

**The Eighteen Root Bodhisattva Vows: Nos. 14 to 18 and
The Four Binding Factors** (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 16 Jun 93

Contents (click on any heading to view selections of the transcript)

- Root Vow 14: (To Abandon) Holding and causing others to hold the view that the learners' vehicle (you can call it the Theravada) does not abandon attachment and other delusions.
- Root Vow 15: (To Abandon) Falsely saying that oneself has realized profound emptiness and that if others meditate as one has, they will realize emptiness and become as high or greatly realized as oneself.
- Root Vow 16: (To Abandon) Taking gifts from others who were encouraged to give you things originally intended as offerings to the Three Jewels. Not giving things to the Three Jewels that others have given you to give to them, or accepting property stolen from the Three Jewels.
- Root Vow 17: (To Abandon) Making bad rules.
- Root Vow 18: (To Abandon) Abandoning the two bodhicittas, the aspiring and engaging bodhicitta.
- Four Binding Factors
- Questions and Answers
- Purification Practices
- Restoring the Vows
- Daily Practice

We are going through the bodhisattva vows, specifically the eighteen root vows. Remember that bodhisattva vows are guidelines on how to practice, what to practice and what to avoid when we have the wish to become Buddhas for the benefit of others.

Root Vow 14: (To Abandon) Holding and causing others to hold the view that the learners' vehicle (you can call it the Theravada) does not abandon attachment and other delusions.

It is a form of sectarianism when we put down other traditions, here in specific, the tradition where the followers aim to attain nirvana rather than full enlightenment. When we say that it is not effective for doing what it is actually capable of doing – liberating somebody from samsara – then that's transgressing this vow. It is causing others to hold wrong views that we might have about a more modest path, saying that by practicing it, you can't abandon attachment, you can't attain liberation and things like that.

[From 28 Jul 93 teaching]

In a previous vow, we want to abandon criticizing the Mahayana and throwing it out. Here, it is criticizing the Theravada and saying, "Oh, we don't need to practice any of those teachings. We're great Mahayana practitioners! The Theravada tradition doesn't help you abandon attachment. It won't get you liberated. We don't have to practice those teachings." That's completely incorrect. The Mahayana is built upon the foundation of the Theravada. Everything that you find in the Theravada is found in the Mahayana. It is like the building blocks. Some people think that if you practice this tradition, you don't practice the other one. It is not like this.

If you practice Mahayana, you have to practice what's taught in the Theravada vehicle. And if you practice Vajrayana, then you have to practice what's taught in the Theravada and the Mahayana. They are steps that we take.

Root Vow 15: (To Abandon) Falsely saying that oneself has realized profound emptiness and that if others meditate as one has, they will realize emptiness and become as high or greatly realized as oneself.

This one is a form of lying, where you go around falsely proclaiming your own realization of emptiness. Without having actually realized the ultimate truth, one is going around saying, "I understand emptiness."

"I have the correct view." "I am on the path of seeing." Or "I am liberated from samsara." Or "I'm a non-returner." One proclaims that oneself has realized emptiness when one hasn't, and then say, "If you practice exactly like me, you'll become as highly realized as I am." This kind of putting on airs and deception is very harmful. When others are seeking accurate teachings on emptiness, if we deceive them by making them think we have the correct view when we do not, and teach them something that is not the correct view, then it is very, very harmful to them, because they will not meditate correctly.

Root Vow 16: (To Abandon) Taking gifts from others who were encouraged to give you things originally intended as offerings to the Three Jewels. Not giving things to the Three Jewels that others have given you to give to them, or accepting property stolen from the Three Jewels.

There is a whole variety of ways to transgress this vow. One way is when, for example, a high government official makes a law that a monastery, or temple, or Dharma center shouldn't have very expensive things and that all these things should be given to the government. Although no one comes and steals the property, the monasteries or temples are forced to give it up. That is breaking the vow.

Another way of breaking the vow: Somebody steals things from the temples and monasteries and gives them to you. You know about it but accept them anyway. Even if you did not steal the things yourself, you break this vow.

Another example would be when the Communists invaded Tibet; they desecrated the monasteries, took the statues and other precious things, gave them to other people or sold them on the free market in Hong Kong. If you accept them or buy them knowing that they were stolen from the Three Jewels, it is an infraction of this vow.

Or say, somebody at a Dharma center is doing funny things with the books, or taking food from the kitchen that actually belongs to everybody at the center, and you know that, and yet you accept it as your own; you accept things that other people have robbed or embezzled. It doesn't have to be huge, enormous things like statues. It can be just things belonging to the Three Jewels that others give to you, things that have been forcibly taken in some way.

Another example is somebody gives you something in good faith and says, "When you get to such and such a temple, or such and such a place, please offer this." You accept it but then you don't offer it. Or let's say you are going to India and somebody gives you money and says, "Please buy candles at Bodhgaya." You take the money but you never buy the candles. Or somebody gives you candles and says, "Please offer these at the stupa in Bodhgaya." You take them but you don't offer them. Or you're going on a trip to Tibet and somebody says, "Oh here, please take these books and donate them to one of the temples." You take them but you sell them and use the money for yourself. Or somebody gives you a whole lot of fruit and says, "Oh, when you get to the temple, please put these on the altar of the temple." On the way there, you get hungry, you decide to eat it, thinking, "Well, the Buddha won't miss this extra banana."

Or even situations where, for example, somebody gives you cookies to offer on the altar at the center, you take the cookies and then you get hungry and you think, "Well, I will eat this package of cookies and buy another one to offer." The mind is thinking, "I'll eat these first and get another one to replace it later." But that isn't the point. The point is that somebody gave you that box of cookies to offer at the altar and once they have given it, it no longer belongs to them or to you. It belongs to the Three Jewels. Any kind of these dealings, things that were intended for the Three Jewels that you don't deliver, or things that were embezzled or stolen from them that you accept, and you know that it does not belong to you, that's breaking the vow.

Vows showing us what to practice

All of these vows are saying different things about how we should practice. In the fourteenth vow, it is really stressing that we should respect other traditions. We should know about the Theravada tradition, respect it and honor those people who practice it. The fifteenth vow is encouraging us to tell the truth and not deceive others. The sixteenth is encouraging us to be honest in all of our dealings and not snitch and rationalize. It's telling us not to be careless about people's property, that we should be really vigilant about others' property. So in all these vows, it's really showing us what to practice, not just what to avoid.

Root Vow 17: (To Abandon) Making bad rules.

This has two parts. First part: *causing those engaged in meditation on meditative quiescence to give it up by giving their belongings to those who are merely reciting texts.* Let's say you live in a monastery or a temple, and somebody gives an offering for the people who are doing samatha meditation, or for the people in retreat. Then you think, "Oh well! They're in retreat. They are supposed to have renounced, so I'm going to give it to all my friends at the center instead." Making people give up their retreat or their practice of samatha or meditative quiescence because they have insufficient provisions to do it, after you rechanneled the provisions – this is one kind of bad rule or one way of harming.

Second part: *making, in general, bad disciplinary rules which cause a spiritual community not to be harmonious.* For example, making business rather than spiritual practice the focus of the Dharma center, monastery or retreat center. Business, making money and having a good name become much more important and occupy everybody's time instead of the actual spiritual practice. Or it could be making some kind of bad rules or rules that are unfair, that make people quarrel. It could be making it difficult for people to practice by, for instance saying that everybody needs to go out and work ten hours a day, when they came to live there in the first place because they wanted to practice.

The above are the ways which make it difficult for other people to practice. We make it difficult for the people in retreat to continue practicing because we don't give them the necessities that they need. Or we make it difficult for the other people in the spiritual community to practice because we make different priorities and rules that are confusing and cause disharmony, hence making living conditions difficult for them. This vow is showing us the importance of helping people who want to practice the Dharma. When people want to practice and do retreat, we should do whatever we can to help them do that.

I do think it is important because I think in America, sometimes we get so individualistic and think, "I have to work to earn my living and I can't take all this time off to do retreat, so why should I support somebody else who just wants to sit and meditate all day for a year?" Many people feel this. "I have to work so hard before I can do what they do, why shouldn't these people work just as hard? Why should I give money to them and support them in their practice? They should go out and get a job!" It's very easy for people in the West to have this attitude, because we want everything fair and right. We do not realize that by supporting other people who do intense practice, whether they be lay people or ordained people, we benefit from it. Instead of really honoring that, we say, with our Western sense of justice and fairness, "No! No! That's not fair because if I can't do it, nobody should be able to do it." We should be careful of that because having those mental states and not allowing other people to do intense practice is really not to our benefit. Like I said, if other people do it, when they get out of retreat, they can really help us.

Root Vow 18: (To Abandon) Abandoning the two bodhicittas, the aspiring and engaging bodhicitta.

This can happen in a variety of ways. One way is by saying it is just too difficult, "The bodhisattva path is too difficult. I don't want to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, I am just going to work for myself." We feel discouraged by the enormity of the practice – trying to transform the object that we care for most from being ourselves to being others. We feel, "I can't do that," and we give it up, out of discouragement.

Another way of giving up bodhicitta is when you get fed up with sentient beings – maybe not all of them, maybe just one – "I tried so hard to help these people but they're completely uncooperative. I give up! If they want to attain enlightenment, they can just go do it themselves. I'm not going to help them at all. I am just exhausted!" This is another way to lose one's bodhicitta because bodhicitta is the wish to become enlightened for the benefit of *all* sentient beings. As soon as we exclude somebody whom we're fed up with, then we're no longer working for all sentient beings, so the power of the altruistic intention disappears. The disadvantage for us of giving up the altruism is that we can't become enlightened, and the disadvantage for other sentient beings is that our capacity to be of service to them becomes very severely limited.

Four Binding Factors

Those are the eighteen vows. I think previously you asked about different factors that need to be present for it to be a complete transgression, so now we come to that. These eighteen root downfalls are very intricately related to the state of the mind we are in. It is not just doing the action. Having a certain motivation or certain mental factors present or not present when we are doing the action determines whether the action is a complete transgression of a vow or just an impingement of it or something less severe.

There are four binding factors or entangling factors. If we have all these four factors complete, the action becomes a complete transgression of the vow. Then the karma becomes especially heavy. Whereas if we don't have all four factors, like if we have three, then the karma is lighter. Or if we have two, then it is lighter. If we have only one, then it is even lighter. If we have none, we have not broken the vow.

These four factors apply to all of the bodhisattva vows except the ninth (holding distorted views) and the eighteenth (abandoning the aspiring or engaging bodhicitta). With those two, you don't need all four factors, because they are so heavy that the action in itself becomes a transgression. Not only is the karma heavy, but also your whole bodhisattva ordination kind of fizzles out.

For a complete transgression of the other sixteen vows, you need to have all four of these factors. These factors are quite interesting to think about; I find all these vows very interesting to think about. I've been hearing about them for years. Every time I study them, I see something new in what's going on. I see something new in my own behavior. Like I said to you before, some of these vows may seem impossible to transgress – "How can somebody do that?" or "That vow doesn't apply to me." I used to think that way too, and then all of a sudden, I'd see some situation that I was close to being involved in or somebody I knew was being involved in – "Oh, that's that bodhisattva vow!"

1) The first of these is not regarding one's action as negative, or not caring that it is even though one recognizes that the action is transgressing a vow. Let's take the example of the first vow – (to abandon) praising oneself or belittling others out of attachment to offerings, fame, reputation. Let's say I'm sitting there praising myself and I don't even see it as something wrong. I am telling you about my good qualities. I'm telling you why I'm such a great person, that you should come and hear teachings from me. I don't even see that there is anything wrong with this very conceited way of talking about myself with the motivation to directly benefit materially or enjoy more prestige.

Or, I recognize that behaving this way is breaking the first vow, "Yes, I do have a vow not to praise myself, but I don't really care; there's no problem with doing this." It is like a mind that disregards karma, "Yes, I am not supposed to do that, but I don't really care, I am going to do it anyway." That kind of flippant, rationalizing mind.

Or we belittle somebody, again out of attachment to our own benefit. We either don't even recognize that we're belittling somebody, or we don't even recognize that there is something wrong with it. We don't see any fault in it. Or we know we have a vow relating to this, but we don't care. It doesn't matter.

You can apply this to any of the sixteen vows, except the ninth and the eighteenth.

2) The second aggravating factor is not abandoning the thought to do it again. You have done the negative action, and afterwards there is no thought at all to abandon doing it again. In fact, you're thinking (in terms of the first vow), "It's a real good thing that I put myself up. I got myself a good reputation. This is really good, people should know how good I am. After all I am being truthful, and I have a vow not to lie." There is no desire to abandon or refrain from the negative action.

3) The third one is being happy and rejoicing in the action. Not only is there no wish to abandon doing it in the future, but you are really glad you did it. "This is good, I am really glad I did this. This is good stuff!"

4) The fourth one is not having self-respect or consideration about what one has done. Remember when we went through the auxiliary mental factors, among those twenty harmful ones, there were two: non-self-respect and non-consideration for others or lack of consideration for others? "Self respect" is abandoning actions out of respect for your own moral integrity, out of respect for your own welfare, not

wanting to create negative karma because you are going to have to suffer for it. "Self respect" is also abandoning actions out of respect for your own feeling that "I am trying hard on the path to enlightenment, I don't want to damage that."

Self-respect for one's own ethical principles and the willingness to live by them – this kind of self-respect is very, very good because then we abandon doing negative actions. We respect our own ethical integrity, our own principles, our own beliefs, our own ability to be an ethical person. When we don't have that mental factor, our mind will do whatever it wants, because there is no wish whatsoever to live by our ethical principles, no respect for our own future lives, no respect for our own integrity as a human being. Didn't they talk about people who are sociopaths who don't have the awareness of their actions on others? I think also they seem to lack a kind of self-respect for their own ethical integrity.

"Consideration for others" is abandoning negative actions because we care about what effect our negative actions will have on other people. They will harm people or people will lose faith in us or the Dharma because to them, in some way, we are representing the Dharma. So "non-consideration" is lack of care about how or what we do, affects other people. It's really important for us to have self-respect and consideration for others, because these are two mental factors that help us abandon negative actions.

When we have all these four factors complete, then it becomes a complete transgression of the vow.

Summary of the Four Binding Factors

The first of the binding factors would be we don't even see anything wrong with it. We're not even aware that we are doing anything negative. Or even if we are aware that this has something to do with the vow, we don't care about the karma created. The second one would be having no wish to refrain from doing that in the future. For example, even though somebody came and apologized to us, we get self-righteous and say, "Well, I'm glad you finally apologize and come to your senses because you were really being a jerk..." and we really laid into them afterwards. And in fact being quite delighted and pleased with ourselves for having done that. This is the third one. The fourth one would be having no self-respect, no consideration for others about what we've done. So we don't care at all what effect our unforgiving and retaliating attitude has on the other person, and we have no consideration at all for the effect this has on ourselves, our own karma and our own integrity as human beings.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] What happens if we regret/recognize we behaved badly about something but we still get angry/upset? Is it a complete transgression?

Now if you have one of these binding factors missing, then it doesn't become a complete transgression. Let's say, somebody comes and apologizes to you. You've been really mad at this person, and they finally come to apologize. You just can't wait to lay into them and you start to tell them off, and really rub it in, even though they've come to seek reconciliation. But part of your mind is saying, "What in the world am I doing? This person has come to apologize and I really want to be reconciled, but I am just too angry and I'm just like dumping all over this person right now but I really don't want to do this." It is like, "I'm out of control, folks!"

At that time, you don't have this first factor. In other words, you recognize the disadvantages of what you're doing. You recognize it is something negative. You recognize that you really don't want to be doing it. So there is some kind of regret, even though you are out of control and you're doing it. There will still be some negative karma involved in it because there was definitely anger generated and harm delivered, but it wouldn't be a complete break of this vow.

[Audience:] Following that question, what if we feel glad that it was something worthwhile to do?

Well, then you definitely have one of the binding factors, don't you? You feel pleased with what you've done. You don't have a wish to refrain from it. Maybe you have some feeling that what you did isn't so good. Maybe you have a little bit of care for the other person but you don't have much integrity yourself. So it could be a situation where, maybe we have one of the binding factors but not the other three, or we may have two but not the other two, or we may have three and not the other one. It is interesting to

discuss and think of situations where you may have some of them.

Sometimes even while you are doing an action, you switch motivations. So, using the example above, I think at one time, there probably is the wish of, "Oh! This is a real good thing and I am going to really dig in!" But even though you might start off with that wish, the predominant thing during most of the action may be, "Wow, I wish I wasn't doing this."

Or while you were doing it, you could be thinking, "This is really good I'm doing it. There is no fault or problem with this." But then afterwards you thought, "I don't feel good about doing that. I'm not going to do that again." In the latter case, you would have the first factor, because at the time you were doing it, you didn't see anything wrong with it, but then you wouldn't have the second or third one, which is not wishing to refrain from it and feeling pleased.

So we have completed the eighteen root bodhisattva vows and we've looked at the four binding factors. It is interesting. Go home and think about it. Think about things that you have done, and see when do you have the first binding factor, when do you have the second one, when do you have the third one, when do you have the fourth? See the different combinations of these. Thinking like this gives you a whole lot of insight into your own behavior. Why I do what I do and what is really going on in my mind when I'm doing that? How do I feel about myself while I am doing it and after I have done it?

Purification Practices

Now with the bodhisattva vows, it is very good to do purification on a regular basis. Actually even if we don't have the bodhisattva vows, just trying to be regular human beings, it's very good to do purification. But it's especially good to do if you have lay precepts or bodhisattva vows. Prostrations to the Thirty Five Buddhas is a very good way of purifying the bodhisattva vows. In fact another term for it is the Bodhisattva's Confession of Ethical Downfalls. That's why it is recommended that we do that on a daily basis. It can be quite good. Or we can do Vajrasattva meditation.

Restoring the Vows

And then, it is possible, even though there's been a complete break of the vows, to again take them and renew them. In actual fact, there is a way of taking the bodhisattva vows yourself and taking them everyday. In that way, you reestablish the vows everyday. When you first take the bodhisattva vows, you have to take them from a teacher. After that, you can take them on your own by visualizing the assembly of teachers and Three Jewels. There is one practice called the Six Session Guru Yoga that people often do where you actually take the bodhisattva vows in the morning and in the evening as a way of reinforcing and strengthening them, and that can be quite useful.

Even if you haven't taken the vows, still, knowing what they are can give you a way of having more perspective on your actions and what you are doing. So it is good to train in the vows. Then someday when the altruistic intention becomes so strong within oneself, one will want to take them. You can pray that you will have the external conditions where you can take the bodhisattva vows. It is not always so easy to take them, to find a teacher who is qualified to give them, so it is a really nice thing and something to feel quite happy about.

Daily Practice

It is good if people can try, during this time, to stabilize a daily practice. Even if you can't do a long daily practice, at least in the morning, take refuge, think about bodhicitta and the Four Immeasurables, maybe even do the prayers – it certainly doesn't take long. If you can get into the habit of doing some kind of practice in the morning, it's very, very good. As much time as you can set out for your practice, that much more benefit you receive.

Listening to teachings is very good but the whole purpose of listening is to put them into practice. It's like going to take a cooking class. It's great to take the cooking class but if you do not practice what you learn and cook something, you are not going to get the real benefit. If you just get into the habit of doing

some practice each day, then it becomes very normal and natural and it doesn't take much energy to do. Starting it and getting yourself into a good habit might take some energy but once you get in that habit, then it's very, very easy.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>