

The Forty-six Auxiliary bodhisattva Vows: No. 13 to 16 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 9 Aug 93

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We've been going through the bodhisattva vows, and we're in the middle of discussing the 46 Auxiliary Vows, and completed the ones about the far-reaching attitude of generosity, and we're in the middle of doing the ones on the far-reaching attitude of ethics.

Auxiliary Vow 13: (To Abandon) Being distracted by and having a strong attachment to amusement, or without any beneficial purpose, leading others to join in distracting activities.

We'll skip that one, go on to the next – I'm joking! [laughter] This is the mind of distraction that just wants to get involved in anything to distract ourselves from practice. So, hanging out and talking, reading the newspaper from cover to cover, turning on the music, blaring it and just spacing out, turning on the TV and watching anything from "Mickey Mouse" to "The Simpson's" to "LA Law" to the cable TV channel where you do your home shopping to...any kind of distraction: going out all the time to the movies and the theatre and the sports events.

The purpose of this vow is not to say "Don't have fun, and having fun is non-Buddhist." That's not the purpose of the vow. There's nothing wrong with having fun. The thing is to have fun mindfully and with a good motivation and a certain purpose to it. And not just space out and pass our time that way.

So this vow is actually something that is meant to protect us. It's not something that is meant to make us feel guilty, but to emphasize to us that we have a precious human life that has great meaning, that doesn't last forever, and if we remember this vow, then we'll remember the preciousness of our life and we'll use it.

This vow is a call for us to remember on a deeper level, the meaning of our life and its preciousness so that we actually use it instead of frittering it away. So don't take it as there's something bad about having fun, or that having fun is sacrilegious, or you can't be a good Buddhist if you laugh too much. If you're around the Tibetans, you'll see that they have lots of fun and they laugh a lot, and it's fine to be a nice, relaxed kind of person. But it's asking us to be aware, when we go to the movies, why are we going to the movies? What's our motivation? When we hang out and talk with somebody, why are we doing that? What's our motivation? When we go to the shopping mall, when we go to the baseball game, when we go on vacation, what's our motivation? And so doing all of these things with a mind that transforms all of them into the path – fine. Or that we're at least aware of what we're doing and why we're doing it. So this vow is to make us more aware of those things.

I think this vow is also an incredible protection against the impact of the media because we so often complain in America about how the media just tells us what to do, tells us what to think. This vow is emphasizing that actually, we have a choice in the matter. If we don't turn the media on, it won't have that power and control over us. Very clear. And so to look at why we turn the radio on and use the TV, all these different things.

[Audience:] What kind of motivation should we have to go to the movies?

I don't go to the movies very much, once a year or twice a year or something, but to keep up with some of the more modern things that are going on just so I can use some as examples in teaching or know what people are talking about, and so when people start talking about the Simpson's, that I know something about what the Simpson's are about. So that could be one motivation, simply so that you are knowledgeable in the culture so you can communicate the Dharma through the vehicle of that culture to the people. Lama Yeshe, when he used to go to places, he used to love to walk around the streets and go in the shopping centers, and then when he gave a Dharma talk, he would always use the examples in that particular country or that particular city that people could identify with.

Another motivation would be if you're trying to create contact with people and create some kind of relationship with people – either your colleagues, your family, whatever; then sometimes the things you do, especially with your family – I don't know about you guys, but I watch a lot of TV when I see my folks (it's about the only time I watch TV), because that's what they do, and if I don't watch TV, I'm not going to see them. Because everything in the house happens around the TV set. Everything! From eight in the morning until ten at night. So if I'm going to see my folks and talk to them, it has to be in the context of watching TV. That doesn't mean I sit in front of the TV all that time, I let them watch alone sometimes [laughter]. But I try and put in my time from time to time, because that's the way to communicate with them. And we'll sit and watch the news and talk about what's going on in the news. So it's a way to establish relationships with people.

Similarly, if you're working with people in the office, you might chit-chat with them about what you did on summer vacation and the different things that are happening, because that's the way to establish contact and create a sense of friendliness and warmth with other people.

His Holiness was saying at the Dharamsala conference that when you go to the movies, it's possible to go with a Lamrim motivation. You see the movie as Lamrim. And I tell you, when you read the newspaper or watch movies with the eyes of the Four Noble Truths, it's incredible! You watch these people in the movies, exactly how the afflictions* create problems in their lives, and the karma they create, and the karma they must have created to experience the things they're experiencing in the movies? And you can also meditate on emptiness when you're at the movies, because you're sitting there getting all emotional, and all it is is light rays on a screen – nothing solid and substantial there. You can see how it's coming from the mind. So it's possible to watch all of these things with these kinds of motivations.

[Audience:] What else could we do besides watching the television which to me is a stress-reliever?

Yes, because life is stressful, when you come home, you just want to relax. So you're saying what other things could we do besides lie in the couch and watch TV? One of them is get some exercise. Go for a walk. Get some exercise. Play with your cat [laughter]. You can read. Doesn't mean you need to read heavy philosophy, but you could try and find a book of some kind of value and read that. You can just do a relaxation technique, lying on the floor and relaxing the various parts of your body.

Or you could do some plain breathing. Just sit and as you exhale, imagine all the stress and all the junk from the day coming out in the form of smoke. And as you inhale, just let the peaceful, quiet mind come into you. You can do that stretched out on your couch – I won't tell anybody [laughter].

So I think it's finding different ways to make that transition between work and home time. Because the thing is when we just plug ourselves into the media, we do it in order to relax, and yet they've done these studies and actually, watching TV is quite stressful because you have so many of these peak experiences that your adrenaline starts flowing and your heart is pumping. They were recording the different emotions they had during the course of watching one TV program, and it certainly wasn't very relaxing!

Art and the Dharma

[In response to audience:] Art is an expression of creativity. So in that sense, it's quite positive. But when it tends to get self-centered and sometimes, rather pessimistic, then it seems to be counteractive

to Dharma. Then the thing is, to either select the art you watch with care, or when you come in contact with those things that seem self-centered, clearly use that as part of your meditation to understand the disadvantages of self-centeredness. And when you try and see into the artists' minds and what's going on, you can learn a lot about Dharma, about their suffering, about their relationship to society, and you can think of the kinds of Dharma antidotes and meditations that could be useful to counteract those things.

[In response to audience:] Personal alienation puts us exactly into the mindset when we don't do the equanimity meditation, when we don't do tonglen (taking and giving). This is the kind of suffering mindset that you get locked into. Alienation is related to self-centeredness. It just revolves around the ego or gets stuck in there. So in some ways it can help you reflect on the disadvantages of self-centeredness, the benefits of cherishing others. And generating compassion for the people that feel that way, that are stuck somehow.

It's interesting, this thing about art. Last year when I was in Dharamsala, I met two Frenchwomen who are artists and they had just had an interview with His Holiness. They asked him about art and they gave me the tape to listen to. It was quite interesting because what he was saying taps into what you were saying. He was saying that the value of art really lies in the motivation with which people do things. And if it's done to convey negative feelings, despair, and things like that, and if it's done just to express oneself, then he says that that motivation determines the value of that art. Whereas if you do art to be of service and benefit to others, and really explore yourself and share that part of yourself with others in an effort to help them, then it becomes something quite positive. So it's interesting, because he wasn't talking about the quality of the art, or anything like that, he's saying it's the motivation that's important.

[In response to audience:] If you do art to unburden yourself, that's fine. But then, the idea is about what we need to share with others.

[In response to audience:] Well, it depends on what we're trying to communicate with others. Because sometimes you expose something negative, and it stimulates people to correct it. But often times, you just expose something negative and it makes people feel more and more depressed and cynical. If I talk about, let's say, us as individuals. We're not great artists and things like that. If we paint or dance or do music or something as an unburdening of the emotions, then that's fine. If it helps you get in touch with your emotion and look at it and understand it and not get stuck in it, that's fine. But is that what you want to show to other people and express to them? Is that going to be beneficial to them?

[In response to audience:] Yes, yes. Artwork about the holocaust definitely wakes people up. That kind of stuff has some kind of social awareness, because I think holocaust art isn't just about the catastrophe and humanity; it tells us that if we're not careful, this can happen. So let's be careful.

[In response to audience:] I'm not saying that all art has to be pretty and cheerful and sanguine. I think so much of it comes again from the motivation – what one's trying to express. It's like literature. Literature doesn't have to just be "And they live happily ever after", and "If I talk about anything nasty, then isn't that being awful?" So don't take me wrong. I'm not saying ignore the First Noble Truth in art. First Noble Truth is reality. Sometimes expressing it can wake people up. But it depends on your motivation and how you're doing it.

Auxiliary Vow 14: (To Abandon) Believing and saying that followers of the Mahayana should remain in cyclic existence and not try to attain liberation from afflictions*.

It says in the Mahayana texts that bodhisattvas give up enlightenment and remain in samsara or cyclic existence for the benefit of others. And so there is the danger that you misunderstand this and think, "Oh, bodhisattvas don't try and get enlightened. They just stay in samsara. Because they don't try and get enlightened, then they don't apply the antidotes to the afflictions*. They don't purify their karma because they're staying in samsara to benefit others.

If you think like that, that's a misconception. That's what this precept is getting at. Although it says that bodhisattvas remain in cyclic existence to benefit others, what that means is, a bodhisattva's compassion for others is so strong that if it would be of ultimate benefit for sentient beings for a bodhisattva not to be enlightened, then the bodhisattva would happily give up even their own

enlightenment because they're so committed to serving sentient beings. But it clearly isn't for the benefit of sentient beings for bodhisattvas not to be enlightened. Because a bodhisattva has this much ability to help others and the Buddha has this much ability to help others, so bodhisattvas are going to try really hard to get enlightened. They're definitely going to apply the antidotes to the afflictions* and purify their karma. And while they're on the bodhisattva path, they're still going to continue to come back to our world in order to benefit sentient beings.

[Audience:] What is it that gives the bodhisattva the ability to come back?

It depends what level bodhisattva it is. If it's a bodhisattva on the path of accumulation or the path of preparation who wasn't an Arhat before, but who entered the bodhisattva path directly, that bodhisattva is not free of cyclic existence yet. They don't have direct perception of emptiness, so that bodhisattva, even though they have bodhicitta and have incredible good karma and understanding, they still are taking rebirth by power of their afflictions* and karma. Then once you get to the path of seeing, when you have direct perception of emptiness, there comes increased ability to direct one's future rebirth. And so then, one takes rebirth out of compassion and also out of wisdom.

So the lower level bodhisattvas have compassion, but they take rebirth because they're not out of cyclic existence. Even the bodhisattvas on the path of seeing and part of the path of meditation aren't necessarily out of cyclic existence. It's only when they get to the 8th bodhisattva level that they are.

[Audience:] Can you tell us more about the bodhisattva levels?

There're 10 levels of the bodhisattva. One is on the path of seeing, the other nine are on the path of meditation. Each one corresponds with the development of a different far-reaching attitude, except in this list, there're 10 far-reaching attitudes instead of 6, and each one corresponds with a particular bodhisattva ground.

Auxiliary Vow 15: (To Abandon) Not abandoning negative actions which cause one to have a bad reputation.

Now, if we're going to be of service to others, having a good reputation is important, because if we don't have a good reputation, then other people are going to think we're a jerk, and then even we try and benefit them, they're going to go do completely the opposite thing. So if one is sincere about wanting to benefit others, then it's important to have a good reputation. And here, the difference comes to motivation again, because normally trying to procure a good reputation is one of the eight worldly concerns, isn't it? It's one of the attachments that keeps us bound to cyclic existence. It's one of the things that when we have in our mind, then we don't do any Dharma action at all. So this is really distinguishing that. For the benefit of others, it's important that we have a good reputation so that others will listen to us. So it's emphasizing the motivation on this one. What this is pointing to, is for us to look at ourselves, at certain traits or behaviors we have that could really put a lot of other people off.

If we're very irascible and very short-tempered, or very complaining, or if you go out and smoke and drink, or insult people, if you're always the person who cuts somebody else off on the highway, or at work, or we're always the person who turns in the work at the last minute and makes everybody else uncomfortable, or we don't fulfill our responsibility towards the other colleagues, or you're the person who doesn't clean up your coffee at the staff coffee corner – that's a big source of conflict in offices, isn't it? Cleaning up after yourself with the coffee. If you're a bodhisattva, it's important to do that [laughter], because otherwise if you get a bad reputation as being inconsiderate or bad-tempered or something like that, then it becomes more difficult to benefit others.

I find this vow particularly interesting because it's getting us to look at different habits. We do lots of things that are perfectly ethical, where we're not going against the ten virtues, but still they bug other people and can give us a bad reputation. And some things where we're definitely involved in the ten destructive actions and that gives us a bad reputation. It's taking care of what others think of us not out of attachment to ourselves, but in order to be able to serve them.

Auxiliary Vow 16: (To Abandon) Not correcting one's own deluded actions and not helping others to correct theirs.

If we're doing actions that are under the influence of afflictions*, try and correct them instead of just letting them go by: "Oh yeah, it doesn't matter." The thing is, when we're trying to correct our own deluded actions, try and pick out the major ones. What are the ones that are most harmful to self and others, and what are the ones we do most frequently? Focus on those two. Instead of getting all nervous about "I brush my teeth with attachment!"

Sure, it's true. At some point we're going to have to give up brushing our teeth with attachment and attachment to the flavor of the toothpaste. It's true that that has to be given up to become liberated, but don't make that the center focus of your Dharma practice when in the meantime, you're completely careless about your speech and how you talk to people. It's much more important to figure out the major disturbing actions that we do that create the most harm and the disturbing actions we do very frequently. And then work principally at those, and as those get more and more refined, then we can extend it to choosing the flavor of our toothpaste without attachment.

Also included in this one is to avoid not helping others to correct theirs. What that means is that when we see other people who are acting negatively, we should step in and try and help them stop that behavior. Now, this does not mean that you become everybody's boss and every time somebody does something that you don't like, you point it out to them. Because pretty soon, you won't have any friends, and nobody's going to want to be around you. So it doesn't mean that we get nit-picking and pick out everything. But what this one is saying is that when other people are involved in negative actions, if we feel that there's some space in the relationship for us to point that out to them, and to show them a different way of thinking or a different way of doing it, then we should do that. In other words, we shouldn't just close our eyes and say, "Well, they're doing all of that but it's none of my business."

So you're at work and somebody is extorting money from the company, and you just say, "That's none of my business, because if I point it out, then they're going to get offended or they're going to get mad at me, or something bad is going to happen to me." If we avoid pointing things out out of fear that the other person won't like us, or fear that they're going to get angry at us, or something like that, some kind of selfish motivation, then that's not correct.

If we don't point something out to somebody because we feel that it's only going to make them angrier and more rebellious and more stuck in their own ways, and it's going to completely close the door of communication with them, then it's okay not to point it out to them.

So this one is saying that if we feel that there's some openness, we should say things. Especially with our Dharma friends, it is important that when we see somebody going off and doing something that's not very beneficial, as a Dharma community, we should point these things out to each other. In other words, with a motivation of kindness and concern, when we feel that there's space and the other person can take it in.

It is the same in our family. It is the same also with social issues. When something illegal or immoral is going on in the society, we should speak up and say something about it. I was thinking about this vow and I was thinking about the situation during the holocaust, when so many people pretended they didn't know what was going on. "We don't know where all these people are disappearing, and the government must be doing something good, and I don't want to know anyway." That kind of attitude where you know something horrible is going on but not speaking out against it.

And the same applies to our own society. When there are things that are harmful going on, we should speak out. Again, that doesn't mean we need to sit and wave signs and yell and throw rocks and stuff like that, but we can definitely support different social activism things. We can write letters to the Congress. We can do things to make things more prevalent. That's what His Holiness is doing, e.g. in the situation of Tibet, where there're all these human rights abuse. To not say something would actually be quite unethical.

[Audience:] If you see something in the work situation that isn't going well, how can you give the feedback so it doesn't make things worse?

We need to look at each situation quite individually and think of what to do. Sometimes I think it can be put in the form of a question. I'll just give you an example. When I was living in Singapore, you've probably heard me tell this story. One student was in the hospital. He was dying and when I came into the hospital, the doctor was trying to convert him on his deathbed. I came into the room and my friend was going, "Don't confuse me. Don't confuse me." The doctor saw me coming and said, "Well, you're intelligent. You know what to decide." I knew what the doctor was doing and I confronted the doctor afterwards. I didn't say, "You're doing this!" I said, "What were you doing?" I gave him a chance to explain. He said, "Well, I was telling him all about Jesus," and blah, blah, blah. And I said, "But you know, he's a Buddhist, and he died twenty minutes later and he was saying, "Don't confuse me. Don't confuse me. Do you think you were acting in his favor?" So I put it as a question.

And then what I did is, I wrote a letter to the newspaper and to the hospital, and I described the situation, and I said, "Is this acceptable conduct in the medical field?" So again, I put it as a question. And it got published in the newspapers, and everybody was so afraid that I raised this issue, because in Singapore, you don't raise any issues. But it was perfectly all right, and the newspaper took it up and they contacted the Ministry of Health and the answer came back "No, this is not acceptable practice." But I think there's something about putting it in the form of a question. So to try and think of how to say things sometimes.

[Audience:] What if people don't accept what we say?

What can you do? The whole thing is, with as much wisdom and compassion as you have at the moment, you act. That's all we can do. Being a bodhisattva doesn't mean that everybody likes you and everything goes the way you want it to go.

[Audience:] What's the best way in any situation?

What's the best way? Is there only one best way? Things are so interdependent and there are so many different factors, what is the best way?

[Audience:] What if the outcome of things are not as we wished?

Yes, it may not turn out the way we thought. But we can't control things.

[Audience:] What is the limit?

It's a thing of stretching the comfort level. Instead of saying "I'm not going to do anything I don't feel comfortable with," stretching the comfort level. Not tearing it, but stretching it.

[Audience:] But sometimes the other person may not accept what we say.

Like I said, it doesn't mean that you go and you correct everything everyone does. If you feel there is no openness from the side of the other person, then it's not worth saying. If it's just going to make somebody so angry and so defensive, and so hostile, then it's not worth saying. And especially, if somebody's saying, "I'm going fishing," that's not the time to tell them. It has to arise in another kind of context where you're not directly threatening something somebody's attached to. It has to arise in another context.

[Audience:] But there will be little or no impact if we don't put our message across strongly.

That's true. They won't take it very seriously, and probably anything you said at that time, they wouldn't take very seriously. But if you came on real strong, they'll probably get really self-righteous and have an adverse reaction and that wouldn't do any good either. That would make them more committed to kill more fish to show you how much they were enjoying themselves [laughter]. So like I said, it doesn't mean we go around correcting everybody, but really trying to figure out how, and in what situations to do and say things.

The whole thing is not to use this thing as an excuse to get self-righteous and put our trip on other people. But whenever we see some kind of negativity, to recognize that that is an external display of what we have the potential to do ourselves. Like the LA riots. I was looking at all these different figures and the whole situation and unfortunately, I saw the potential to be every single one of them within myself. I could find some part of me that, put in the right situation, or rather, wrong situation, could be uncontrolled. And so using that situation to develop a sense of ethics, to develop compassion for others.

I have a real hard time when I walk around Green Lake, and I see people fishing. When they're catching a fish, it's so hard for me. And yesterday, somebody was with a net and a big fish, and I just want to go up to him and say, "Please, put the fish back in the water. Please put it back in the water." But I knew if I did, we might start a riot – I'm joking, I don't think it'd be that bad. It's really hard to walk by and see that going on. And so I try to put it in the Buddhist perspective and think about tonglen – taking and giving.

[Audience:] Each of us have our own way of doing things and ours is not always the best way.

Right. It doesn't mean that just because somebody has a philosophy of why they do something, that that philosophy is correct. It doesn't mean that. But I think what you're saying is very right. Rather than always looking at others, really look at what we're doing too. We're always talking about, "Oh, all these people are polluting the sky, and there's so much pollution!", and then we drive here and drive there and drive everywhere we want and we never think about taking the bus or car-pooling, or something like that. So in all these kinds of things, look at our own behavior.

[Audience:] People need time to change, right?

I lived in one family's house in Singapore. They were technically a Buddhist family but didn't know much about it. The son knew a lot about it; he was the one I knew the best. The mother would come and say to me things like, "There're all these cockroaches in the kitchen. I guess I shouldn't kill them, should I?" [laughter] And I say, "You're right. Cockroaches want to live". I went away for a few days, and I came back and she said, "Well, you'll be very sad. I killed those cockroaches. I guess I did something really bad." But it was a really interesting kind of thing, because we would talk about it, and she knew I didn't like it, and she would do it, but somehow, the thing that was good about it, was it was different than before when she did it, because before I lived there, she would just do it and not think anything about it. With our dialogues about this, she would do it but she would have some feeling of "I shouldn't be doing this. The cockroaches are getting hurt." She was getting somewhere with it, so I hope... And every once in a while, she came and said, "I took that cockroach out. I didn't squish it. I guess you'd be happy." [laughter] And I say, "Yeah, very good!"

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>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes.'