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Foreword

This book consists of talks on the bodhisattva precepts by Master Sheng Yen given at the Chan Meditation Center in New York from December 6 through 8, 1997.

We sincerely hope that this commentary on the bodhisattva precepts will provide the reader with a clear understanding of their meaning, as well as the inspiration to integrate these teachings into their lives.

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Introduction

There is a saying in Mahayana Buddhism: "Those who have precepts to break are bodhisattvas; those who have no precepts to break are outer-path followers." Many Buddhists know that receiving the bodhisattva precepts generates great merit, yet they believe this without a real understanding of the profound meaning of the precepts, or of what keeping these precepts entails. They receive the precepts as a matter of course, knowing only that receiving them is a good thing to do. To try to remedy this situation, we are conducting the transmission of the bodhisattva precepts over the course of three days so that prior to the formal transmission ceremony, I can explain to all participants the meaning and significance of these precepts within the Mahayana tradition. Each participant, after understanding what keeping these precepts involves, is free to decide for himself or herself whether or not to take them. In this situation, many participants in the past did decide to take the precepts and were able to happily commit themselves to the bodhisattva path. Transmitting the precepts in this way-allowing aspirants to take them in good conscience and with proper understanding-can help aspirants plant the seeds

of Buddhahood with no feelings of compulsion or guilt in their minds.

The virtue in vowing to observe the precepts is that it enables us to practice diligently to purify ourselves. These codes of behavior may also help us interact with others in a more peaceful and harmonious manner. If we can purify the actions of our body, speech, and mind through practicing the three sets of pure precepts, the five precepts and the ten good deeds, then, with the wisdom such practice gives us, we can banish craving, covetousness, anger and all other afflictive emotions. With a bodhisattva's mind of compassion, we can accept and cherish all sentient beings, and by purifying our own conduct, we can help to transform society at large. Even in the midst of suffering, each individual sentient being can attain the altruistic bodhi-mind and also help others arouse this awakened mind of wisdom.

The combination of vows and precepts that we are transmitting here—including the four great vows, the three sets of pure precepts, the five precepts and the ten good deeds—is quite accessible to everyone. There is ample flexibility in practicing the three sets of pure precepts: so long as their fundamental principle is adhered to, these precepts can be adapted to the different situations that a practitioner of the

bodhisattva path may encounter. Such flexibility makes these precepts relatively easy to practice for a wide variety of people. As these precepts also function as guidelines for wholesome behavior for Buddhists, the commitment to practice them is a valuable undertaking for all practitioners.

I dare not change the content of the bodhisattva precepts, nor do I have the virtue necessary to invent new ones. I have simply referred to the various systems of bodhisattva precepts in both the Chinese and Tibetan traditions and adapted them to fit the needs of modern practitioners. In doing so, my hope is to promote the actualization of the spirit of the bodhisattva precepts, and I encourage all practitioners to receive and practice them.

The Source of Compassion

Love, kindness, and compassion are the very foundations of Buddhism. From a general perspective, these virtues correspond to similar values held in many other religious traditions and spiritual practices. However, in Buddhism, genuine love and compassion arise from a penetrating insight into the true nature of our own existence, and are thereby more firmly grounded in a practitioner's experience. We can understand this from two perspectives.

First, from the perspective of interdependence, we see that no phenomenon in the world, whether material or mental, exists independently of other phenomena. All beings and things are intimately related to one another. All of the activities engaged in by a seemingly independent entity are actually connected to, and affected by, the activities of other entities in an intricate, infinite network. Everything that exists relies on innumerable, apparently external factors for their existence. Separation from this vast system of connections between all things would make existence impossible. This is the profound reality of the nature of the world we live in, and of course, it is also the reality of our own individual lives as we live them. We are all

connected to each other and to all living things, both sentient and insentient.

On a human scale, we can see the truth of interdependence in the fact that no person can live entirely apart from society. We depend on the assistance of other human beings for everything we have: from the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, and shelter, on up to the various forms of knowledge and skills that we acquire, and to the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment we derive from our work. If we are fortunate to live in a relatively stable society, we should know that much of the order and stability in our daily lives depends on the structure of our society and on the work of other people in all sorts of public institutions. Similarly, global interrelationships and the mutual influences between different nations and cultures are often demonstrated in fields like economics, political science, and cultural studies.

On a larger scale, countless other forms of life, both sentient and insentient, have either direct or indirect influences on our well-being. Also, from the viewpoint of the Buddhist belief in innumerable past lives and future rebirths, each of us must have, in countless previous lives, once lived in very close, direct

connection to every other sentient being. All these "other beings" have been our mothers, our fathers, our sisters, or our brothers. Each one, at one time or another, has been the cause of our happiness. With this sort of outlook, how can we not have sympathy and concern for all beings? We can only feel a deep sense of responsibility for and gratitude to them. Such gratitude in turn engenders genuine caring and love that goes beyond an individual's love for his or her own family, race, or nation. This sort of love, extended to all beings everywhere, springs from the very knowledge that we are truly all one family.

Second, from the perspective of equality of all conditions, all of these infinitely varied sorts of interrelations and connections among sentient and insentient beings give rise to a multitude of individual traits and distinctions. However, since these seemingly unique and distinct entities are all contingent upon one another, not one of them can be said to exist autonomously and permanently in and of itself. This is the nature of emptiness. As we penetrate the depths of this conditionality through contemplation and the cultivation of genuine compassion, we can understand personally and directly that all phenomena are empty of any inherent, separate nature of their own. This

essence, or empty nature, of all things reveals their likeness, their profound similarity. With the realization of this non-dual, equal nature of existence—which is the experience of wisdom—an unbounded desire to help and benefit all beings indiscriminately will then well up in our hearts.

In the Mahayana tradition, all sentient beings are identical in nature to Buddhas. All sentient beings have the potential to realize full enlightenment and to manifest Buddhahood. A person walking the path to full Buddhahood must cultivate deep compassion for all beings as if they were of one body with himself or herself. This is not wishful thinking, but rather a sincere motivation that inspires our actions and compels us to live humanely in the world. When other sentient beings suffer in the depths of confusion, it is as if we ourselves are suffering too, but lack the wisdom to help either ourselves or others. This genuine concern and selfless love do not come from anyone or anything external, but rather from our insight into the nature of our own existence. Such insight is the ethical impulse of an enlightened being. It is both the motivation and the source of inner strength of a bodhisattva.

Who Is a Bodhisattva?

For any Buddhist practitioner, the ultimate purpose of practice is to attain complete enlightenment or Buddhahood. To achieve this very lofty goal, we work to cultivate wisdom and accumulate merit, and through this practice we are able to benefit both ourselves and others. This practice is precisely the task of a follower of the bodhisattva path as put forth in the three sets of pure precepts (which we undertake in the transmission ceremony): to accrue merit and realize wisdom for the benefit of all sentient beings. Through the diligent cultivation of wisdom and merit, a bodhisattva practitioner will attain Buddhahood. In other words, walking the bodhisattva path is the cause of Buddhahood; Buddhahood is the result of having accomplished the bodhisattva practice.

In Buddhist circles, we hear the word bodhisattva frequently. Among Chinese Buddhists, bodhisattva, transliterated as pusa in Chinese, is commonly used simply as a title with which to address a fellow practitioner. It is also often used by monastics as an honorific when speaking to or about a layperson. On the other hand, non-Buddhists visiting a Buddhist monastery may think that bodhisattvas are the

statues placed on the altar. In short, many people, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, do not know the true significance of the term bodhisattva. Therefore clarification of this term is essential for our understanding of what the bodhisattva practice entails.

Formed by the conjunction of two Sanskrit words meaning "enlightenment" and "sentient being" respectively, the word bodhisattva denotes an enlightened sentient being. "Enlightened" refers to the quality of having achieved, to some degree, enlightenment, awakening, understanding, or mindfulness. This concept has a very rich, multifaceted meaning, with many nuances. "Sentient being" refers to a living being who experiences the world through sentience, feelings, sensations, or emotions.

Thus bodhisattva can be understood as having four levels of meaning. First, the being described by this word aspires upwardly to attain supreme wisdom or enlightenment. Second, this being aspires to do this in order to bring genuine benefit to all other sentient beings so that they too will attain enlightenment. Third, each bodhisattva seeks to fully awaken his or her own intrinsic nature, or buddha-nature. Fourth, while striving for this kind of full awakening, a bodhisattva strives just as hard to awaken all of the innumerable

sentient beings to the same buddha-nature intrinsic to each and every one. By considering these four levels of meaning together, we come to the following definition of bodhisattva: a person who aspires to Buddhahood while seeking to enlighten all sentient beings on the path.

How to Overcome Difficulties

Without the experience of enlightenment, how can aspirants in the Mahayana tradition, meaning bodhisattvas, rise to the seemingly impossible task of helping all sentient beings to become enlightened? How can practitioners on the bodhisattva path truly help others attain enlightenment when they themselves have not done so? Daunted by such questions, many practitioners place exclusive emphasis on cultivating faith in and devotion to the Buddha, while others focus solely on striving to realize emptiness, wishing to escape from the toil and travail of life.

Such responses are understandable, as we are all only human. If we do not know how to swim, how are we going to save others from drowning? And if, at last, we have learned how to swim, and managed to get ourselves safely to the shore, why jump back into the roaring waters and risk our lives to save others? This attitude has led some practitioners to strive hurriedly to liberate themselves from suffering. Alienated from the sentient world, these people seek only to remove themselves from the ocean of cyclic existence. It becomes extremely difficult and takes an incalculably long time for them to generate the bodhi-mind.

In fact, in order to save people from drowning, one should not leave the water and seek safety on shore. And if we do not know how to swim, then the only place to learn is in the water, whether we like it or not. Likewise, the bodhisattva path must be practiced in the midst of suffering, in the whirlpool of cyclic existence. However, to keep our head above water, we need strength and skill, as we cannot rely solely on the power of Buddhas, or wait to become completely enlightened. Discernment, unshakable faith and vows, constant cultivation of love and compassion, and a penetrating insight into the nature of emptiness are four things we can bank on. Maintaining a balance in these four areas will safeguard and sustain us in times of difficulty. Eventually, it will subdue our vexations and afflictive emotions, leading us to the realization of emptiness, to the understanding of the interrelatedness of all beings and all conditions. To find the path and to tread firmly along it, we must undertake and commit to the bodhisattva precepts. This is the first step we should take to establish and maintain ourselves on a definite course that leads toward Buddhahood.

On Vinaya Practice

To help us put our vows into practice and provide ourselves with a clear set of behavioral guidelines, we commit ourselves to a code of discipline set forth in a given system of precepts. The Sanskrit term for these various codes or systems is vinaya, which can be translated into English as "discipline" or "restraint." According to the scriptures, Shakyamuni Buddha did not establish a set code of conduct for his disciples during the first twelve years of his teaching, because these early practitioners achieved such a high level of spiritual attainment and had such strong, deep, positive karmic roots that they never engaged in any sort of unwholesome or destructive activity. It was not until the occurrence of specific instances of misconduct that threatened the integrity of the Sangha and the ability of his disciples to practice the liberation path that the Buddha began to institute rules of behavior for his followers. Thus we should note here that the precepts were not founded in a vacuum on a set of abstract principles, but in direct response to specific problems that arose within the earliest community of practitioners.

So the intention behind the establishment of

the vinaya was not to randomly impose a set of disciplinary strictures on practitioners, but rather to give them a set of realistic guidelines that would help them persevere in following the teachings of the Buddha and, ultimately, attain liberation. The scriptures recount that at the time of his death, the Buddha told his disciple Ananda that only the maintenance of the vinaya would ensure the continued existence of the Dharma in the world. He went on to say, however, that by this he meant the fundamental principles of vinaya practice as embodied in the five major precepts prohibiting killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, verbal misconduct, and using intoxicants. As for the multitude of detailed minor precepts upheld by monastics, which had been formulated in response to particular incidents, the Buddha gave his followers permission to dispense with them as needed, should changing circumstances cause such rules to become more of a hindrance than a help. He added that in no way should codified sets of regulations prevent his followers from performing beneficial actions in given situations, and that should they encounter ethical practices which conform to the spirit of the vinaya and prove to be of benefit, but which he had not specifically mentioned, they should not hesitate to adopt them.

It was the Buddha's intention that as his followers carried the Dharma to foreign lands, continuing to follow his path in different cultures and in different ages, they should be flexible and adopt the customs and mores of each particular time and place, provided that in doing so they did not violate the fundamental principles of the vinaya. Unfortunately, overcome by emotion at the time of the Buddha's passing, Ananda forgot to ask him which particular minor precepts the Buddha considered dispensable. This omission made the more conservative members of the Sangha uneasy, and at the first conference held by the Buddha's disciples after the Buddha's parinirvana, it was decided that rather than compromise the Buddhadharma by mistakenly abandoning the wrong items, all the precepts would be codified and strictly maintained from then on. For this reason, most of the various, intricate monastic rules throughout the Buddhist world have been more the result of different interpretation than of innovation.

Nonetheless, over the history of Buddhism's development, numerous codes of discipline derived from the original vinaya handed down by the Buddha have been developed to address changing historical, social, and cultural conditions. There are codes for

lay practitioners, codes for the different categories of Buddhist monastics, and codes formulated to apply to both. Some of these codes are general and simple, such as taking refuge in the Three Jewels and practicing the five precepts, while others are very detailed and complex, such as the codes for monks and nuns, which contain hundreds of scrupulously differentiated items. Yet all of these codes of conduct serve the same purpose: to safeguard the continued existence of Buddhadharma in the world and to enable practitioners to attain enlightenment.

The basic purpose of all vinaya codes is to provide Buddhists with a standard of ethical living conducive to, and functionally related to, the cultivation of compassion and wisdom and the ultimate liberation of sentient beings from suffering. These systems of precepts were not formulated to enable us to increase our "spiritual powers," still less to provide us with a moral standard by which to measure and judge other people's conduct. Nor were they developed merely to provide us with another topic for study and idle, self-important conversation. While it is important to study and discuss the precepts, doing so without putting them into practice is like talking about food without eating it or counting other people's money-it will not benefit

us at all. In a very real sense, the purpose of the vinaya for an individual is to actualize the Buddha's teachings in daily life through proper conduct. Hence in the scriptures we often see the vinaya referred to as the "correct Dharma vinaya," which underlines the integral role these codes of conduct play in actualizing the Dharma taught by Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Five Precepts

The devotional aspect of vinaya practice lies in taking refuge in and relying on the Three Jewels, namely the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. On the other hand, the practical aspect of vinaya practice, where it ceases to be merely personal but begins to shape one's interaction with others, is the keeping of the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no verbal misconduct, and no using intoxicants. The five precepts are the simplest codification of precepts in Buddhism, yet they are the foundation upon which all the other systems of Buddhist precepts and vows rest. No matter which set of precepts we consider, including the exhaustively detailed monastic code, not one of them falls outside the scope of the five precepts. Not one of the various codes of conduct that have evolved over Buddhism's long history omits the five precepts. It is no exaggeration to say that the five precepts are the most important precepts in Buddhism.

At first sight, some might assume that the five precepts are easy to keep because they appear to be so simple. One might be tempted to assume that they merely comprise a sort of universal code of acceptable,

civilized behavior. Such an assumption is, however, quite superficial. After committing ourselves to keeping and integrating the five precepts into our lives, we soon come to realize that they are not as easily kept as we might have thought. By living with the precepts and by engaging in continued analysis and scrupulous study of both the precepts and ourselves, we will begin to penetrate them more deeply, and realize that they are in fact extremely subtle. It is through applying ourselves as best we can to the practice of the precepts that we come to understand their significance, and the profound influence they exert on us and on our relationships with others.

As we noted before, all of the different systems of precepts branch out from this fundamental code, so if a practitioner cannot seriously commit to the practice of the five precepts, it will be extremely difficult for him or her to practice any of the other, more detailed, systems. Conversely, a practitioner who can observe the five precepts in the smallest detail would be said to be very close to attaining a pure buddha land. For this reason, all practitioners who wish to take the bodhisattva precepts should pay special attention to the observance of the five precepts. We should not be casual about keeping the precepts and integrating them

into our daily lives in the mistaken belief that they are simple and obvious. If we approach this practice haphazardly, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to appreciate the many subtleties in the meaning and function of the five precepts, and may never truly experience the dignity and profound insight that keeping these precepts affords.

The Ten Good Deeds

Building upon the foundation of keeping the five precepts, we can broaden and deepen our practice of vinaya by going further to perform the ten good deeds: renouncing killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh language, frivolous talk, craving, aversion, and deviant views. At first sight these ten good deeds seem to overlap with the five precepts, yet a closer look will quickly reveal that they actually expand the range and depth of the five precepts.

The ten good deeds are divided into three categories of practice, commonly known as the purification of the three kinds of actions: physical, verbal, and mental. The first of these three practices, the purification of physical actions, consists in observing the vows to renounce killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The second, the purification of verbal actions, requires vigilant attention to what one says and how and why one says it in order to keep the vows to renounce lying, divisive speech, harsh language, and frivolous talk. The third category of practice, the purification of mental actions, lies in observing and guarding one's mind in order to prevent craving, aversion, and deviant

views (such as the belief that sentient beings exist as self-sufficient, lasting entities that exist in competitive competition with a separate "I").

This last category of practice, as it specifically deals with the functions of the mind, obviously extends the scope of the five precepts. It certainly is not easy to carry out, but by taking refuge in the Three Jewels regularly, by cultivating mindfulness, and by learning to steer our thoughts away from craving, aversion, or deviant views, we will gain ground. What we engage in through this practice is in fact the gradual dissolution of what in Buddhism is called the three poisons, namely craving, aversion, and ignorance, which are the root of all vexations. Through our faith in the Three Jewels and through our practice of the five precepts and ten good deeds, we can progressively purify our minds—a process in itself of inestimable help to all sentient beings.

The Three Sets of Pure Precepts

The precepts that have been discussed above are common to both the Theravada, the vehicle of individual liberation, and to all schools of the Mahayana, in which emphasis is placed on a bodhisattva practitioner's striving for the benefit of all sentient beings. The essential purpose of the transmission of the bodhisattva precepts is to arouse in people's minds an altruistic spirit of service to others and a firm dedication to the pursuit of enlightenment. Such spirit is called the bodhi-mind. Bodhi is a Sanskrit word derived from the same root as Buddha, and it can be translated to mean "awakening," "enlightenment" or "wisdom." The foundation of the bodhi-mind is embodied in the four great vows we take: to deliver innumerable sentient beings, to cut off endless vexations, to master limitless approaches to the Dharma, and to attain supreme Buddhahood.

To help us actualize these four vows, we need to vow further to observe certain principles and guidelines that may help us conduct ourselves in an ethical and humane manner and purify our minds of the three poisons of craving, aversion, and ignorance. For this purpose, here we transmit what are known as the

three sets of pure precepts, which contain the essential principles of all the different systems of bodhisattva precepts codified over the course of Mahayana Buddhism's long, rich history. Functionally, these three sets of pure precepts lead a practitioner to (1) renounce evil deeds by keeping the precepts, (2) accumulate merit by performing beneficial deeds, and (3) work for the salvation of all sentient beings. The vows to keep these precepts embody the spirit of all Mahayana Buddhist practices: to stop evil, to do good, and to deliver all sentient beings. In a very real sense these vows can be seen as the ultimate expression of the aspirations of all Buddhists in all eras.

In following the first in the three sets of pure precepts, which is to keep all pure precepts, we can begin by applying ourselves with vigor to practicing the five precepts and ten good deeds in our daily lives in order to purify our minds and avoid causing harm to ourselves and others. From the viewpoint of the bodhisattva practice, observing the ten good deeds involves more than just passively refraining from the ten evil deeds: one should also actively practice and cultivate the ten corresponding beneficences. Therefore, in this light, the precept against killing can be seen as an injunction to regard sentient beings with

compassion and thus to nurture, comfort and protect them; the vow to renounce stealing, by the same token, becomes a commitment to practicing generosity and selflessness. Thus the practice of the Buddhist precepts—considered by many to be passive and negative—is in truth active, dynamic, and positively involved with the world.

This attitude of positive involvement is precisely what lies at the core of the second set of pure precepts—to practice all good deeds. Regarding this particular set, we might do well to consider the idea of 'merit' as it applies to the bodhisattva practice. Many of us know that the performance of virtuous deeds generates merit, and that in many Buddhist ceremonies we transfer such merit to others or to all sentient beings. Some people associate this idea exclusively with securing a good rebirth for themselves as the result of accrued merit recorded in some celestial ledger. However, the Buddhist concept of merit has nothing to do with this whatsoever.

It is said that by receiving the bodhisattva precepts, one generates "a vast amount of merit." This can be understood as follows. When you take the precepts, a seed is planted deep in your consciousness. Because this seed has been planted for the benefit of all sentient

beings, the natural consequence of its maturation, as you nurture it by keeping the precepts, is a growth in your compassion and a weakening in your propensity to do harm. With sustained practice, there naturally arises in you a tendency toward wholesome actions. As you increasingly go through life acting on the basis of compassion, you will come to experience a sense of security and stability.

Why is this? Because, quite simply, you are no longer living your life in an obsessively self-concerned, self-centered way, always worrying about your own well-being and feeling constantly threatened and insecure. As your life is dedicated to others, you become less and less concerned with your personal benefit, gain or loss; consequently, you no longer live in fear and cease to be agitated or plagued by vexations, which are all caused by self-attachment. You achieve stability of mind.

The stability and security you so experience then creates, in turn, an atmosphere of stability and security around your person that is palpable to other sentient beings. They feel safe around you, and because you, out of genuine compassion, never intend to harm them but only try to be of help, they also feel a sort of joy in your presence. Thus in an immediate and very concrete

way, you, after receiving the bodhisattva precepts, are benefiting sentient beings, a deed that generates "a vast amount of merit." And it is in this way that we undertake the practice of the third set of pure precepts—to deliver all sentient beings. The observance of this precept actualizes our intention as put forth in the four great vows, and sets us decisively on the bodhisattva path.

All systems of bodhisattva precepts fall within the range of the three sets of pure precepts, which can be seen as a distillation of all the various aspects of the bodhisattva practice. Using the three sets of pure precepts as a working principle gives practitioners tremendous flexibility in their practice, allowing them to choose to observe either a simpler, more generalized code or one that is detailed, complex, and rigorous, depending on their temperament and abilities. The three sets of pure precepts can be practiced either generally or in detail since their meaning and applicability can be either broad or specific. As they, like all the other systems of precepts, are based on the older precepts of the vehicle for individual liberation, the Theravadan codes of conduct can also be included under this rubric. However, the emphasis on a practitioner's dedication to cultivating all virtuous

practices to deliver all sentient beings highlights the unique spirit of the bodhisattva precepts, distinguishing them from the older precepts of the Theravada tradition.

On Violation of the Precepts

The three sets of pure precepts and the four great vows, once received by a practitioner, are maintained across however many lifetimes it may take for the recipient to attain complete enlightenment. Once the seed of compassion and wisdom, also known as the 'essence of precepts', has been sown in the mind of a practitioner through the transmission of the bodhisattva precepts, it will remain in the recipient's 'storehouse consciousness' and can only be cast off through the recipient's express declaration of his or her intention to abandon the bodhi-mind. A recipient of the bodhisattva precepts cannot lose or negate the essence of precepts simply by breaking one of them.

This does not mean, however, that a recipient of the bodhisattva precepts is somehow exempt from the law of karma, or that taking the precepts somehow "magically" protects one from the karmic consequences of one's actions. Actually, part of the bodhisattva practice consists exactly in becoming more sensitive to the law of karmic causality and in taking responsibility for one's actions. Violations of the precepts and lapses of discipline, manifested in unwholesome or self-centered actions or thoughts, will

certainly cast shadows over the essence of precepts in a recipient's consciousness. If a recipient breaks the precepts habitually, this essence of precepts will indeed become clouded and may even seem to disappear. Yet the essence of the bodhisattva precepts, though obscured, remains. When causes and conditions permit, the violator's compassionate intention to strive for the liberation of all sentient beings will again become fervent, and the essence of precepts' power to prevent wrongdoing, hitherto dormant, can be reactivated through sincere repentance and the formal retaking of the precepts. Again, this does not mean that since the essence of the bodhisattva precepts cannot be lost through misconduct, we should feel free to break the precepts at will. On the contrary, to counter our inclination to forget the vows we make, we should redouble our diligence and take every available opportunity to study and practice the precepts.

While we should not treat the bodhisattva precepts lightly, breaking them at whim, neither should we hesitate to take them out of fear that we may break them. Nor should we, after taking the precepts, live in anxiety and worry over the possibility that we might inadvertently break them and have to suffer some sort of terrible retribution. In fact, once we receive

the bodhisattva precepts, we will naturally meet with various favorable conditions that will help us to keep them.

Perhaps the best attitude to adopt toward violation of the precepts is to understand that ordinary bodhisattva practitioners, meaning all of us, are "infant bodhisattvas." When babies first learn how to walk, they invariably fall down over and over again. However, it is only in this way-by taking a few steps, falling down, getting back up again, and taking a few more steps-that babies do finally learn to walk. Thus we, as newborns on the bodhisattva path, should not be disheartened by the repeated falls, or failures, along the road. Rather, we should know that as our legs become stronger and we learn what to do with them, we will fall down less and eventually learn not only to walk, but to run, skip, and jump! So our attitude toward keeping the bodhisattva precepts should not be one of fear and guilt, but rather one of open-mindedness, self-acceptance, hope, and joy.

As there are many subtle and complex aspects to the practice of the precepts and many levels of understanding, from crude to refined, it is almost inevitable that we will stumble in treading the bodhisattva path. It is said that the period between

a practitioner's initial aspiration to Buddhahood and their attainment of complete enlightenment is three asamkhyā kalpas. An asamkhyā kalpa is an incalculably long period of cosmic time, the sort of time used to measure the life span of universes. We should know that there are numerous stages along this path, and that it takes a long time to purify the mind of the various poisons and defilements that are the actual cause of any violation of the precepts. Over such a long period of time, it is only natural that infant bodhisattva practitioners will break the precepts repeatedly.

Still, it is better to break the precepts than not to have any precepts to break. With our initial vows to keep the precepts in mind, we can repent and renew our vows over and over again as many times as necessary. There is, in fact, an intimate relationship between repentance and the observance of the bodhisattva precepts: by virtue of repeated repentance, we become increasingly aware of the depth of our delusion and grow in our commitment to the cultivation of compassion. By continuing to practice with increased mindfulness and diligence, we can gradually purify the deluded mind and strengthen our resolve and ability to help all sentient beings attain Buddhahood.

The Four Immeasurable Minds

The fundamental and distinctive mind-set of a bodhisattva, which enables all bodhisattva practices, can be characterized as the four immeasurable minds: kindness, compassion, joy, and impartiality. Here, kindness means helping others attain genuine, lasting happiness by leading them to enlightenment. Compassion means working with sentient beings to free them from all kinds of calamities, pain, and tribulations, and ultimately from the fundamental causes of suffering. Joy refers to the sincere delight in seeing other beings liberated from suffering and successful in self-realization. Impartiality means the perception of friends and foes alike as equally important and precious.

This mind of impartiality comes from breaking the habits of self-servingly helping others in order to angle for personal gain, and of seeing and judging others in a purely self-referential way. Although bringing happiness to others is the primary motivation of a bodhisattva, our deluded tendency to be jealous of others' success and happiness and to favor one person over another nevertheless makes it impossible for us to truly participate in the world and help all beings

impartially. For this reason, a bodhisattva practitioner should not only nurture kindness and compassion, but also cultivate the minds of joy and impartiality.

The Four Methods of Inducement

As important as they are, pure intentions and a compassionate mind are not enough. One's intentions must be actualized and action must be taken on the basis of the compassionate mind. The principal actions performed by a bodhisattva practitioner are the four skillful methods of inducing people to learn the Dharma, as only the Dharma can genuinely and thoroughly benefit sentient beings. These four methods of inducement are giving, speaking lovingly, acting beneficially and intermingling.

One can give financial help, physical assistance, or even one's own life; giving of this sort is categorized as the giving of wealth. Guiding others toward enlightening concepts such as those contained within the Dharma—even if one merely utters a simple phrase that helps someone aspire to goodness and abandon harmful thoughts and deeds—is considered the giving of Dharma. If we see people experiencing pain, loss, anxiety, fear, or great psychological distress and alleviate their suffering by helping them regain security of mind, this is called the giving of fearlessness. These three forms of giving include all of the many practices that benefit sentient beings. If a bodhisattva

stops cultivating the practice of giving, "compassion" becomes a meaningless word.

Speaking lovingly refers to compassionate and meaningful communication with others, which may at times include strong words or exhortations. But while we may have to express ourselves forcefully sometimes, our words must flow from the compassionate mind, for only words of compassion can be accepted wholeheartedly. Speaking lovingly does not mean interacting with people in an artificial or condescending manner so that we feel ourselves to be more important or above others. This will do more harm than good. Also, inappropriate forms of communication that might make others feel uncomfortable should be avoided. We should relate to other people with an open mind. What we say, or any advice we give, should be based on an understanding of our own experiences, for it is through a knowledge of ourselves that we can better understand the needs of others. Without understanding ourselves and others, even though we are speaking truthfully or giving good advice, we may cause our listeners to mistake our intentions and create unnecessary trouble for themselves, for others, and for us.

In contemporary terms, acting beneficially might

be called "engaging in social work." It means that one cares about the welfare of others and works on their behalf, striving to nurture and protect one's society, one's nation, humanity as a whole, and all forms of life on the planet. According to the needs of different people in different places and circumstances, we can participate in socially valuable and meaningful work, such as promoting wholesome education, environmental responsibility, ethical conduct, peace, harmony, and so on. There are many forms of socially valuable work in every society that need to be done.

Intermingling refers to working alongside others, doing the same work, receiving the same benefits, and not placing oneself in a higher, privileged position. In other words, it simply means being the same as everyone else. In this way, we can truly touch people. By working closely with other people we can eventually share with them the Dharma that we have learned and experienced ourselves.

These four practices are the means adopted by a bodhisattva practitioner whose merit consists in their implementation and cultivation. They are also called "skillful means" and their purpose is to bring or gather sentient beings to the Dharma, not to make a practitioner powerful or to turn him or her into a leader.

It is for the purpose of genuinely benefiting others that a bodhisattva practitioner strives to help all beings realize their potential. Aware of the interdependent relationship between all beings, a bodhisattva can feel joy when working not only for others, but with them as one among equals.

Participation in the World

Compassion is undoubtedly the foundation of Buddhist teachings, and it is compassion that resides in the hearts of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In order to foster compassion, the initial motivating force of an aspiring bodhisattva practitioner must be strong and secure. He or she must be equipped with correct views and effective methods. More importantly, the foundations for growth—a wholesome personality, compassionate sensibilities, and stability of mind—must be firm. To this end, bodhisattva practitioners should not only meditate regularly, but also make use of every opportunity to interact with the world in order to hone their ability to help themselves and others.

A wholesome personality comes from the cultivation of the bodhi-mind, which can be described as the desire to help others overcome pain and suffering, along with the inclination to put the welfare of others before one's own. To eliminate self-obsession and self-clinging, practitioners of the Dharma, and of Chan in particular, should develop the inner strength needed to let go of self-centeredness and work to reduce their inclination toward craving, aversion,

ignorance, arrogance, and doubt. The less dominated we are by these afflictive emotions, the stronger our bodhi-mind, and the greater our opportunity for gaining entry into the Dharma.

The aforementioned inner strength comes from the recognition of the interdependent relationships between ourselves and others. This recognition moves us and draws from us the capacity to reach out toward a deeper and wider circle of sentient beings. Living with this kind of mind-set naturally reduces our feelings of separateness, alienation, and self-centeredness. This inner strength can help us participate fully in the world, allowing us to give ourselves to others and to receive others into our lives. In this way, we can gradually be freed from suffering and eventually reach the safe shore of enlightenment-Buddhahood. Such an attitude is precisely the "right view" we often speak of in Buddhist discourse.

This right view can be manifested in many ways. Acting from the mind of compassion and understanding, one can naturally incorporate the ten good deeds, the five precepts, the four great vows, and the three sets of pure precepts into one's life. Should you feel intimidated by the scope of these precepts, or that you will probably not be able to observe some

of the five precepts and ten good deeds with comfort and integrity, you can elect to postpone taking on those particular precepts and provisionally accept only those you feel able to keep, along with the three sets of pure precepts and the four great vows. The point of taking the bodhisattva precepts is not to make practitioners feel guilty or anxious, but rather to plant the seed of compassion and wisdom in their minds. A practitioner who takes and agrees to keep the bodhisattva precepts with some exceptions will still be considered a bodhisattva. By taking the bodhisattva precepts, you enter into the great assembly and become another son or daughter in the family of Buddhas.

As stated before, the goal of attaining complete enlightenment for all sentient beings is intimidatingly lofty. Its realization is subtle and profound, and the path leading to it is long and arduous. The conditions for achieving Buddhahood are rarer and more precious than the finest of this world's jewels. Yet while Buddhahood is extremely difficult to attain, it is not impossible. We can attain it by mustering all our determination and putting forth all our effort. In other words, the "price" of Buddhahood is to give whatever it takes, to implement the Dharma with wholehearted, unreserved devotion. That means striving to achieve

supreme wisdom on the one hand, while dedicating ourselves to the lasting, genuine happiness and eventual deliverance of all sentient beings on the other.

By purifying and washing away afflictive emotions and fundamental ignorance, we will increase our insight into the true nature of reality, or wisdom. We can use this wisdom as a mirror with which to not only see ourselves, but to let others see themselves to help them wash away afflictive emotions and ignorance too. To this end, we should work tirelessly to improve ourselves and practice good deeds to benefit ourselves and others. This is precisely the task of a bodhisattva as set forth in all systems of bodhisattva precepts: to keep all pure precepts, to practice all good deeds, and to deliver all sentient beings. Once again, I encourage all practitioners, whatever your abilities or dispositions, to take the bodhisattva precepts, so as to decisively establish yourselves on the path of liberation