

Nine Considerations and Criteria for Benefiting Beings

By

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Translated by Karen Liljenberg, 2009. Revised and edited version for Lotsawa House and Zangthal by Karen Liljenberg and Adam Pearcey 2015.

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This concerns the ways in which bodhisattvas act to benefit beings.

Bodhisattvas who genuinely take the bodhisattva vow of ethical discipline do nothing but act for the benefit of beings, either directly or indirectly, but unless one is skilful in benefiting these beings, no matter how much one does, it might not benefit beings, but could actually be a direct or indirect cause of harm. Take account, therefore, of these nine considerations and criteria as you act for others' benefit:

1. Consideration of the benefit to both oneself and others

- Anything that would be of direct or indirect help and benefit to both yourself and others should be done.
- Anything that would not benefit but harm both you and others, directly or indirectly, should not be done.
- Anything that would benefit you but cause harm to other beings should not be done.

If something would harm you but help others, then act in accordance with your situation. If you are a beginner, the main thing is to protect yourself from harm. Like the shoot of a medicinal plant, protecting yourself from harm will be the source of benefit to others. If you are a bodhisattva at the stage of "devoted conduct"¹, weigh up the priorities. From the point of obtaining the bodhisattva levels² onwards, the main thing is to act solely for others' benefit.

You should also examine the amount of help or harm that would be caused. If, directly or indirectly, it would be of considerable help to others and little harm to yourself, you should act to benefit them. If it would be of little help to others but would seriously harm you, do not act. If the amount of help and harm would be equal, act in accordance with your situation. If you are a beginner, mainly protect yourself from harm. From the stage of "devoted conduct" onwards, mainly act to help others.

2. Consideration of the status of beings

If something would benefit lower beings such as animals but harm higher ones such as humans, do not act for the benefit of the lower. Even if an action would harm some animals, if it would benefit humans and the like, then act for the humans' benefit. The same principle applies with regard

to ordinary people and practitioners of Dharma, and among practitioners, with regard to shravakas and bodhisattvas.

3. Consideration of the number of beings

If many beings would be helped and few harmed, you should act to benefit the many. But if many would be harmed and few helped, do not act. If the numbers and the help and harm would be equal, by relying on teachings of skilful methods of protection from harm, you will succeed in helping.

4. Consideration of this and future lives

If it would benefit others in both this life and those to come, you should act to benefit them, by all means. Whenever it would benefit neither life, you should not act. If it would help in this life but harm in future ones, do not act. Even if it would harm in this life, if it would help in the next, being skilful with methods to protect this life from harm you should act to benefit the next.

5. Consideration of vows and non-virtue

Even though you may hold vows of ethical conduct, if some sentient beings would be greatly aided and benefited solely by your committing a negative action, then, for the sake of others, and since it would be a training in spiritual accomplishment, you should act, committing any of the ten negative actions³.

- If you should see someone thinking of committing many "actions with immediate result"⁴, such as killing numerous shravakas, pratyekabuddhas⁵, or bodhisattvas merely for the sake of some petty material goods, while you avoid the karmic result, even *taking their life* with a loving motivation would not be a negative action, but would actually accrue a great deal of merit⁶.
- If a bodhisattva has the power, and sees robbers and the like stealing many offerings to shrines or monastic goods, then, with a loving attitude he should reappropriate them and restore them to their place in the monastery or shrine. In that way, the action of a bodhisattva who *takes what is not given*,
- and also of a bodhisattva who, out of compassion, engages in *sexual intercourse* with a laywoman who has no spouse and is

tormented by sexual desire, although nominally negative, count as virtuous.

Also:

- uttering various *falsehoods*, if as a means to save many beings' lives, or to prevent them being captured and having their limbs cut off, and so on;
- out of loving kindness, disparaging and *spreading discord* to separate people from false spiritual guides and non-virtuous friends to whom they have become attached;
- if talking calmly does not deter them, *speaking very harshly* to and humiliating, out of love, those who have fallen into error and negative behaviour;
- if someone is very stressed and miserable, and enjoys such pleasures as song, dance, music, joking chit-chat and so on, then, out of love, cheering them up with various kinds of *idle talk* - dancing, singing, playing various kinds of music, and teasing banter –

These actions lead to virtue and are not an occasion for committing the three negative mental actions⁷, it is said. Rather, they become an exercise in accomplishing others' benefit.

Moreover:

- If you see destitute people or beggars, and you have no items that you can give them yourself, but see a rich and miserly person, and take this miser's food and goods by various means, motivated by love, and give them to the poor, this *covetous* wondering about and longing for another's food and goods;
- acting to destroy some people who have become dangerously hostile to teachers, the Sangha, and so on - to the Three Jewels⁸ - out of a fierce *wish to harm* their bodies, and their lives;
- sometimes teaching a "*wrong view*"⁹ to those who are devoted to wrong views and conduct, out of love and for their benefit, in order

that, by teaching them the wrong view, they may be brought under your control and drawn towards the correct view—

All of these ten actions are not negative, and, on the contrary, accrue a great deal of merit.

As it says in the *Twenty Verses on the Vows*¹⁰, "In whoever has a loving heart, there is no non-virtue".

If such a basis of non-virtue might later become a cause of quarrelling, or of strife among the Sangha, or might destroy the faith of many people of faith and cause wrong views to develop, then as a beginner, you should not act.

6. Consideration of the pros and cons of generosity

This has four parts:

1. Consideration of the pros and cons of material giving

If you see some poor beings and you have some material thing which you could give, and would not yourself be harmed by giving it, but would help the others, then giving whatever material goods you have to the poor, dispel any non-virtuous thoughts and engage in virtuous action.

If material giving should become an obstacle to your life and limb, or your study, contemplation and practice, and be of little benefit to others, do not give. But, however little you give, do it smilingly, acknowledging the other person with kind words, and looking them in the face.

If material giving would cause harm to yourself and help others in equal measure, or you are not able to face the other person, allot what your circumstances allow, and give it.

Furthermore, when giving material things you should note the following:

Since ordained bodhisattvas have renounced all material possessions, they should prioritise having nothing to give. Lay bodhisattvas should prioritise giving. Also, among the ordained, those who live as isolated hermits should not prioritise giving, while those who frequent the towns should share whatever comes into their alms-bowl collectively with the poor.

2. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving the body

If a bodhisattva who is still an ordinary person is asked for their body, it is not the right moment to give it, since, if it were really given it would become the work of Mara¹¹, so the body is not given in reality. Instead it should be given to sentient beings through visualization, either as a whole or in individual parts.

Once one of the bodhisattva levels has been reached, the body should be given in reality, since it will be of great benefit to sentient beings, giving the limbs, flesh, blood, and whatever is desired. Pray that from now on, you may find and be reborn again and again, in the body of an elephant or a great fish and so on, for the sake of those beings that are carnivorous. If flesh- and-blood is made beneficial then it will become the cause of longed-for higher rebirths and liberation even for those who have eaten a bodhisattva's flesh.

3. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving Dharma

When it causes no problem to a bodhisattva's meditative stability, the Dharma should be taught to appropriate people who desire it, however much they wish. If it would cause a problem to your meditative stability and if those who desire the teaching are inappropriate, it should not be taught. If it would slightly damage your meditative stability but the person who wants the teaching is appropriate, it should be taught. Even if it would cause you no problem, if the person who wants the teaching is someone who delights in negative actions, a scoffing non-Buddhist who just steals teachings, he should not be taught.

If you do not know a teaching, but in expectation of respect and honour from the person who desires it, pretend to know it and wilfully teach some false, made-up thing of your own, this is said to be an incalculably negative act, and therefore you should not do it. If you do know it, unless it would be tossed aside and wasted by a greedy or blasé person, you should teach it. As it is said, "Of the various kinds of generosity, giving the Dharma is the best".

4. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving protection from fear

If bodhisattvas possess the power to protect sentient beings from danger, they should act to do so. But if they do not, they should not act. If you have the power but it would cause harm to yourself, you should not act.

Even if your power is small, if it would not harm yourself or others, you should act to protect and defend endangered beings as much as possible.

7) Consideration of beings' various levels of devotion

Although, in general, the types, capacities and motivations of sentient beings are incredibly diverse, if summed up briefly, they fall into eight categories:-

- i. those whose merit is exhausted, lacking any faith or interest in the karmic causes and effects leading to higher rebirths and liberation
- ii. those who are interested in the karmic causes and effects leading to better rebirths in the god or human realms
- iii. those interested in the shravaka path and result
- iv. those interested in the path and result of the pratyekabuddhas
- v. those interested in the bodhisattva path and its result
- vi. those interested in the Great Vehicle Secret Mantra¹² path and its result
- vii. those interested in the instant enlightenment of the profound essential meaning¹³
- viii. difficult cases who are do not fall into any definite category

Thus, if you look at these eight categories, excluding those among them whose merit is exhausted and those who are indeterminate, the other six should be benefited, in accordance with their individual interest, with Dharma that is appropriate to their mind, and also with material things. They should also gradually be led from the lower to the higher paths. They should not be placed onto lower paths from higher ones. Teaching that is not appropriate to someone's mind-stream should not be given.

As for those who are of the indefinite category, they should be gradually brought into the Great Vehicle. They should not be introduced to lower paths. Even those whose merit is exhausted should not be abandoned and forgotten. By giving them material things, create karmic links with them and connect with them, praying that in future they may be reborn as disciples of the Three Jewels.

8. Summary

Furthermore, by giving them material things, you should gauge beings' different aspirations, and examining the categories of beings, you should act for their benefit, by means of food and other gifts of the appropriate size, quantity, purity, suitability and capacity for benefit. As Shantideva¹⁴ says, "In this way, whenever giving (Dharma), take everyone's measure". Therefore, bodhisattvas who have supernormal perception¹⁵, or are endowed with the 'dharma eye' of transcendent knowledge, should examine beings' different wishes by means of their aspirations, and accordingly employ various means to benefit them with Dharma, material things and so on.

9. Consideration of the pros and cons for one's own Dharma practice

In brief, if acting directly to benefit beings will not create obstacles to your study, reflection and meditation, which are themselves the indirect cause of benefitting countless beings, then you should act to benefit beings directly as much as you are able. Having examined the extent of your direct assistance to beings and the extent of the harm to your study, contemplation and practice, come to a conclusion. If they are equal, then prioritise benefitting others. As it is said, "Don't commit major acts for minor reasons. Chiefly think of others' benefit".

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So, by carrying out whatever actions are to be done, as determined by these nine considerations, and by refraining from carrying out whatever should not be done, bodhisattvas will not transgress their vows and will be helpful and beneficial. In the event that they do not do what should be done, and do what should not be done, their vows will be damaged.

However, if in order to accomplish something of great benefit to beings you disregard a little benefit to yourself or commit some minor infraction, and then act for the sake of beings, this is what is known as "the façade of breaking vows". And though to a foolish person it might look as if your ordination vows have been damaged by some faults, in actual fact there is absolutely no transgression. Alternatively, when seeing an opportunity to be of great benefit to beings, if you shy away from disregarding some slight benefit to yourself or committing some minor infraction, then this is what is known as "the façade of non-breakage."

While it might look to a foolish person as if there has been no breakage of vows, there has in fact been a transgression. So give up actual breakages and the façade of non-breaking, and train instead in actual non-breaking and the mere façade of breaking.

These are ways to train in the ethical discipline of benefitting sentient beings.

The three kinds of moral discipline are one in essence, but are distinguished conceptually. The three moral disciplines of a bodhisattva are, in a single essence, simply the awareness that aims at benefitting beings. But the different conceptual stages are:

- i. The discipline of refraining from negative action, through which *one's own benefit* is accomplished for the sake of sentient beings.
- ii. The discipline of collecting positive actions, through which *both one's own benefit and that of others* is accomplished.
- iii. The discipline of acting on behalf of sentient beings, through which *others' benefit* is accomplished.

And:

- The discipline of refraining from negative action should be prioritised by *beginners*.
- The discipline of collecting positive actions should be prioritised by the bodhisattva engaging in "*devoted conduct*".
- The discipline acting on behalf of sentient beings should be prioritised by those who have attained the *bodhisattva levels*.

Also:

- The first discipline completely discards those disagreeable factors to be renounced that obstruct one's own and others' benefit.
- The second discipline completes the perfect accumulation of qualities that accomplish one's own and others' benefit.
- The third discipline, if it is not accompanied by the wisdom that realizes non-self, runs the risk of developing the attitude of the shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, as you can become tired of

sentient beings, because it takes a long time, since their constituent elements are never exhausted, and since not even all the buddhas of the past have been able to liberate them, and because beings, by behaving in negative ways, pay back their benefactors by causing them harm. However, if, through the wisdom that realizes non-self¹⁶, you know that all phenomena, on the absolute level, are without substance, like the sky, you will not become sad or disillusioned.

As *all* positive actions are included within the two accumulations¹⁷ they belong to the discipline of collecting positive actions.

What is called “the supreme aspiration, the perfect, sublime bodhichitta”¹⁸, means understanding that oneself and others are the same in wishing for happiness and not wanting to suffer, and so cherishing other beings who have the deluded belief in a "self".

As regards the three vows¹⁹, from the perspective of their essence, they alternate between either a manifest or a latent presence. From the perspective of the individual:

- For a *beginner* the three vows are present in the manner of the absolute meaning.
- For the bodhisattva engaged in "*devoted conduct*" the vows of individual liberation are present in both the manner of the relative and the absolute meaning²⁰.
- After attaining the *bodhisattva levels*, the three vows are present in the manner of the relative meaning, since on the level of the absolute meaning there is nothing to vow.

In terms of time, the vow of individual liberation is present for as long as one may live and the other two vows are present until one attains enlightenment. On the level of the absolute, there are no independently-existing sentient beings to be wandering in samsara; it is only on the delusory, relative level that illusory sentient beings are obscured by adventitious karma and conflicting emotions. Once this merely conceptual mind has been instructed, an individual experiences the suffering of samsara as merely an illusion, and the conceptual mind is like the dream-world of oppressive sleep.

If whatever actions you do, such as giving and so on, are held with both the view of emptiness²¹ and with compassion, they will become the cause of the state of omniscience²², or part of your spiritual path.

Furthermore, the bodhisattva should first practice generosity²³ and the rest, on the path of omniscience, by applying the three supreme methods²⁴:

- guided by *supreme bodhichitta*,
- concluding with the *supreme aspiration*, and
- sealed with *supreme wisdom*.

The first is a stable intention to apply this practice in the mind-stream, born of a wish to attain supreme enlightenment swiftly for the sake of all beings, and then to work for their benefit.

The meaning of the second is as in the prayer "Through this merit, may all beings attain the omniscient state of enlightenment",²⁵ etc.

The third seals the action by not fixating on the three concepts²⁶.

Translated by Karen Liljenberg, 2009. Originally published on www.zangthal.co.uk. Revised and edited version for Lotsawa House and Zangthal by Karen Liljenberg and Adam Pearcey.

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- ¹ The stage of "devoted conduct" is when a bodhisattva acts out of devotion, and it encompasses the first two of the "five paths", successive stages on the path of enlightenment, which are: the path of accumulation, the path of connection, the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and the path beyond learning.
- ² Bodhisattva levels - this refers to the ten levels of realization (*bhumi* in Sanskrit, and *sa* in Tibetan, literally "ground") reached by bodhisattvas on the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and the path beyond learning.
- ³ The ten negative actions are: taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, sowing discord, harsh speech, worthless chatter, covetousness, maliciousness, and wrong views.
- ⁴ Action with immediate result - there are five actions that are said to propel a person immediately after they die into the most serious hell-realm (the hell-realms being one of the six realms of Samsara, into which beings are born or from which they emerge according to their karma, rather than a permanent state). These five actions are: patricide, matricide, killing an arhat (a realized shravaka), drawing blood from a buddha's body with evil intent, and causing a schism within the sangha, the community of Buddhist practitioners.
- ⁵ A pratyekabuddha, (in Tibetan *rang sangs rgyas*, literally "self-buddha") is someone who finds buddhahood by him or herself, without a teacher in his/her final life.
- ⁶ Merit is good karma, through positive actions of body, speech and mind.
- ⁷ The three mental negative actions are the last three of the ten negative actions, listed above, i.e. covetousness, maliciousness, and wrong views.
- ⁸ The three jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha. In Tibetan Buddhism the teacher or lama is often added.
- ⁹ A "wrong view" is a false belief, particularly one that causes negative acts leading to further suffering.
- ¹⁰ "Twenty Verses on the Vows", written by Chandragomi, 10th century C.E.
- ¹¹ Mara is a "demon", the personification of influences that create obstacles for practice and enlightenment, in particular one's own ego-clinging.
- ¹² The Great Vehicle, the Mahayana, is that followed by all bodhisattvas. It is called "great" because its aim or scope is great - the enlightenment of all sentient beings. The Secret Mantra Vehicle is part of the Mahayana, and is otherwise known as the Vajrayana or Diamond Vehicle.
- ¹³ "Instant enlightenment of the profound essential meaning" is a reference to Dzogchen, which strictly speaking, is a non-gradual path.
- ¹⁴ Shantideva is the author of the famous Bodhicharyavatara, or "The Way of the Bodhisattva".
- ¹⁵ Supernormal perceptions include divine sight, divine hearing, recollection of former lives, cognition of the minds of others, etc. These kinds of powers are regarded as merely "ordinary accomplishments" of Bodhisattvas as they attain higher levels of realization, as opposed to the "supreme accomplishment" of enlightenment.
- ¹⁶ The wisdom that realizes non-self is the wisdom which sees the lack of true, independent self-existence of the individual personality and/or of phenomena. This lack of self-existence is also, roughly, referred to as emptiness.
- ¹⁷ The two accumulations are the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. Both need to be complete in order to attain enlightenment.

¹⁸ Bodhichitta, literally the mind of enlightenment, in the relative sense is the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings. On the absolute level, it is direct insight into the true nature of the mind and phenomena.

¹⁹ The three vows are the pratimoksha vow of individual liberation, the bodhisattva vow, and the Secret Mantra or Vajrayana vows.

²⁰ The absolute meaning - the ultimate truth, realized by those who are enlightened. The relative meaning - the provisional or conventionally-agreed truth as understood by beings in Samsara.

23 The view of emptiness and with compassion - these two correspond to wisdom and merit, the two accumulations.

²² The state of omniscience is a synonym for enlightenment.

²³ Generosity and so on - this refers to the six transcendent actions (or six paramitas), which are: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, concentration and wisdom. These six comprise bodhichitta in application.

²⁴ The three supreme methods for any practice are: beginning with the compassionate motivation of bodhichitta, practising without concepts and ego-clinging (see three concepts, below), and ending with the dedication of the merit to the enlightenment of all beings.

²⁵ The full prayer is as follows: "Through this merit, may all beings attain the omniscient state of enlightenment, and conquer the enemy of faults and delusion. May they all be liberated from this ocean of Samsara and from its pounding waves of birth, old age, sickness and death".

²⁶ The three concepts, (in Tibetan '*khor gsum*, literally "three spheres") are those of subject, object, and action, (wrongly) viewed as having a real, unchanging, independent existence.