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# THE BODHISATTVA VOWS

*taken from two weekends' teachings given by Geshe Tashi in February and March 2001 at Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London*



## The Eighteen Root Downfalls

1. praising oneself and belittling others
2. not sharing with others one's wealth and Dharma
3. not forgiving even when others apologise
4. doubting and denying the doctrine of the Great Vehicle
5. taking offerings intended for the Three Jewels
6. abandoning the doctrine through sectarianism
7. causing an ordained person to disrobe
8. committing one of the five crimes of immediate retribution
9. holding perverted views
10. destroying places such as towns
11. teaching emptiness to the untrained
12. discouraging others from seeking full enlightenment
13. causing others to break the vows of Individual Liberation
14. belittling those who follow the path of Individual Liberation
15. proclaiming false realisations such as the realisation of emptiness
16. accepting gifts that have been misappropriated from the belongings of the Three Jewels
17. laying down harmful regulations and passing false judgement
18. giving up the pledge of altruistic aspiration

## The Forty-Six Secondary Downfalls

1. not making offerings every day to the Three Jewels
2. acting out of desire because of discontent
3. not paying respect to those senior in ordination and in taking the Bodhisattva vows
4. not answering others' questions out of negligence though one is capable of doing so
5. selfishly not accepting invitations due to pride, the wish to hurt other's feelings or anger or laziness
6. not accepting others' gift out of jealousy, anger etc or simply to hurt others
7. not giving the Dharma teaching to those who wish to learn
8. ignoring and insulting someone who has committed any of the five heinous crimes or defiled his or her vows of individual liberation, or treating him or her with contempt
9. not observing the precepts of moral conduct because one wishes to ingratiate oneself with others
10. complying with the minor precepts when the situation demands one's disregard of them for the better benefit of others
11. not committing one of the seven negative actions of body, speech and mind when universal love and compassion deem it necessary in the particular instance
12. accepting things that are acquired through one of the five wrong livelihoods
13. wasting time on frivolous actions such as carelessness, lack of pure morality, dancing, playing music just for fun, gossiping and also distracting others in meditation
14. misconceiving that bodhisattvas do not attempt to attain liberation and failing to view delusions as things to be eliminated
15. not living up to one's precepts
16. not correcting others who are motivated by delusions
17. parting from the four noble disciplines
18. neglecting those who are angry with you
19. refusing to accept the apologies of others
20. acting out thoughts of anger
21. gathering circles of disciples out of desire for respect and material gain
22. wasting time and energy on trivial matters
23. being addicted to frivolous talk
24. not seeking the means to develop concentration
25. not abandoning the five obscurations which hinder meditative stabilisations
26. being addicted to the joy of meditative absorption
27. abandoning the path of Theravada as unnecessary for one following the Mahayana
28. exerting effort principally in another system of practice while neglecting the Mahayana teachings that one already has
29. without good reason exerting effort to learn or practise the treaties of non-Buddhists which are not the proper object of one's endeavour
30. beginning to favour and take delight in the treaties of non-Buddhists although studying them for a good reason
31. abandoning any part of the Mahayana by thinking it is uninteresting or unpleasant
32. praising oneself and belittling others because of pride and anger
33. not going to Dharma gatherings or teachings
34. disparaging the spiritual master
35. not helping those who are in need
36. not helping people who are sick
37. not alleviating the suffering of others
38. not explaining what is the proper conduct to those who are reckless
39. not benefiting in return those who have benefited oneself
40. not relieving the sorrow of others
41. not giving material possessions to those in need
42. not working for the welfare of one's circles of friends, students, employees, helpers

43. not acting in accordance with the wishes of others if doing so does not bring harm to oneself or others
44. not praising those who have good qualities
45. not acting with whatever means are necessary according to the circumstances to stop someone who is doing harmful action
46. not using miraculous powers, if one possesses this ability, in order to stop others from doing unwholesome actions

## Commentary on the Vows

### 1. The Intention for Taking the Bodhisattva Vows

The intention is everything with the Bodhisattva vows. We take the vows purely for the sake of others. Only when we dedicate for the sake of others and try our best to put what we have learned into practice will our practice become truly beneficial.

The preparation for taking the Bodhisattva vows is really to know how to develop bodhicitta itself. We must have that knowledge and have the intention to develop our minds to really benefit others. We should already be engaging in either the Seven Points of Cause and Effect or Equalising and Exchanging Oneself with Others. Only when we have a really strong altruistic mind, when we are at the stage called aspirational bodhicitta, are we ready to take the Bodhisattva vows.

Although strictly speaking we need aspirational bodhicitta before thinking about taking the Bodhisattva vows, these days we often take them in connection with a Vajrayana initiation. In the Mahayana tradition I have heard great masters say many times that if we wait until then we would have to wait many, many aeons. So they talk about how we can develop artificial bodhicitta, although I feel maybe 'created' bodhicitta is a better word – created in the sense that it occurs only when the practitioner meditates on it. As soon as the meditation stops that mind stops so, in a way, it is manufactured. Then, the masters say, the next step is the Bodhisattva vows. This is what tends to happen these days.

### 2. The Preparation

So the preparation involves generating aspirational bodhicitta as well as having a clear and strong determination to be free from samsara – in other words, pure renunciation. Without the kind of mind which really cannot bear to be in this kind of conditioned existence, there is no wish for enlightenment for ourselves and so it is impossible to have a strong wish to lead other sentient beings to full enlightenment.

What happens quite often these days is that aspirational bodhicitta is given by masters at the end of a series of lam-rim teachings. It is a ritual which has certain commitments and is the step before taking the Bodhisattva vows.

I agree with those masters who say that we cannot wait until we have a really genuine aspirational bodhicitta in order to take Bodhisattva vows. If we did we would never have the chance to take the vows and that would be a great loss. On the other hand, if we are not keeping the easier vows perfectly, what is the point of taking the harder ones because there is no way we will be able to keep them? As Shantideva says in his *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* if we have not really mastered the activities we are doing now, it is pointless to start new ones.

*First of all I should examine well what is to be done  
To see whether I can pursue it or cannot undertake it.  
(If I am unable) it is best to leave it,  
But once I have started I must not withdraw.*

*(If I do), then this habit will continue in other lives  
And evil and misery will increase,  
Also other actions done at the time of its fruition  
Will be weak and will not be accomplished.*

If we start an activity, it is much better to finish it rather than starting many activities without finishing any of them. I think that makes perfect sense.

So I think we have to take a middle way here. What the masters say makes sense – by participating in teachings and taking commitments we can't keep, we are still gaining important imprints for future lives. But, although it is good to accumulate imprints for future lives, at the same time we need to do all we can now to develop the mind which can keep the commitments we are given.

There are several texts by great Indian masters in connection with the Bodhisattva vows, such as Asanga's *Bodhisattvabhumi* or the *Bodhisattva's Stages*. The tenth chapter, 'The Ethical Practice of Bodhisattvas' deals with how to keep the vows.

Lama Tsong Khapa wrote a long commentary on that chapter which is what I will be mainly referring to. There are other texts such as the sutra called *The Sutra on the Bodhisattva Akasagarbha* which quite thoroughly discusses both the Bodhisattva vows and the bodhisattva's conduct. And there is a text on the vows called *Candragomin's Twenty Verses on the Bodhisattva Vows* which also has a commentary by Lama Tsong Khapa called *The Main Path to Enlightenment* as well as Shantideva's *Compendium of Training*.

### 3. The Commitment

When we take the Bodhisattva vows, it is very important to be fully aware of what kind of commitment we are making, otherwise it will be very, very difficult to keep the vows. There seems to be a sequence – first the Individual Liberation vows, then the Bodhisattva vows and finally the Vajrayana or Tantric vows. In order to take the Tantric vows, we must have first taken the Bodhisattva vows – we cannot proceed without them. But do we need to have taken one of the seven different types of Individual Liberation vows (two for lay people and five for ordained people) to take the Bodhisattva vows? There is a lot of discussion; Lama Tsong Khapa dedicated almost twenty-four pages to it. The Buddha himself taught that his followers must follow the practices he recommended step-by-step, which indicates that the Individual Liberation vows must come first. In Atisha's *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment* there is a clear statement saying that without taking the Individual Liberation vows there is no way to take the Bodhisattva vows. But Lama Tsong Khapa's conclusion was this although ideally that would be the case at least the very base of the Bodhisattva vows is to avoid the ten non-virtues.

Avoiding the ten non-virtues depends upon ethics and ethics depends upon compassion, so again it all comes down to compassion. Compassion is the base. And here again Lama Tsong Khapa goes quite thoroughly into why compassion is important to lay the foundation on which we practise the vows. He then looks at two unwholesome mental factors we must avoid, shamelessness and lack of consideration for others.

## i. shamelessness

We have already talked about these two minds in the Buddhist Psychology course book (page 38). Shamelessness (Tib: *ngo-tsa me-pa*) is a lack of concern about our own well-being whereas lack of consideration for others is about the harm we do others because we don't care about them. In both cases we need to develop the opposites, consideration for both ourselves and others.

Why are these two minds seen as so important? A person who lacks the first one, self respect – i.e. concern about one's own life, both now and in the future – is much, much more at risk of doing anything because there is no sense of understanding of what is going to happen to them in the future. If they are concerned with the future they will be in a much better position to avoid committing negative actions which will bring unfortunate consequences for themselves.

## ii. lack of consideration for others

The second mind, lack of consideration for others, while taking in all sentient beings, mainly refers to the people who are important in our lives such as our parents or those concerned with our spiritual life. If we lack consideration there is a great risk of not keeping our vows.

Of course we must refrain from unwholesome activities because they will cause us and others suffering, but having consideration for others brings in the added dimension of the pain our parents, friends and spiritual masters will feel when we let them down.

## 4. The Three Ways of Practising the Vows

The Bodhisattva vows can be practised in three ways:

- restraining oneself from harmful actions
- accumulating wholesome deeds
- working for the benefit of others

For us, the first step is to restrain from harmful actions. If we cannot do that, then the second and third steps are quite difficult. The first and second, restraining oneself from harmful actions and accumulating wholesome deeds, are technically what is called 'ripening one's mental continuum'. These are mainly for our own sake. We need to be prepared because if we are not ready, how can we benefit others?

Lama Tsong Khapa says that without subduing one's own negative emotions, there is no way to subdue or help to eliminate other people's disturbing emotions. That is very clear.

## The Eighteen Root Downfalls

With the Bodhisattva vows there are eighteen root downfalls or infractions and forty-six secondary infractions. The forty-six are broken up into six groups depending on the six perfections they relate to so don't worry if this seems like the longest list yet!

### 1. *praising oneself and belittling others*

The first root downfall is praising oneself and belittling others. Praising oneself has nothing to do with self-confidence. From the Buddhist perspective, we have to have self-confidence. Without it we could not keep the vows because lacking self-confidence means we are more likely to break them.

In this particular context, it is praising ourselves with a self-centred mind in order to increase our self-importance. From the Buddhist and particularly from the Mahayana point of view, this is wrong.

We must also look at belittling or criticising others within the entire Buddhist context. One of the vows of a fully ordained monk is to tell another monk when you have seen him break a vow. If you don't, *you* have broken a vow. In that context it is not criticising. There is nothing wrong with pointing out somebody's fault. So again we need to look at belittling or criticising others in the context of self-interest.

## 2. *not sharing with others one's wealth and Dharma*

It is quite clear that sharing our possessions, knowledge and understanding is crucial. If we don't share our own possessions and Dharma understanding with sentient beings who need it, we are breaking the second root downfall. I particularly think sharing Dharma knowledge is very, very important, although by that I don't necessarily mean traditional teachings. Giving good advice in a conversation is also sharing your Dharma knowledge.

## 3. *not forgiving even when others apologise*

If someone has done something to us, our family or friends, out of ignorance or greed or some other negative emotion, and they have acknowledged their action in some way, not to accept their apology is breaking the vow.

We should not ignore or reject their attempt to explain. Of course the incident might still be too painful, or they might still be evasive or dishonest and we might need more detail to be convinced – such situations are rarely simple – but there must be some kind of receptiveness on our part. An immediate blind rejection invariably sets up a chain reaction which is very destructive. By trying to be receptive in some way, there is the possibility of healing the damage.

To stay open means to start to understand their point of view whereas to fully understand is to fully forgive. I would say that if your initial response is to not immediately reject, then you are not breaking the vow. Understanding will come gradually. Therefore to prevent the third downfall from happening we must be mindful all the time when such things happen within ourselves or within our community or family.

## 4. *doubting and denying the doctrine of the Great Vehicle*

Denying the teachings of the Mahayana is saying that they are wrong in some way. There have been many books and theories which say things such as bodhicitta cannot grow in an individual continuum or the Prajaparamita sutras are not the teachings of the Buddha. Actually that is wrong.

At this stage, because of our strong and spontaneous self-centred mind, caring totally for others is not spontaneous but it is possible. Some of these theories utterly refute that but if the self-centred attitude has been developed by habituating ourselves to it, why can't the other mind also be developed like that? Saying bodhicitta cannot grow in an individual continuum is very misleading. Selflessness is possible. The best thing we can do is to investigate through our own experience whether these teachings are possible or not. If we really trace back to the original Buddha's teaching on selflessness, there is not doubt that the Buddha taught it. The teachings on emptiness are an extension of the teachings on selflessness from the Four Noble Truths.

We are born as human beings and we have the capability to learn. It is therefore very important at this stage not to rush and make wrong decisions or wrong judgements. It is very dangerous to say that the Great Vehicle or Mahayana teachings are not the Buddha's teachings, or that they won't lead to full enlightenment, or that those who follow the teachings won't develop great bodhicitta.

Although there are many ups and downs in our lives, in general we are in a very fortunate situation and have the ability to see right from wrong. To spoil this opportunity through some emotional reaction would be tragic. When will we ever get the opportunity again?

According to Mahayana Buddhism, within the thousand buddhas of this fortunate aeon, very few will give Mahayana teachings. Even if we are born as a human being in our next life, it will probably be very difficult to meet these kinds of circumstances again.

I am not saying that you should just accept all this. What I am asking is that you don't reject this because you might have read a few persuasive books or heard a charismatic teacher refuting the Mahayana teachings. Investigate for yourself. Don't accept immediately but don't reject immediately either. This is so important. To block off this crucial area of investigation is therefore a downfall.

### 5. *taking offerings intended for the Three Jewels*

Taking offerings intended for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is considered a root downfall. Here the Buddha means any buddha image as well as the actual Buddha himself. At Jamyang we make many offerings to the big Buddha statue in the main gumpa. Why is it so bad if you steal something from a statue? It is just a statue. Peter Griffin built it out of plaster. We all know that. But still, it is more than that. Within the statue are many, many mantras and there have been so many strong prayers made to the statue. So this is no longer just an object made by Peter. After he completed it many great masters such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Denma Locho Rinpoche have blessed it and many people, with sincere conviction, have made prayers in front of it. It is not just an image, it is an inspiration, and, for a Buddhist practitioner, it really represents the Buddha.

So things offered to the Buddha's image are offered to the Buddha. It is the same with any holy object – a statue, a stupa, a thanka. It is not as if the objects 'own' the offerings. But although there is no one who says, 'This belongs to me', taking those offerings is the same as stealing from a buddha. The offerings have been sincerely offered, so it is very important to learn how to handle those objects with great sensitivity.

In the monastery, handling the monastery's things is a very sensitive issue – not for only those monks who have the responsibility of looking after those things but also for people coming from outside.

Traditionally, Tibetan people are very, very careful. Even when having a cup of tea in a monastery, they pay a lot of attention because the object they are using is really dedicated towards the Three Jewels, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This is true of any property that belongs to a community, but much more so a spiritual community such as a monastery or a Dharma centre.

It is a very sensitive point. When Nagarjuna was asked to become the monk in charge of the monastery property, he completely declined. There is a prayer which he wrote requesting not to be born in charge in a monastery because he saw how heavy a downfall it was if that property was mishandled.

People contribute things to Dharma centres with a sincere heart, really wishing to help the development of the community. Because places like this are such powerful objects, if we misuse their possessions we are creating a much heavier negativity than if we misuse a normal person's possessions.

And of course, taking without permission is much, much heavier than if someone in charge gives you something and you misuse that.

It is the same with taking from the Sangha. 'Sangha' very strictly speaking refers to a person who has a direct realisation of emptiness, or more generally to fully ordained monks or nuns but very loosely speaking, Sangha can refer to people who are practising the spiritual path. It is very important to know how to use things which belong to that kind of community.

### 6. *abandoning the doctrine through sectarianism*

The sixth one is referring to stopping or abandoning the practice of Buddhadharma, either completely or partly, due to misinformation. For example, for people who are practising the Mahayana path, there is such a strong emphasis on the Mahayana teachings that there is a risk of saying the Theravadin teachings are not really important. Conversely if the emphasis is put very strongly on the Theravadin teachings, there is a risk of thinking that the Mahayana teachings are not relevant. Of course there are different emphases but that does not mean that we should abandon one teaching or the other. They are there purely due to an individual's interest and mental dispositions.

Lama Tsong Khapa said very clearly in his *Lam-rim Chen-mo, The Great Exposition of the Gradual Path to Enlightenment* that a unique feature of the lam-rim is that through studying it the entire Buddhadharma can be understood as a spiritual path to achieve buddhahood. In the earlier stage, the middle and small scope teaching, there is a strong emphasis on the law of cause and effect and the Four Noble Truths, whereas in the great scope there is much more emphasis on bodhicitta or Mahayana teachings. The

entire teaching is given to show a practitioner where to start and where to end. Like the analogy I often use, if you pull one corner of the cloth, the whole cloth moves. To understand bodhicitta, we must understand emptiness and cause-and-effect. It is so important not to abandon one part of Buddhadharmā just because that is not our main emphasis or because we are following a particular tradition. Of course, different traditions suit different mental dispositions. I am not advocating mixing everything together. In English you have an expression, 'melting pot'. That does not work so well in Buddhism.

#### 7. *causing an ordained person to disrobe*

Disrobing is breaking an Individual Liberation vow, but causing someone to disrobe is breaking a Bodhisattva vow. I think this really emphasises how important it is not to see the Individual Liberation vows as inconsequential or inferior to the Bodhisattva vows.

This kind of thinking is possible and has happened in the past. Because somebody is practising the Bodhisattva path they might feel that what they are doing is more important than simply observing the lower vows and that if someone disrobes, it is not so important. It *is* important. To cause an ordained person to disrobe is a root downfall.

#### 8. *committing one of the five crimes of immediate retribution*

The five crimes of immediate retribution or the five 'heinous' crimes are: killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhat or someone who has attained liberation, making divisions in the Sangha community or causing harm to a buddha's form.

Perhaps there is no risk of us committing the fifth one because at present there are not too many buddhas around that we can harm, but there are many discussions about the fourth one. Some scholars say committing an action which divides the Sangha members can only happen during the Buddha's time. Some texts say that for the crime to be one of immediate retribution one condition must be that there is the possibility of reconciliation and that can only be brought about by the living Buddha. Therefore if the Buddha is not around this downfall cannot happen.

It is possible to commit the first two: killing one's own father or mother. These very heavy downfalls result in immediate retribution which means that as soon as a person departs from this life having committed one of these actions, they will definitely be born in a lower realm.

#### 9. *holding perverted views*

The ninth one, holding perverted or wrong views, can be understood on many different levels. On a basic level, it can be the wrong view of thinking that the law of cause and effect does not work or is just religious superstition. It doesn't matter if we commit a virtuous activity, there won't be any result in the future. If we believe that whatever we experience at this stage merely happens accidentally with no connection between these experiences and what we did in the past, this a very basic wrong view but it is quite a heavy one.

Wrong view can be much subtler than that. We might feel that there is some relevance in cause and effect but that the twelve links are wrong or how we came into this existence is due to an accident or some biological function, nothing more. From the Buddhist perspective this is a wrong view.

More subtle still is the misunderstanding of interdependence or inherent existence. If you deny the emptiness of inherent existence, that is a wrong view and one of the two root downfalls that do not need the four factors to be complete. So again it is quite a heavy downfall.

This might not seem as harmful as killing somebody, but from my understanding, it is more harmful because it is long-term. Taking somebody's life is committing one karma, one really heavy karma, but holding a wrong view (such as that the law of cause and effect doesn't exist) really causes long-term

harmful consequences.

#### 10. *destroying places such as towns*

We might not destroy towns very often, but this vow has a wider meaning than that. It refers to causing an immense amount suffering for large numbers of beings. Some commentators make the example of lighting a fire in the forest. If somebody starts a forest fire countless sentient beings will be killed. Putting poison in the ocean will kill countless sentient beings. This is the sort of thing that this downfall is looking at.

It seems unlikely that this downfall will concern us, but we have to count it and remember it again and again. Firstly, it will help not to commit these actions in the short term. Secondly, it will leave an imprint in our mind which will help prevent us from indulging in such attitudes, not only in this lifetime but also the next lifetime. Bringing that kind of mind again and again leaves an imprint which is an important way of developing spiritually.

#### 11. *teaching emptiness to the untrained*

If we look at the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, when he reached the point of teaching the theory of selflessness or *anatma*, he was very, very sensitive. When asked if 'self' exists, there were many occasions when he did not reply yes or no but just stayed in silence. I am not saying these things just from a Mahayana Buddhist point of view. If you read the Theravadin Pali texts, you will come across a section where there are eighteen questions which the Buddha never gave any answers to and these are all connected with the topic of self, such as if the sense of self continues after death or whether self exists at all. He considered the best way to answer such questions and concluded it was very risky teaching this topic to anybody.

If a person is not really ready to listen, saying 'self' doesn't exist will cause strong distress, or it might cause great damage to their self-confidence. These ideas are so subtle that the person listening might easily decide that the Buddha was teaching that there is no self and that nothing exists. That is very, very dangerous.

The teaching on emptiness is the only teaching which can really deal with the root of samsara. There is no other method to destroy the cause of cyclic existence. In a desert, a one-litre bottle of water is your survival. Lose that and you are dead. The teaching on emptiness is that bottle of water. Of course the teachings on compassion and bodhicitta are very, very powerful but emptiness is the only teaching which can really deal with our fundamental ignorance. If we get it wrong then there is no other solution.

Teaching emptiness, therefore, is dangerous. If you want to discuss emptiness with someone, the first thing to decide is whether that person is ready or not. If they are not, it might cause many difficulties and great misunderstanding. The second thing to decide is whether you yourself are ready or not to teach. We have to be so careful.

In the sixth chapter of Chandrakirti's *Commentary on Nagarjuna's 'Fundamental Wisdom'* there are six lines that describe the person who is ready for a teaching on emptiness. That indicates how important it is to really find the right moment and the right person to teach this topic. The wrong shade of meaning and the student might feel it is nihilism, which will leave very bad imprints on their mind streams. Even when bodhisattvas entering into the Path of Accumulation start to realise emptiness, there is often great, great fear. When they start to realise emptiness they are terrified that they themselves are somehow being extinguished and if they become non-existent their main aim to benefit sentient beings is being lost. So great caution is needed with the teaching of emptiness.

#### 12. *discouraging others from seeking full enlightenment*

This can easily occur to us in this life. Enlightenment is too far – it is an unrealistic goal. It's impossible! We can easily become discouraged ourselves and we can easily carry that discouragement through to others. Of course we must have realistic expectations. That is important in order to carry on our practices but, at the same time, we should not be discouraged and feel that we will never attain enlightenment nor make others feel that it is impossible.

The Buddha himself recognised that there are different mental dispositions. Some people are not interested in attaining full enlightenment but just want to attain liberation. But for people who have an interest in that path, it is important to support their interest and not to discourage them because our buddha nature can become active at any time.

His Holiness has said that for him just having some understanding that there will be many, many lives is not discouraging, it is encouraging. "This is not the only life I will have. I will have many lives so I will try to attain full enlightenment although, at this stage, it is very distant. It is a bit difficult for me to measure but I will keep trying through all these lives."

We need to use this kind of logic to encourage ourselves and also to encourage others, particularly those who are interested in that path.

Lama Tsong Khapa gives the example of a small action giving rise to vast merit, such as offering a cup of water to a person who needs with the thought to attain full enlightenment. These small but powerful practices build up – this is what is called the 'accumulation of merit'. By really focusing on the main aim – the attainment of enlightenment – no matter how small the action is, it acquires vast merit.

Sometimes it is very, very helpful to read those great masters talking about this in order to encourage ourselves.

### 13. *causing others to break the vows of Individual Liberation*

The differences between the eighth downfall and this one is in the object of the action. The eighth downfall refers to ourselves breaking the Individual Liberation vows whereas this one is about causing others to break them. This can be done by disparaging the Individual Liberation vows, telling others that they are not as important as the Bodhisattva vows and can be disregarded in order to keep the Bodhisattva vows.

This one is also about degree. The eighth downfall deals mainly with the four root vows, whereas this one refers to all of them.

Some of the Individual Liberation or monastic vows are very subtle. Our common sense may ask what they mean. There is a vow which says if a monk beats somebody with a single straw, they are breaking a vow. How is this so? It is not really causing any pain. Here again it is mind, isn't it? Although there is no pain, the action is accumulating that habit of violence.

So this vow is about respecting the vows of Individual Liberation. We need to see how important they are and because of that not encourage anybody in any way to break them. They are the base. Without them the other vows are difficult to keep.

### 14. *belittling those who follow the path of Individual Liberation*

It is very risky for Mahayana practitioners to think that the Mahayana teachings are the highest, the most complete or advanced teachings and that the other teachings such as those of the Theravadin are lower or incomplete. Having such a feeling is really a very heavy negativity.

When the Buddha taught these different liberation vehicles he did not teach that the Individual Liberation vehicle is the starting point, the Mahayana vehicle is in the middle and Vajrayana is the completion. He taught according to people's different mental dispositions and we must understand it in that context. No one system is 'better', 'higher' or 'more advanced' than the others.

Of course, in order to understand teachings such as the Vajrayana, an understanding of the Bodhisattva teachings on emptiness and bodhicitta is needed because there is a strong link between them and the entire Vajrayana practice is designed to make the Bodhisattva path quicker. It is very important not to

have a notion that some teachings are lower or inferior to others.

*15. proclaiming false realisations such as the realisation of emptiness*

For fully ordained monks or nuns, one of the heaviest of all the types of lying is proclaiming false realisations such as clairvoyance or shiné or other common realisation when they have not. (These realisations are called 'common' because they are found amongst non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists.) To falsely claim such a thing for self-gain – power, name, fame – is considered a very heavy negativity, mainly because those who proclaim false accomplishments might become teachers and lead others. Tibetans are not completely free from these things, but generally speaking the great masters are very humble. They would not admit to having any realisations for fear of giving wrong information to other people. If a high lama says that they have no realisations then someone who the people know is lower cannot claim to have them. That is the kind of culture we Tibetans have. On the other hand, on one occasion His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that it is good to be humble but if no one admitted to having realisations there would be an entire population without them. Being truthful can also be helpful in some situations.

*16. accepting gifts that have been misappropriated from the belongings of the Three Jewels*

This is very similar to the fifth one, taking offerings intended for the Three Jewels. The fifth one, however, is more about stealing offerings whereas this one is more about misusing them, even though we might have permission to use them. It is easy for people in authority in monasteries or Dharma centres to take shortcuts and start using funds and gifts for their own purpose – maybe not really stealing but just to make life a bit easier for themselves. In a Dharma centre we are using centre property that actually belongs to the Three Jewels all the time, so we really need to be mindful.

*17. laying down harmful regulations and passing false judgement*

As with the previous downfall, this one poses a greater risk for someone in authority at a Dharma centre or monastery. If the fifth vow is stealing and the last one misusing property, this one is to do with misusing the rules an organisation has. Here we bend the rules or pass a false judgement to get our own way because we have the power to do so.

The Tibetan term for this has the sense of making bad rules, bad in terms of stopping opportunities for other people to have Dharma teachings or harming them in some way. It does not just have to apply to a large organisation. This can also apply in a shared house, where we have to live with others. Especially if someone, like the person whose name is on the lease, has some power and then starts to abuse it. We always have to be so careful with power. If we have some sort of authority or have followers, we are in danger. That power can so easily blind our wisdom and then it becomes so difficult to make the right decision.

For example, if a Dharma centre is setting up a teaching programme, someone in authority might vote against a particular teacher coming just because they have a personal grudge against them or because they personally dislike their teaching style, not because they think the teacher is inappropriate for the centre.

It is so important to go beyond self-interest where Dharma is concerned. Because of the power of the object the negativity is so much greater if we do not.

*18. giving up the pledge of altruistic aspiration*

The last downfall is actually giving up bodhicitta. We so often start out with great enthusiasm when we first hear about bodhicitta. The idea of it, how it is so beneficial for others, how we can develop the mind

and so on, all seems so inspiring. But when we start to face the reality of developing that mind, it is not that easy. Quite often we are torn between working on our mind and the real world. The real world is not peaceful, calm or sincere all the time. We find our wish to help others comes up against real obstacles and it starts to seem too difficult. We hear about Chenrezig's ocean of tears over the suffering of sentient beings, but that emotion was a pure one. Our compassion, however, is mixed up with all sorts of other feelings – feelings that confuse us and obstruct our progress. The simple pure wish to benefit others comes unstuck when we are faced with the difficulties of actually doing it.

If you read the sutras there are many stories about people generating bodhicitta in front of a particular buddha but then having that bodhicitta deteriorate because they could not carry on the bodhisattva's activities. The stories may seem strange to us. For someone who has undergone such hard work to develop the mind of bodhicitta – accumulating so much merit, dedicating so much time, doing so much meditation – how could they give it up? Actually, giving up bodhicitta is not difficult at all. As soon as the thought that we can't do it clicks in our head, we lose it. No more than that, no less than that. If we think "I can't do this for sentient beings" then that is the end of bodhicitta. It does not take a long time.

## Breaking a Root Vow

### 1. The Four Factors Needed to Break a Vow

#### *i. not being mindful of the disadvantages*

For sixteen of the eighteen root downfalls there are four factors needed for it to be a complete downfall. The first one, not being mindful of the disadvantages, means having committed one of the downfalls and with no sense that it has been an unwholesome action. Say, for instance, that after we have praised ourselves – the first downfall – we realise that it was an unwholesome thing to do. That is not a complete downfall. But if we do not see that, then, with the other three factors, it is complete. So the first factor is not recognising the disadvantages of committing the action.

#### *ii. having no desire to stop the action*

The second factor also translates as not reversing the desire to indulge in the infraction. This occurs when we are committing or have just committed a root downfall, such as praising ourselves, but there is nothing in our mind that wants us to stop it.

#### *iii. indulging in the act with great pleasure and delight*

The English translation of the third one is indulging in the act with great pleasure and delight. The Tibetan translates more as happiness and satisfaction, so maybe I would say that while we are committing the action there is a sense of pleasure and satisfaction. If it feels good when we are doing it, then the third factor is there.

#### *iv. lacking any shame or conscience*

The last factor is the lack of shame at having committed the action. In Tibetan we have the two terms that I have discussed earlier *ngo-tsa me-pa*, shamelessness, and *khrel me-pa*, lack of consideration for others. This refers to both.

These four factors are needed for all but two of the root downfalls to be complete. They are very important to know in case if we break some of the vows. With one or more of these factors missing, it is still an infringement but it will be a bit lighter. If they *are* all there, then the consequences are quite heavy. If, on the other hand, after committing an downfall, by regretting having done it, by seeing the disadvantages of it and by not gaining satisfaction and pleasure from it, we can immediately make the result lighter.

## 2. The Two Root Downfalls that Do Not Need All Four Factors

There are two root downfalls, however, that do *not* need the four factors to be complete. Simply doing the action makes it a complete action. Those two are the ninth (holding perverted views) and the eighteenth (giving up the pledge of altruistic aspiration). All we need is to simply have that mind and we have completely broken the vow.

If, in our mind, the law of cause and effect makes no sense at all, then that is a complete wrong view. As we have seen, the ninth downfall, holding perverted views is very powerful in terms of destroying lots of our virtue. The very fact of that mind occurring – such as saying the law of cause and effect does not exist – means that we are breaking the Bodhisattva vows without all the four factors being present. In the same way, giving up bodhicitta is a wrong view. But be careful here. That does not mean that if you are not a bodhisattva you are breaking a vow! As we looked at in the twelfth root downfall (discouraging others from seeking full enlightenment) it is easy to feel attaining a mind of bodhicitta is impossible. When we hear about the bodhisattvas' deeds, they seem like something we could never do, no matter how many lifetimes we worked towards them. If someone kicks us maliciously, how can we be patient? If someone treats us really badly how can we stop from losing our temper? Reading about the bodhisattva's deeds or the sixth chapter of Shantideva's *Bodhisattacharyavatara* gives us inspiration and prevents us from becoming discouraged. Of course we cannot do such things now, but there will come a time when we will be able to. It is so important to have a positive attitude towards our practice. So giving up bodhicitta is not about being unable to act like a bodhisattva. As long as that wish to help others is strong in our minds, that is not breaking the root downfall.

## The Forty-Six Secondary Downfalls

The list of forty-six secondary downfalls, like the root ones, is based on Lama Tsong Khapa's teaching called *Jang-chub Shung-lam – The Fundamental Way to Enlightenment*.

These are secondary, not because they are necessarily less important or less negative than the root vows, but because they stem from the root vows and are not so likely to lead to other negative actions.

Another translation of 'root' in Tibetan is defeated, because if we engage in such an action our entire Bodhisattva vow is broken. That is not necessarily the case with the secondary downfalls.

The forty-six secondary downfalls are mainly connected with the practice of the six perfections, or the ten deeds if we include the four means of gathering disciples.

### 1. Downfalls Related to Generosity

(1) *not making offerings every day to the Three Jewels*

The first seven downfalls are related to the first perfection – the perfection of generosity. Not making offerings every day to the Three Jewels is mainly to do with material generosity.

Although it explicitly says the Three Jewels, it can be implicitly taken to mean sentient beings who need material things such as food or shelter. When we take the Tantric vows, there are eighteen commitments in connection with five Dhyani Buddhas and this one covers the commitments associated with the Buddha Ratnasambhava.

The kinds of offerings we should make to the Three Jewels and sentient beings are traditional things such as flowers and incense, but also non-traditional things – things which are beautiful from both their own side and from the side of the mind giving them.

The attitude involved is also important. We should make offerings to the Three Jewels and to the sentient beings who need it with the wish that it will be very beneficial and productive. Right attitude generally

means without self-interest – there should not be any attitude of wanting something in return. Making offerings to the Three Jewels – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – does not have to be in the traditional way with a shrine and water bowls. We can just bring our minds to the Three Jewels – or other sentient beings – for a few seconds before we eat, and offer the food to them. That is enough.

A very practical thing we can do, however, if we have taken the Bodhisattva vows, is to set up a shrine and an altar. Making that part of our daily practice will really help our minds. But if you can't because of circumstances, you don't have to do these things. I remember a great meditator, Yeshe Tobten, who passed away a few years ago. In his cave in the Dharamsala mountains he had an altar with some small bowls, but, because he had so few possessions, the altar usually also had his drinking bowl on it filled with water or tea. When he needed it, he took it and used it, then washed it, refilled it and put it back on the altar. When we visited him, he would take the other bowls from the altar to offer us tea. So practical! In our tradition we should not use the master's cups, but he gave us no choice. That showed me that the offering is in the mind, not in the action.

Lama Tsong Khapa says making offerings can also be making prostrations. We can prostrate to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in front of a statue, the scriptures or a Sangha member to really get a feeling of the Three Jewels.

### *(2) acting out of desire because of discontent*

If the first secondary downfall is about not offering material things, the second is more about not supporting others' mental state. The practice of generosity is divided into making material offerings, saving sentient beings who are at risk of their life or emotionally are in difficulty, and making Dharma offerings such as giving teachings.

The second and third downfall are related to helping sentient beings who are at risk, either physically or mentally if their mind is in a very disturbed state. To give that kind of help is practising generosity and to withhold it is breaking the vow.

The vow says 'acting out of thoughts of desire because of discontent'. Having a certain degree of contentment is an important part of keeping the Bodhisattva vows. If we are discontent then respect to others is very difficult. Respect can mean understanding other beings' mental and physical difficulties or acknowledging the good qualities of great beings. If a person is discontent, that acknowledgement is very difficult. When Lama Tsong Khapa talks of great beings here, he uses the word 'elder' – someone who has made that Bodhisattva vow commitment earlier than ourselves.

### *(3) not paying respect to those senior in ordination and in taking the Bodhisattva vows*

The difference between the second downfall and the third is that the second one is not paying respect due to discontentment, and the third one is not paying respect due to strong arrogance.

### *(4) not answering others' questions out of negligence though one is capable of doing so*

When people ask a question sincerely it is very important to answer. If we ignore their request then that is also breaking the vows. But there are certain exceptions. If we are very sick or incapable of answering, that is all right. It is also not necessary to answer if, during a Dharma discussion someone asks non-Dharma question and the answer would break the flow of the discussion.

Of course, when someone totally new asks us what emptiness is all about, then we are in a real quandary. Teaching emptiness to the untrained is breaking a root vow and not answering, though we might be capable, is also breaking a vow! I think here we must bear in mind all the circumstances. Is the person just asking out of idle curiosity or a genuine desire to understand? We need to give the answer in accordance with the motivation of the person asking. My feeling is, depending on the angle the question is coming from, we should stay very closely to the actual words of the Buddha, using terms such as non-self, rather than swamp them with a load of Madhyamaka Prasangika philosophy. Only later, if we manage to get further, can we go more into the subtler views. It is a very difficult point, though.

*(5) selfishly not accepting invitations due to pride, the wish to hurt other's feelings or anger or laziness*

When people with the right intention invite us as a guest, we have to accept. The first four vows are about increasing our own generosity; this one is about giving others the opportunity to practise it. If we do not accept an invitation for a meal or a drink when it has been genuinely offered, we are blocking their practice of generosity. Bodhisattvas should not only increase their own practice of generosity but also give other beings the chance to increase theirs.

Traditionally, Lama Tsong Khapa says ordained monks and nuns *must* go and receive offerings – either when they are invited to lay people's homes or the lay community brings offerings to the monastery. But there are some exceptions. For example, fully ordained monks have a vow not to eat after noon, so declining an invitation after noon is not breaking your vow. The vow quite clearly says *selfishly* not accepting, so if there are circumstances, such as it might risk your life, then we can refuse.

*(6) not accepting others' gift out of jealousy, anger etc or simply to hurt others*

When somebody offers you things of great value there is danger. If you accept out attachment or refuse out of jealousy or anger, then you are creating negativities. If one bodhisattva rejects the gift because it is very valuable and they do not want to have valuable things, while another accepts it with strong attachment, both are actually breaking the sixth vow.

Lama Tsong Khapa says when somebody offers a gift to you with the right motivation, whether it is valuable or not, you must accept. The fifth and sixth vows are connected with increasing other beings' practice of generosity.

*(7) not giving the Dharma teaching to those who wish to learn*

The seventh vow is connected with the third type of practising generosity, giving Dharma. This is the most important form of generosity. To give Dharma we do not have to have certain degrees or have the name 'teacher'. Sharing whatever we know with others is giving Dharma.

When we genuinely share our knowledge in a general discussion on Buddhadharma, that is giving Dharma to the people who need it. We may not get chance to give Dharma to thousands of people, but day-by-day or month-by-month, if we take opportunity through the discussion with others, that is our way to give Dharma to others.

It is sometimes said that the present masters are kinder than the buddhas because they are here with us now in this very needy time, a time when spirituality is in a very weak state. So if we manage to contribute some knowledge to sentient beings, that is also the same, isn't it? It is really important to share our own Dharma knowledge. If we don't, even though we have the answer, that is worse than not giving material things, because they will relieve only physical difficulties, whereas *this* is relieving mental difficulties which is far more important.

## **2. Downfalls Related to Morality**

The next nine secondary downfalls are connected with the second perfection, the perfection of morality. Ethics can be practised in three ways. The first is to make sure we do not engage in practices that cause pain and difficulties. Then, when we are capable of not indulging in those kinds of activities, to take it further by generating more virtuous thoughts. In Tibetan it is literally to collect virtue. Then the third way is, through those thoughts, to actually engage in deeds to benefit others. So some kind of sequence is there: from refraining from committing negative actions, to actually creating more virtue actions, to finally actively benefiting others.

*(8) ignoring and insulting someone who has committed any of the five heinous crimes or defiled his or her vows of individual liberation, or treating him or her with contempt*

These nine secondary downfalls can be divided into three: the first four are for the sake of others; the

next three are for our own sake and the last two are for both.

This first one is mainly for others' sake. The examples given are of people who have committed very heavy negative actions, such as one of the five heinous crimes or immediate negative actions – killing their own parents or a bodhisattva etc – or have committed a root downfall. These people are mentally in a very difficult position because the majority of them know they have committed those actions. If we neglect them or if we do not support them, we are actually breaking the vows. We must support them even if they have committed great crimes. They are the people who need the most help, to restore their commitments and their stable mental state. We must help them do that.

*(9) not observing the precepts of moral conduct because one wishes to ingratiate oneself with others*

There is often a great temptation to do something harmful just to get respect from others. This is what the second of the downfalls connected to morality is about.

We can see that in our everyday life. Lama Tsong Khapa, however, uses the examples of the fully ordained monk. For them, it is wrong to try to impress people by saying they are helping others simply because they have taken the Bodhisattva vows and because of that the lower vows are irrelevant. Or that they can break their Bodhisattva vows because they have taken Tantric vows, which are higher.

*(10) complying with the minor precepts when the situation demands one's disregard of them for the better benefit of others*

This is very similar to the previous downfall, but from the other angle. Here we do not break a minor vow, even though we are harming others by keeping it.

*(11) not committing one of the seven negative actions of body, speech and mind when universal love and compassion deem it necessary in the particular instance*

There might be circumstances where, with a pure bodhicitta motivation, we are compelled to break one of the seven non-virtuous actions connected with the body and speech (three with the body and four with the speech).

The very traditional example is of the Buddha in a previous incarnation as a bodhisattva. He was travelling on a ship with five hundred people when he learnt that a man was going to kill the captain, and thus kill everyone on board, because without the captain the ship would sink. Seeing this, the bodhisattva killed the person in order to save all the others. This vow says that if those exceptional circumstances arise we must not hold back because we might be breaking a vow. We need to act for the greatest good, regardless of the results for ourselves. If not killing that person is more beneficial, of course we should not kill them. If killing that person and saving others' lives is more beneficial, then we should do so, but here we have to be very careful. We need great, great wisdom to understand such things.

Lama Tsong Khapa comments on this at length, going through all the ten negative actions in connection with body, speech and mind.

*(12) accepting things that are acquired through one of the five wrong livelihoods*

The first four downfalls connected with the perfection of morality are for the sake of others. The next three are for our own sake.

To gain something to eat or drink, to get somewhere to live or to gain a reputation using one of the five wrong livelihoods is a downfall. The five wrong livelihoods are flattery, hinting, bribery, extortion and deceit.

Flattery means saying nice things to someone in order to get your way. Hinting is being deceitful and underhand when you want something. Not coming out with it, but letting that person know through hints. Or giving a small thing in order to get back something much bigger. Similarly deceit and extortion are to do with deceiving people to get what you want.

Lama Tsong Khapa says the reason why people do these things is lack of self-dignity.

*(13) wasting time on frivolous actions such as carelessness, lack of pure morality, dancing, playing music just for fun, gossiping and also distracting others in meditation*

This downfall is about wasting time due to strong attachment to sense pleasures. Wasting time is bad in a worldly sense, but when we have taken the Bodhisattva vows to work for all sentient beings, then it is really the wrong thing to do.

*(14) misconceiving that bodhisattvas do not attempt to attain liberation and failing to view delusions as things to be eliminated*

The bodhisattva's main aim is to attain full enlightenment, so if you say bodhisattvas do not wish to attain liberation, that is wrong. Lama Tsong Khapa says bodhisattvas have gone beyond the goal of individual liberation due to their motivation to free all sentient beings but to say they have no interest in liberation is entirely wrong. Their aim is to attain liberation as well as to attain full enlightenment.

Our main aim is to attain full enlightenment therefore the delusions which we need to abandon are the more subtle, deep-rooted ones but, at the same time, we need to abandon the less subtle delusions which are obscuring our attainment of liberation. There is no way we can ignore the less subtle obscurations and concentrate on the more subtle ones. Our minds do not work like that.

*(15) not living up to one's precepts*

The last two downfalls connected with morality are about not harming both ourselves and others. A good reputation can be an important tool to assist a bodhisattva to help others. This has to do with having the capability of helping others but somehow not using it. Lama Tsong Khapa uses the example of not taking a question seriously, even when we know the right answer and the person's motivation is sincere. Giving the wrong answer, making a joke of it because we are reluctant to make the effort – that kind of response will destroy that other person's trust in us.

Some people are always flippant. It is good to make people laugh but we need to know when to be serious too. Always hiding in jokes and games is denying our own capabilities and is harming both ourselves and others. We are not fully helping others and they are not benefiting from the capabilities we have.

*(16) not correcting others who are motivated by delusions*

When we see somebody is making a mistake, we must talk to them with the right motivation and try to help them correct that mistake. If we help other people not to make a mistake again, that is very helpful for that other person but it will also indirectly help us as well.

### **3. Downfalls Related to Patience**

There are four secondary downfalls connected to the third perfection, the perfection of patience.

*(17) parting from the four noble disciplines*

The first of the four is looking at the source of losing our patience. Unless we have these four noble disciplines, we will not be able to keep our vows or develop patience.

Even if we have had many Highest Yoga Tantra initiations and can do advanced sadhanas and visualisations, without these four qualities we cannot really call ourselves a practitioner.

The first noble discipline is that if somebody gets angry with us, we should not respond in the same way, with anger. At the least we should maintain a neutral state of mind.

The second quality is that if somebody harms us physically, we should not respond in the same way. We should not retaliate physically, harming their body in response to the harm they did us.

The third quality is that if somebody criticises us or discusses our faults, we should not respond in the

same way, by picking on their weak points or criticising them. In Tibetan we say if somebody damages your nest you shouldn't damage theirs.

The last quality is that if somebody argues with us, we should not respond in the same way, by arguing back. Of course, if it helps them, we can skilfully discuss or debate a point, but that sense of adversary should not be there.

These four noble disciplines are very basic Buddhist teachings. They come up often in the Theravadin tradition but are also an important part of the Mahayana tradition. It seems to me they show what it really means to be a practitioner. Keeping many commitments, doing great recitations – these are wonderful activities, but these four are the really real practice.

Lama Tsong Khapa says that if we lack these four noble disciplines within ourselves, we lack the main cause to be patient. If we do not have these four qualities no matter what people have done to us, people will not respond to us in the same way.

#### *(18) neglecting those who are angry with you*

If the first downfall to do with patience is responding to anger etc, then this one is as bad, neglecting someone who is angry. By ignoring them, we are adding fuel to the fire. Maybe the gross level of anger will disperse after a while but by neglecting them there will always be a deep-down resentment.

It is much better to negotiate with someone who is angry, to try to bring them closer. Reasoning with them, listening to them, trying to see their point of view – these things will help reduce their anger, not ignoring them.

These first two downfalls are to do with ourselves, dealing with our own impatience and anger.

#### *(19) refusing to accept the apologies of others*

This is another way to deal with somebody else's anger. If someone, knowingly or unknowingly, treats us very badly and after a period of time comes to understand what they have done and offers a really genuine, sincere apology, then we must accept that apology, otherwise their anger will continue and will probably grow.

This is very similar to the third root downfall, but that one needs the four factors to be a complete downfall and this one does not. Perhaps if the four factors are not there, it is not the third root downfall but this one, a secondary downfall.

#### *(20) acting out thoughts of anger*

This downfall is also to do with not searching out the antidote to anger.

The Tibetan is literally accepting anger when it comes, although it has the feeling of not just accepting it but sometimes actually pursuing it.

In Lama Tsong Khapa's explanation it is clear that in order not to break this vow we must actively search for a solution to our anger. The sixth chapter of Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* has many methods and reasons to do with reducing and stopping anger.

## **4. Downfalls Related to Joyous Effort**

The next perfection, joyous effort, has three secondary downfalls connected with it.

#### *(21) gathering circles of disciples out of desire for respect and material gain*

The first downfall is about making effort but doing it with the wrong motivation. You are a teacher, but the work you do is not joyous effort because your base motivation is to get a good reputation and to have many disciples or students.

This kind of mind is very active. The English translation is 'gathering circles of disciples' because this commentary was written for monks. You wouldn't expect Lama Tsong Khapa to say 'work hard on a

corporate merger'! The main point is the effort being put into the wrong things, not searching for the right solution, not searching for the right circumstances to do the meditation.

So much of what we do here in the West involves a lot of energy going in the wrong direction. We are so active here, dozens of emails every day, always rushed and apologising on the telephone, "Sorry, no time to talk" and booking friends in our filofaxes. All that rush, rush, rush is very energetic but not very productive spiritually. I'm not saying don't work to pay your bills. I'm not going to pay your bills for you! But there must be some kind of limit on how much effort goes into the mechanics of staying alive. There must be a balance.

'Gathering circles of disciples out of desire for respect and material gain' is a traditional explanation. We may not do that but the vow can equally be applied to the kind of life we lead in the West.

(22) *wasting time and energy on trivial matters*

In Buddhism, there are different kinds laziness. Just as working 60 hours a week to make lots of money and have a career is considered lazy because it is avoiding doing what is meaningful, so this second mind, wasting time and effort on trivial matters, is lazy. This is more what we would normally see as laziness though. This is the couch potato, where there is no energy, no action; everything is completely flat.

(23) *being addicted to frivolous talk*

I think we all know this one! Do we put effort into gossip and idle chat? Does it waste our time? I don't think I need to discuss this.

## 5. Downfalls Related to Concentration

There are three downfalls related to the perfection of concentration. Lama Tsong Khapa says they are what we need to avoid doing during the *preparation* for the practice of the perfection of concentration, the *actual* practising of the perfection of concentration, and *after* practising the perfection of concentration.

(24) *not seeking the means to develop concentration*

The first one 'not seeking the means to develop concentration' is to do with preparation. Here, we have taken the Bodhisattva's vows but due to a lack of enthusiasm or effort or, as Lama Tsong Khapa says, due to arrogance or habit, we do not seek help from others on how to develop concentration; that is breaking a vow. We might have an attitude that we have heard so many teachings on developing concentration we have heard enough, but we still don't have concentration. So that kind of attitude is an obstacle.

(25) *not abandoning the five obscurations which hinder meditative stabilisations*

Here we might have had instructions on developing concentration but we are not really putting them into use. We are not using the methods we have been taught to overcome the obscurations, which are:

- i. not directing the mind to the object during meditation
- ii. forgetfulness
- iii. laxity and excitement
- iv. non-application
- v. application

Of those five, this downfall mainly refers to distractions and mental sinking.

Not directing the mind to the object of meditation means not applying the mind, not concentrating on the object of meditation, whether it is just the breath or whatever. Forgetfulness is where we have an object of meditation but we forget it, we drift off. Laxity is slightly different. Although we might have some focus, we still have no clarity, every now and then the mind still gets distracted.

Non-application means that when laxity or excitement come, we do not apply the antidote to dispel that obscuration. Application, on the other hand, means we do apply the antidote, even though we do not need to. When the mind is really on the object with clarity and freedom from laxity or excitement, if at that stage we apply the antidote that is an obscuration.

So although during the preparation time we have collected lots of information, we are not using that information to really tackle those two main obstacles in order to develop concentration.

*(26) being addicted to the joy of meditative absorption*

After a practitioner has gained genuine concentration, real *shamatha* (Tib: *shiné*), there is a risk of becoming attached to the blissful feeling that meditation induces. When a person gains genuine *shiné*, they can meditate hour after hour without any physical or mental difficulties; there is no exhaustion at all, just sheer joy and pleasure. So the risk is that if we are not very careful we may spend our time just experiencing that joy. That is breaking a vow. The infraction is not about enjoying the bliss of *shiné*, but about becoming attached to it and forgetting the real reason we are meditating, which is to develop other qualities such as compassion and wisdom. That kind of mind which is completely focussed, where there are no distractions, mental sinking or dullness – that kind of quality of mind when turned towards compassion and wisdom will be a really powerful mind. In Buddhism we are developing *shiné* for that reason alone.

Of the eight concentrations, four to do with the form realm and four with the formless, people in non-Buddhist schools might have developed up to the eighth with perfect techniques, but after that what will they do? I am not saying *shiné* isn't a wonderful thing to accomplish, but it is a tool, not an end in itself. Merely developing *shiné* will not take us that far. If we manage to develop *shiné* in this lifetime, when we take another life, that *shiné* will not be there. I think Lama Tsong Khapa here put it very nicely, saying this third downfall is connected to what happens *after* developing concentration.

## 6. Downfalls Related to Wisdom

Then there are eight secondary vows in connection with the sixth perfection, which is wisdom. We will see in these eight that there are some similarities with some of the eighteen root vows, but here Lama Tsong Khapa made quite clear that here are differences. The first four are connected with mundane or ordinary things.

*(27) abandoning the path of Theravada as unnecessary for one following the Mahayana*

The first secondary downfall connected with wisdom is very similar to the thirteenth root downfall, 'causing others to completely abandon their vows of self liberation'.

Lama Tsong Khapa explains that the difference is that the root downfall is very much connected with monastic vows whereas this one is mainly referring to our attitudes to non-Mahayana views, particularly selflessness. Losing our Individual Liberation vows is more dangerous than losing or not studying non-Mahayana because the monastic vows are the basic, fundamental Buddhist teaching.

From the Sutrayana point of view, whether the Buddha's teachings exist or not in this world depends on whether there are vinaya teachings or not. Without vinaya teachings and vinaya practices, no matter how available other advanced Buddhist teachings and practices are, we can say there is no Buddhist teaching. That is why the previous downfall is a root downfall, whereas this one, referring mainly to non-Mahayana teachings on selflessness, is a secondary one. That is not to say studying them is not important. It is, and thinking of them as unimportant is breaking this vow.

*(28) exerting effort principally in another system of practice while neglecting the Mahayana teachings that one already has*

This next downfall is the other side of the previous one. Instead of not abandoning non-Mahayana views,

here it is saying, if people are already following a Bodhisattvayana path, we should not encourage them to abandon the Mahayana by putting emphasis on non-Mahayana teachings. If we do, there will be a problem.

Here we are searching for a balance. The previous one is not seeking to discourage people from studying non-Mahayana teachings; this one is not seeking to discourage people already in the Mahayana practice by drawing their interest too much towards the other side of the teaching. The balance is studying non-Mahayana teachings without losing the effort of practising Mahayana teachings.

*(29) without good reason exerting effort to learn or practise the treaties of non-Buddhists which are not the proper object of one's endeavour*

In order to benefit people, we need to understand all philosophies, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. This downfall is placing effort on studying non-Buddhist philosophies without that bodhisattva motivation – through idle curiosity, or because the philosophies attract us. In other words, from the point of view of someone on the Bodhisattvayana path, 'without good reason.'

A teacher or spiritual master will be asked by their disciples about non-Buddhist ideas, so they need know about them, but they are not necessary for their practice. Understanding them is to benefit their disciples, and that is a very good reason. We commit this downfall when we do it without the bodhicitta motivation.

*(30) beginning to favour and take delight in the treaties of non-Buddhists although studying them for a good reason*

The next one takes it a bit further. We are studying non-Buddhist philosophies for a good reason, but we get attached to them.

Actually Lama Tsong Khapa says that these four are not really that important points but these are vows in connection with developing wisdom.

*(31) abandoning any part of the Mahayana by thinking it is uninteresting or unpleasant*

This downfall, again, is similar to the fourth root downfall – doubting and denying the doctrine of the Great Vehicle. The difference is that this secondary downfall very much connected with the wisdom side (such as emptiness teaching) rather than the method side (such as bodhicitta).

*(32) praising oneself and belittling others because of pride and anger*

This downfall is also very similar to the first of the eighteen root downfalls. Here, the difference is whether the four factors are needed or not. For the root downfall they are, otherwise it is this secondary downfall. There is some disagreement between scholars, but Lama Tsong Khapa's conclusion is that it is a root downfall if all four conditions are present. To repeat the four: not seeing what you are doing as a negative action, no willingness to stop, a sense of great joy and no sense of shame or embarrassment. If one of these four factors is missing then it will become a secondary downfall.

*(33) not going to Dharma gatherings or teachings*

Lama Tsong Khapa says this is a downfall because it will reduce our own opportunity to increase our wisdom. If we miss out on teachings we will have less information, and that will hinder our development of wisdom. In order to develop wisdom, three steps have to be taken; listening, contemplating then meditating. The first is the gathering of information. Without it there is nothing to contemplate.

*(34) disparaging the spiritual master*

This is the last secondary downfall connected to the perfection of wisdom. Lama Tsong Khapa says we should not commit this one because having a strong resentment towards the person giving the teachings will reduce our accumulation of merit. In order to accumulate merit, paying respect and recollecting the

spiritual master's kindness is very, very important.

The more we resent the spiritual master, the more we distance ourselves from spiritual activities, while the closer we feel to the spiritual master, the more chance we have to do spiritual things. That seems quite logical to me.

If we develop a sense of dislike or resentment towards the spiritual master, the result will be that we keep a distance from him or her, and the more we do that, the greater the risk there will be that we will be trapped in other direction, in non-spiritual things.

## 7. Downfalls Related to Ethical Practice to Benefit Others

As I have already said, the perfection of ethics is divided into three: keeping the vows as purely as possible; collecting as much virtue as possible; and undertaking ethical practice to benefit other sentient beings.

Generally speaking, the eighteen root downfalls are connected with the first ethical practice, and of the forty-six secondary downfalls, from one to thirty-four are connected with the second one (collecting merit) while these last twelve are connected with the third one (the ethical practice to benefit others). These divisions, however, are not completely clear-cut. Lama Tsong Khapa has further divided the twelve. The first four concern general sentient beings we need to benefit – although of course we need to benefit all sentient beings.

### *(35) not helping those who are in need*

When you take the Bodhisattva's vows, you make a promise to help others, so if you do not do that you are breaking that promise. If somebody says they are in trouble and we tell them we can help and then fail to do so, that is quite bad, isn't it?

### *(36) not helping people who are sick*

This is much the same as the previous one, but here concentrating on sick people. Whether we have some connection with the sick person in this lifetime or not, we should not avoid helping them. There are some exceptions due to various circumstances. For example, when we offer our help to a sick person but the family rejects it, then we should not interfere. Or if the sick person asks for more than we can do, we need to be skilful. Say they want some specialised medical help and we are not trained, of course we should not do this. It would cause more harm than good.

### *(37) not alleviating the suffering of others*

The previous one is particularly connected with illness whereas this one is general suffering. We must help people who are having any suffering. We must get involved to help them eliminate their suffering.

### *(38) not explaining what is the proper conduct to those who are reckless*

Lama Tsong Khapa says this downfall is connected with the source of suffering. Of course we need to help people reduce their suffering, but it is also necessary to help them reduce the cause of their suffering, to reach a deeper level.

The word used in the vow is 'reckless'. Perhaps careless also applies. It means behaviour with a lack of consideration for the result. Many of our daily sufferings and worries, physical as well as mental, are due to this so here it is pointing to the cause of suffering - lack of mindfulness or lack of responsibility.

### *(39) not benefiting in return those who have benefited oneself*

From this downfall onwards we are moving from sentient beings in general to more specific beings. This first one refers to beings who have benefited us, which in Buddhist texts is often seen as our parents and our spiritual masters. Spread over all our lifetimes, all sentient beings have been so helpful to us, but

here we are looking at this lifetime.

For example, our parents have helped us physically, giving us this body, bringing us up when we were helpless, making tremendous sacrifices for us and taking huge responsibility. Mentally we have been really helped by people who have given us teachings about how to have a positive mind.

Repaying their kindness can be achieved by doing similar kindnesses, such as when our parents get old and helpless we look after them the way they did for us, or it can be in other ways. We can repay their kindness by becoming a good person or by following their advice. For our spiritual masters, following in their footsteps is a perfect way to repay that kindness.

*(40) not relieving the sorrow of others*

When people are in a particular state of misery such as having lost their loved ones, friends, relatives or possessions – as in a natural disaster such as an earthquake or even something much more personal and small – then we must try to help them.

Try to make time to listen and talk to people who are depressed. This might be more difficult than talking to a friend who is happy, but think of the difference. It is like the difference between giving a glass of water to someone in the desert dying of thirst and someone who has just had three glasses of champagne. The object being offered is the same and maybe our motivation is the same, but from the receiver's side it is very different. To the thirsty person it is nectar, whereas to the other one there is no real appreciation.

Generally of course we must reach all sentient beings but in particular cases where a person really needs our help we should not avoid getting involved.

*(41) not giving material possessions to those in need*

This is similar to the previous one, although here the emphasis is on material help rather than time and mental help. Lama Tsong Khapa's explanation emphasises that we should give whatever we can to someone who badly needs it.

*(42) not working for the welfare of one's circles of friends, students, employees, helpers*

Again this downfall looks at specific people, people who have put their trust in us, who have some real hope that we can help them in some way. It is looking at people we have some connection with.

It is like when we go for a job interview. If the person who is interviewing us is a friend, we feel confident the job is ours, whereas if they are a stranger, we have no such hope. (Although of course this *never* happens in this time of equal opportunities!) In the same way, if we have a certain group of people who rely on us, we have to look after them in whatever way necessary.

*(43) not acting in accordance with the wishes of others if doing so does not bring harm to oneself or others*

When the circumstances are right, we should go along with the other person's suggestion, whatever that suggestion is. There may be reasons where it is not skilful to do this of course, but then we should discuss it with them rather than just not doing it. In general, however, rather than impose our own will on a situation, we should accept the other person's ideas.

*(44) not praising those who have good qualities*

Lama Tsong Khapa says we must appreciate people who have good qualities such as great compassion or great wisdom because normally, when a person is very capable of appreciating others' good qualities, that will prepare the way for them to develop those qualities themselves. Without a sense of appreciation there would be no interest in doing it ourselves.

*(45) not acting with whatever means are necessary according to the circumstances to stop someone who is doing harmful action*

The last two downfalls are saying that, although we must not do anything to harm sentient beings, there are circumstances where we might have to act quite forcefully to stop them harming themselves. When a person or a group is causing themselves or others pain and difficulties, really unlawfully or immorally treating great numbers of sentient beings badly, we should not just accept that, saying we are Buddhists and therefore passive people. We should oppose them skilfully.

*(46) not using miraculous powers, if one possesses this ability, in order to stop others from doing unwholesome actions*

Generally speaking, even if bodhisattvas have clairvoyance or other miraculous powers, they are not allowed to show them without good reason.

Here Lama Tsong Khapa says if someone is trying to eliminate the teachings, teachings which are greatly benefiting sentient beings, then if we have miraculous powers we must use them to stop that person.

## Restoring the Vows

If we have broken our vows how do we restore them?

### 1. Restoring Monastic Vows

Traditionally broken monastic vows can be restored twice every month. That is set by the Buddha and the monasteries still carry on that rite every fifteen days. There must be a minimum of four fully ordained monks or nuns. The main thing they do is listen to the Pratimoksha sutra, which talks about the vows the Sangha have to keep. The early part of the sutra gives background and the reasons for keeping the vows and the main part is just reciting those 253 vows. Fully listening to the sutra is the main part of the restoring their broken vows, so whoever is reciting the sutra must not leave out a single word and those listening must listen precisely.

In the Tibetan tradition the person who is reciting the sutra must be the head of the monastery, the abbot or the senior monk, so the other monks don't really worry about memorising the sutra until they reach that level. But, in the Theravadin tradition, it seems every monk has to memorise this sutra. Afterwards the monks or nuns will go to another Sangha member and do some individual recitations connected with the VOWS.

### 2. Restoring the Bodhisattva Vows

There are different ways of restoring the Bodhisattva vows, depending on the tradition. There is one way that is very easy to do, however.

Whenever we have committed a downfall, at that time we should really manage to acknowledge to ourselves we have done it and feel regret for it. Then have a very strong feeling we want to restore that vow. Without feeling depressed or negative about it, we have purified the broken vow by wanting to make it better.

We recite the vows when we are doing the Six Session Guru Yoga so, if we have broken a vow, we can restore it then. We have already visualised our spiritual master, so we confess our transgression of the vow in front of the visualisation. That is part of the purification.

Whereas we can only restore the monastic vows twice a month, there is no set time for the Bodhisattva vows. The only difference is that when we want to confess breaking a root downfall, we have to recite in front of at least three of four monks or nuns who hold the Bodhisattva vows. If they are not available,

then do it in front of three or four lay people who all have the knowledge of the bodhisattva vows and have themselves not broken the root vows. The main recitation is to go through the list three times. I am talking about a broken root downfall – full, complete, accompanied with all those four factors – in other words, the greatest or the heaviest part of the root downfall.

We make three prostrations and recite a line in Tibetan that means ‘please pay attention to me’ then we say our name – if we have a bodhisattva vow name, we say that. (See the rite below.) Then we can just go through the particular vows we have broken but we must recite the vows very clearly, there must be no ambiguity or confusion of words. The people who are listening must hear clearly.

The second thing is that from our own side there must be a very strong feeling or regret and that we are not going to repeat it. The people listening must not only understand the vows and have not broken any root ones, but they must have strong compassion towards us.

We can either recite the vows we have broken three times or the whole list three times. After the third recitation there must be a strong feeling that we have restored the vows.

But for the bodhisattva vows which are not root downfalls, or which are but not accompanied by those four factors, we do not have to confess in front of four or five people. We can confess with an individual person who has and understands the vows. The process is the same.

If there is no person to confess to, then we can do it in front of a buddha statue or a visualisation. But that is really the last option.

If you sincerely confess, does that mean there are no negative consequences? That is not really the case. The Tibetan word for restored is actually ‘blessed’ and it means that, once the broken vow is blessed there will be *no more* unfortunate consequences. The increasing of negative consequences has been stopped. Due to having broken our vows there must be negativities, so it is not really the case that when we confess our negativities they all are completely wiped out.

Restoring the vows is quite similar to confession in Christianity where you have to confess to a priest. You have to *express* your negativities. Here Lama Tsong Khapa says the words must be very clear, there must be no ambiguity and you have to say the things that you have done. The main thing is the motivation – to not commit those things again.

## RITE OF REMEDY FOR BODHISATTVA VOW DOWNFALLS

*Make three prostrations, stand and say:*

All buddhas and bodhisattvas dwelling in the ten directions, and bodhisattva community, please listen to this rite of remedy for measureless transgressions I have committed in violation of the bodhisattva discipline from what are described as grounds for defeat and grounds for misdeeds.

*The elder replies:*

Please proceed in accordance with the teachings and the discipline.

*Squat down and recite:*

All buddhas and bodhisattvas dwelling in the ten directions, and bodhisattva community, please listen to me. I, (*your name*), with the title of bodhisattva, have committed measureless transgressions in violation of the bodhisattva discipline from what are described as grounds for defeat: I have committed measureless transgressions that are actual downfalls included in small and medium contamination which belong to the class of eighteen root downfalls, and approximations of them such as the following accepted as downfalls of defeat: praising myself and belittling others out of attachment to gain and respect; not giving Dharma or wealth to the miserable and forsaken out of avarice; not listening to the apology of others and striking them in anger; abandoning the universal vehicle and teaching a facsimile of the holy Dharma; taking the property of the three jewels; etc. I have committed measureless transgressions in violation of the bodhisattva discipline from what are described as grounds for misdeeds: I have committed measureless transgressions that are actual downfalls belonging to the class of forty six misdeeds and approximations of them: such as not

making offerings with the three doors to the three jewels; following thoughts of desire: and so forth. Furthermore, not recollecting the benefits of the thought of enlightenment six times daily; not conceiving the aspiring thought six times daily; mentally forsaking living beings; not making an effort to amass the two collections; not abandoning the four dark ways; not adhering to the four pure ways: not making an effort to train in the moral discipline of restraint; the moral discipline of gathering virtuous Dharma, and the moral discipline of working for living beings; not making an effort to train in the six transcendencies: giving, etc.; not making an effort to work for living beings through the four ways of collecting disciples; not making an effort when it is necessary to endeavour to provide Dharma and materials for others; discarding living beings by keeping in mind those who help and those who inflict harm and discriminating against them with the biases of anger, attachment, and indifference; not closely relying on holy beings; improperly listening and thinking about the profound and vast bodhisattva canon; not making use of food, clothing and shelter with others' welfare in mind; not holding the practice of the six transcendencies: giving, etc. with the thought of others' welfare; not making an effort in the practice of actualising the happiness and dispelling the suffering of others; and so forth. In brief, I have committed measureless transgressions in violation of the bodhisattva discipline.

I, (*your name*), with the title of bodhisattva, confess these transgressions of mine before all the buddhas and bodhisattvas dwelling in the ten directions and bodhisattva community; I reveal them, I do not conceal them; henceforth I take up restraint. If I reveal and confess them, I will live in happiness; but if I do not reveal and confess them that will not happen. *Repeat 3x*

### *Conclusion*

(*Elder*): Do you see these as transgressions?

(*Others*): I do.

(*Elder*): Henceforth, do you properly restrain yourself?

(*Others*): I will keep up most restraint in accordance with the teachings and the discipline.

*Repeat 3x*

(*Elder*): This is the way.

(*Others*): It is well. (*Then another bhikshu puts the questions to the elder*).

*Make three prostrations, stand and say:*

All buddhas and bodhisattvas dwelling in the ten directions, and bodhisattva community, it is kind of you to listen to this rite of remedy for measureless transgressions I have committed in violation of the bodhisattva discipline from what are described as grounds for defeat and grounds for misdeeds.

(*The elder replies*): It is most wonderful that you act in accordance with the teachings and the discipline.