have realized the fact that the buddha is your mind,
 But still regard the sublime yidam deity as dear as your own heart.
 You may have understood that suffering itself is greatest bliss,
 But still avoid creating all its causes, actions, and involvements.

You may have transformed emotions into pristine wakefulness,
 But still avoid scorching your mind with flames of the three- and fivefold poisons.
 You may have experienced nonaction as the state of greatest ease,
 But still exert yourself in goodness with the utmost diligence.

So there are still consequences for our actions. And this is not Tibet. Even if you are able to sustain Pure View and see all actions as pure – as they are – others may not, since they are still bound by *samsara*. This may lead to a wide variety of problems in your life and those of others. If, for example, you take the position that there are no barriers in having sex with another, and do that, a spouse or significant other may want a divorce or break up the relationship. Even if you are able to maintain a state of no attachment or aversion under these circumstances (the ideal here), your actions have resulted in a great deal of harm to others, and you have accrued negative karma. So while no rules may sound good, it's never that simple. Pick your poison carefully. In addition, to the extent that you do engage in these activities, it is important to be discrete; show respect for others, as well as the dharma.

Some Specific Atiyoga Vows (not always taught)

In some sources there are also specific Atiyoga or Dzogchen vows. These fit into two categories: general and exceptional. **The general category** is divided into body, speech, and mind, each having outer, inner, and secret levels.

1) Body

- a. Outer – do not steal, engage in sexual misconduct, or kill.
- b. Inner – do not disrespect
 - i. Your parents, vajra brothers and sisters, or your own body;
 - ii. Teachings or other individuals;
 - iii. One’s own body through beating or extreme asceticism.
- c. Secret – do not
 - i. Threaten to strike tantric brothers and sisters, or mock their ornaments
 - ii. Strike one’s tantric consort or be mischievous toward the master’s consort
 - iii. Step on the shadow of the master or be irreverent in his or her presence.

2) Speech

- a. Outer – do not lie, slander others, or revile others.
- b. Inner – do not rebuke or slander
 - i. Those who impart the teachings,
 - ii. Those who ponder the content of the teachings,
 - iii. Those who meditate on the abiding nature of reality.
- c. Secret – do not have contempt for or transgress
 - i. The words of tantric brothers and sisters,
 - ii. The words of the master’s consort or his close attendants,
 - iii. The master’s teachings.

3) Mind

- a. Outer – do not be malicious, envious, or hold wayward views.
- b. Inner – do not
 - i. Be unconscientious (mistaken conduct),
 - ii. Fall under the sway of dullness, excitement, and deviant impediments (mistaken meditation),
 - iii. Adhere to the extremes of eternalism or nihilism (mistaken views).
- c. Secret – to
 - i. Cultivate (in every part of the day) the view, meditation, and action,
 - ii. Practice deity yoga [especially Guru Yoga],

- iii. Cultivate mystic union with the master (as the guru in Guru Yoga practice) and love for tantric brothers and sister.

The four exceptional pledges (the second category) are as follows:

- 1) Trekcho (the essence of *primordial purity*) –
 - a. to liberate oneself from *grasping to* the **perceived reality** of ongoing phenomena by realizing that everything that manifests as the environment and inhabitants is primordially “non-existent” (not as it appears to be), and
 - b. to liberate projected appearances by cultivating **natural intrinsic awareness** without grasping at the concept of an observer (dualism).
- 2) Togal (the natural expression of *spontaneous accomplishment*) –
 - a. to disengage from an outer spiritual quest, **confident** in the realization that buddhahood is to be actualized within oneself through continuous cultivation of the four visionary appearances, the manifestation of the inner radiance of the five-colored lights, and
 - b. to arrive in primordial *exhaustion of phenomena into reality* through the **confident realization** that all occurrences and manifestations (thoughts, events, feelings, circumstances, and appearances) are solely natural pristine awareness.

Motivation, Intention and Rationalization

Doing *the right thing* is largely a matter of motivation and intention. You cannot always be sure that what we intend will actually yield the best result. So you must trust your intentions and follow the guidelines. Following these is no guarantee, but they have been shown to be *beneficial* to the practice of millions over thousands of years.

There is a risk, however, that you may use these guidelines in a way that simply rationalizes doing what you want to do, based on your ordinary attachments or aversions and your habitual tendencies. This necessitates that you be *constantly aware* of your choices and *question* your motivation and intentions before acting.

Sometimes using *the ultimate view* as the basis for your actions in *samsara* is simply a rationalization. If I use “Pure View” as a reason to drink alcohol or have sex, then I am rationalizing. If, however, I genuinely see alcohol as nectar and illusory, then it does not matter if I drink it or water. I have *no attachment or aversion* ... no preference one way or the other. Similarly with sex. If I maintain Pure View during sex or follow the guidance of the lama for the practice of sexual yoga without *any* attachment or aversion, then it will not affect my karma. But if I am just using “no attachment or aversion” to rationalize my desire to have sex, then it can have consequences for me and/or others, which of course comes back to me.

Yes, there may be cases where circumstances and the view of yourself and others are such that you can engage in “crazy wisdom” and cross the line. But rationalization is a very slippery

slope. Beware! It is important to maintain your *view* when dealing with others, no matter how pure *your* view is.

Three Commentaries by Some of the Greatest Masters on Dzogchen Ethics

- **Padmasambhava** (*Innate Happiness*, p. 285) – “My view is as vast as the sky; my behavior is as fine as barley flour.”
- **Longchenpa** (*Trilogy of Rest*, Vol 2, p 68) – “One must neither mix them up nor disparage the observances of the lower vows. If the observances of the three vows are in conflict, the person concerned must chiefly act according to the Mantrayana (Tantra or Vajrayana) point of view, thus enhancing the lower vows as to their purpose and remedial function. When, however, one is in a public situation, one should guard against *all* the downfalls viewed differently at the three levels of the vows, separately and without confusing them. And if the observances are in conflict, one should principally act according to the two lower vows. For the Mantrayana view is very secret, and to act with such discretion enhances the purpose of not causing others to lose faith.”
- **Jigme Lingpa** (*Treasury of Precious Qualities: Book One*, pp. 306-307) – “Observance should be *appropriate to the moment*. Generally speaking, from the level of beginner up to that of accomplished yogi, the behavior of practitioners should be appropriate to their capacity and also to the situation in which they find themselves. In the midst of a gathering of people, they should act impeccably and with care and concern for others.... As the *Guhyasamaja-tantra* says: ‘Be outwardly like Shravakas and inwardly enjoy the quintessential meaning.’ The perfect Buddha, the Lotus-Born Guru, has said the same.

“When a yogi is engaged *in secret practice*, actions that are considered downfalls on all levels of vow should be rejected totally. However, in the case of those actions that may be assessed differently at different levels, or in the case of one who is training in ‘fearless and unconventional’ yogic activities, preference should be given to the mantra point of view, although in no case should the lower vows be disparaged. Since the practitioners here are acting with the means and wisdom of the higher vows, no fault is committed. Nevertheless, if their behavior is liable to give scandal to ordinary people and cause them to lose faith, they should adhere to the precepts of the lower vows.”

Skillful Means

Because Buddhism treats ethical principles as guidelines rather than hard and fast rules, there is another overriding principle necessary, as described by these three great masters. This is *skillful means*. Previously I mentioned the first-five of the Six Perfections are sometimes referred to as skillful means (generosity, ethics, patience, persistence, joyful effort, and concentration). In this case the term is applied in the context of *ethical conduct*. To avoid the slippery slope of rationalization, you can apply the principle of skillful means to help determine how and when to

apply or make exceptions to the basic guidelines. *Motivation and intention* become important considerations. You also need to ensure that you are not falling into the abyss of rationalization. But lying, in order to save another's life is an example of skillful means. You won't always know.

For this reason, there are lamas who will argue that we are simply too ignorant to decide what is skillful or not until we attain liberation. On the surface this may sound, and may even be, legitimate in guiding our behavior. Nevertheless, it can also lead you down the path of not doing good for the benefit of others. *Another* form of rationalization!

Perhaps this is why His Holiness the Dalai Lama makes a strong case for the importance of your *altruistic intention*, your *ethical intention*, in deciding upon your actions of thought, word and deed each and every day. You do the best you can with what you do know, grounded in your altruistic intention to benefit others. This is skillful means.

Buddha described his path as the three trainings: ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The purpose of wisdom is to realize the view. The purpose of the view is to enhance our meditation. The purpose of our meditation is to guide our actions of body, speech, and mind ... *ethics*. So, these are not just some old "rules" or "guidelines". They are at the heart of what Buddhism is all about – *dukkha* (suffering and discontent) are the result of our own views and actions, our *karma*. So Buddhism can be said to be all about *ethics*, with lovingkindness and compassion for *all sentient beings*!

May these talks enrich your dharma practice in body, speech, and mind.

Yogi Khenpo Drimed Dawa

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