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So the section that we're now on is the bodhisattva vows. Even though some people may have taken the vows, some people may not have. Still, hearing about it is very good because even if you haven't taken them, it gives you a lot of practical information to use in your daily life, and a good framework to help us discriminate what's a positive action, what's a negative action.

Review of Vows 35 - 38

I think we're on vow number 39, but I thought I would just start with 35 again and do a little bit of review, because this whole last section, vows 35 to 46, is to eliminate obstacles for practicing the ethics of being of benefit to others, and so it is really quite applicable to our daily life. Like I said, whether or not you've taken the vows, these are things that are really good to bear in mind in your life.

No. 35. Abandon: Not Helping Those Who are in Need

So, number 35, which is the first vow in this last section on the ethics of benefiting others. These are all things that we're supposed to avoid. Here, the thing to avoid is: Not helping those who are in need.

People who are in need: it could be that they have physical needs – may be food and clothing, it could be a traveler who needs help, or somebody who doesn't speak the language and needs language assistance, somebody who's lost and doesn't know where they're going, somebody who's organizing a big conference and needs help, etc. So there could be lots of people who are in need of help. This precept is to help us to open our minds and hearts to help those who are in need. Sometimes, we wait until we're asked for help. But if we can clearly see that somebody needs help, we can just right away

give it without being asked. The thing to abandon is the kind of lazy mind that says, “Well, there’re so many other things to do. And actually, they don’t really need my help. If they’d wanted my help, they would ask. I’ll just be getting in the way and they’ll resent me if I offer to help. So I think I’ll lie down and take a nap instead.” That’s not the way to think. This vow’s to avoid that kind of lazy, rationalizing mind that doesn’t want to get involved with other people when we can clearly see their need.

This last batch of vows here is talking about engaging with others, but of course it has to be seen in perspective. If you’re sick, then you don’t go out and help in a hospital. If you’re doing something that’s quite important already, you don’t cut that short to do something that’s less important. Or somebody asks for your help, and you don’t have the skills necessary to help, then it’s better to explain rather than say “Yes” and then not deliver. So all of these precepts have to be tempered with some kind of reasonableness in our life too. It doesn’t mean that any time that anybody needs help, no matter what else is going on, you drop it and then go do that. It depends on the situation.

No. 36. Abandon: Avoiding Taking Care of the Sick

It could be somebody at home who is sick, we don’t want to go near them. Or a relative who is suffering, we don’t want to see it. Their pain frightens us, and so we don’t go to the hospital to visit them. We don’t call and find out how they are, or if we go, we get out as soon as we possibly can because their suffering makes us quite jittery because in actual fact it reminds us of our own mortality.

Rather than just avoiding taking care of the sick, if we can, we should offer the services necessary, whatever it is that they need. And if it’s bringing up some kind of fear or apprehension within us, then to take some time out and look at what’s coming up inside of us and then do some of the meditation on loving kindness so that we can overcome that. Because when we feel repulsed by people who are suffering, we’re very much locked into the view of “me”. And it’s so funny: we’re repulsed by their suffering, and we suffer so much from it, but actually we’re completely well and everything is okay, and they’re the ones who’re suffering. But the mind creates this kind of tightness. So it’s really good spending some time meditating on compassion, and especially putting ourselves in the shoes of the people who are suffering so that we can feel for them.

No. 37. Abandon: Not Alleviating the Sufferings of Others

So again, if somebody is having great difficulty – physical problems, mental problems, or whatever. Maybe they’re distressed, they’re suicidal, they’re paranoid, maybe they’re just lonely – to try and do whatever we can to alleviate the suffering. Now it doesn’t mean that we’re always going to be successful, because being a bodhisattva doesn’t mean that you have a 100% success rate with everybody that you try and help, because anyway what is success? It’s really hard to know sometimes. So rather, from the bodhisattva perspective, it’s eliminating the obstacles that we have of being of service to others, without expecting that everything we do is going to cure the world’s problems and everybody is going to come to us and say, “Oh, you’re so kind. You helped me so much. Thank you so much.” And so without that kind of expectation, doing whatever we can to alleviate the suffering of others.

As we know, there’s lots of suffering in this world. We don’t need to look too far for it: there’s the very gross sufferings, and then there’s more subtle sufferings. In poorer countries, you have more physical suffering. In rich countries, like in this place, you have a lot of mental suffering. We have mental suffering here that people in poor countries couldn’t even dream of. So there’re lots of different ways of suffering, even though there’s really not a lot of difference between us and them. We want to be happy, they want to be happy with the same intensity. We want to be free of suffering, they want to be free of suffering with the same intensity. If we have this sense of equality, then helping others isn’t a big burden, it’s just something that’s quite natural.

And I think that another thing that would really help us to overcome our obstacles to helping others is to lose some of our individualism. Now I know this may sound unfamiliar to you; you might try me for having a conspiracy to overthrow the constitution if I talk about the disadvantages of individualism. But if we get too locked into our individualism, we focus only on the pain within us. In other societies, in other cultures, people’s identity is much more bound up with the group: people automatically think of the welfare of the group more than what they feel like individually. So if we can slowly expand our mind, we can start recognizing that the boundary between self and others is not that big. Of course we still have

our individuality, there's nothing wrong with that, but this real tight mind that's always so concerned about "me": "Am I doing the best things for me?", "Am I actualizing my potential?", "Is anybody taking advantage of me?" "What are my hidden talents?", we should learn to let go of that.

No. 38. Abandon: Not Explaining What is Proper Conduct to Those Who are Reckless

People who are engaged in doing harmful actions, if we can, it's really good if we can correct their behavior or give them some extra information to help them rethink what they're doing. But if we're too lazy, and we don't care about them, that means: if they're harming other people and we don't care about the people they're harming; if they're harming themselves and we don't care. In other words, basically, out of our own ill-will, our own laziness, we are not trying to provide them with other ways of acting, other means of behavior, then that would be a break of this particular precept.

Again, it doesn't mean that we go around meddling in other people's business. It doesn't mean saying to people: "You don't have proper conduct, so I'm going to tell you how to act." Keeping our little antenna up for any small error that somebody makes. It doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean minding other people's business. But when we see people making quite gross mistakes in their lives: you see a friend who starts to drink too much, or you see one of your Dharma friends who stops their daily practice, or you see somebody who's getting angry quite a bit, or who is about to get involved in an illegal business deal, or something like that. Or somebody who's being quite cruel to their family members. These kinds of situations, if we can discuss it with this person, not give them orders, but help give them more information, help give them alternative ways to handle whatever difficulty they're having so that they don't act in ways that are harmful to other beings.

So those are the ones that we did before.

Elaboration of Vows 39 - 46

No. 39. Abandon: Not Benefiting In Return Those Who Have Benefited Oneself

This refers to not repaying others' kindness. Generally in the world, repaying the kindness of people who have helped us is something that's held in high esteem. Often, in worldly ways when we repay the kindness, we're doing it out of attachment or out of obligation, and that's not what we're talking about here. What we're talking about here is, doing it with a heart of equanimity. In other words, we're not picking out the people who've been particularly kind to us and favoring those amongst other people, but we're having equal compassion for everybody but recognizing that in this particular circumstance, we're close to a few people and if we really repay their kindness and benefit them, it'll really have an effect. But it's not doing it out of a sense of obligation – because they may not like us otherwise or other people will think badly of us, or out of a sense of guilt, or something like that. But again, it's with a heart recognizing that they're basically like us, wanting happiness and not wanting pain. And so being sensitive in our life to particularly the people who have been very kind to us. Because often, we just space out and forget it.

Recognizing the kindness of our parents, teachers, strangers etc.

One big thing they talk about in the scriptures, that really in our culture we don't think of, is the kindness of our parents. In our culture, we tend to attribute so many of our difficulties and problems to our parents. I'm not saying disregard problems in the family, but I think it's also equally important to remember the kindness of our parents. The fact that without our parents, we won't be alive. It's basically very simple. Without our parents, without people keeping us alive, we wouldn't be here. So there's some very fundamental kindness. Really remembering that, having some gratitude and respect for our parents, regardless of what else happened.

Also having a sense of gratitude and repaying the kindness of our teachers, be they the kindergarten teachers, the grade school teachers, our spiritual teachers, our Yoga and pottery teachers. Whoever teaches us something, whoever shares what they know, shares their talents and skills -- to remember that.

And especially remember the kindness of the people that we share the Dharma with, the kindness of the people who organize Dharma teachings, because often we forget that. It takes tremendous organization,

like when His Holiness comes to Seattle, people work months and months and months, for a-day-and-a-half event. How many of us remember the kindness of all these people who work all those months preparing? So to remember the kindness of the people who organize. Remember the kindness of His Holiness. Really thinking in our life the various people who have been kind.

When I was on this trip to China, it became real evident to me all sorts of little kindnesses that strangers gave, because we'd be traveling from one place to the other, and stop for lunch and these people would bring food out on the table, and we would eat, and then we'd pack in the bus and go on. It's like you drop into somebody's life, eat their food, and run away. I began to stop when I was offering the food, to really think of the people who had grown the food, prepared the food,..., people who were going to wash the dishes after us. All these people whom we'd probably never see again in our life, whom maybe I didn't even take the time to look at properly when they bring the rice out on the bowl to the table. So, remember their kindness to us, and especially of the people that are close to us, to try and take care of these people.

No. 40. Abandon: Not Relieving the Sorrow of Others

Develop the motivation to help

Another way to put it is: (To Abandon) Not consoling people who are distressed. If somebody is bereaved, somebody they love has died, or they themselves are sick, or one of their dear ones is ill, or they lost their job, or they're distressed over something or another, then to try and console, to try and offer help.

And here, it's good to develop some skills in how to offer help. First of all, we need the motivation, we need the compassion within us that wants to actually sit and listen to people's problems. And again, sometimes, we don't want to hear other people's problems. It's like, "You're on the phone again, sorry, I've to do something else." We don't want to hear somebody else's problems, we don't want to have somebody dump their stuff on us. And so to look at that part of us that doesn't want to engage, that just wants to close off, and meditate on compassion. And in that way then develop a compassionate wish to be able to relieve their distress. That's on the mental side, the motivation side.

Learn practical skills to help

And then on the practical side, to learn some skills for doing that. Because if somebody is distressed, we have to be real sensitive about the best way to help them. Some people, if they are unhappy and you go, "Don't worry about it. It will all be okay," then they get really angry and more upset. Because that's not what they want to hear. They just want to be heard. They don't want anybody making commentary, especially if they feel rather pessimistic about the situation. Some people, when they are distressed, they don't want us to say anything, they just want us to listen. Other people, when they're distressed, they're actually happy when we share with them some of our experience. But another person may be unhappy.

So helping them requires a sensitivity of who needs what, who needs you just to listen and be silent, who needs you to share your experience, who needs you to ask questions, who needs you to tell them that it's going to be okay, and who needs you to say "You know, it might not be okay. How can we prepare, because it might not be okay." "This person in your family may not live." "You're right. They may not live, so how can we start to prepare for that right now?" So consoling those who're in distress isn't necessarily painting over something or lying to them. It's being sensitive to what it is they need. There's no set prescription for that.

No. 41. Abandon: Not Giving Material Possessions to Those in Need

Those who come and ask us for things: if we have those things, we could try and give.

One of the root vows that we did earlier was: (To Abandon) Not giving material aid. Some people may wonder what's the difference between that root vow and this one. The root vow is done with miserliness. In other words, out of clinging to our own possessions, we don't share with other people who come and ask us for something. This one is much more out of other motivations besides miserliness, like ill-will, or laziness, or arrogance, or something like that.

Another way to differentiate them is that in the root vow, the people who are asking for help are the

people who really, really need it, who are really suffering, whereas the people in this vow are people who are not quite in such a bad state. So there's some difference in the degree of the object too. That's why different lamas explain the difference in different ways.

Again the question comes up: if I'm in India, every time I see a beggar, do I have to give to a beggar? Every time an announcement comes to my house from an organization asking for money, do I have to give money? Again, there's no hard answer. It's something that you have to look inside at your own motivation. If it's something that out of laziness, or neglect, or ill-will, that we don't do, then we need to check up. If it's something that we don't have, whether it's the things that they're asking for, or money, or that we just gave a couple of months ago, or if we prefer to make one big donation a year rather than several smaller donations – there could be a whole lot of other reasons – that's okay.

The most important thing is that when people ask, and we can't give them for one reason or another, that we still have an attitude that wishes them well in their fund-raising or what they're doing instead of dismissing them with an angry attitude. Some charities may appeal to you more than others. Some may seem where your heart goes and you want to help them and so you give them more, and that's fine. Basically, it's not to have this heart that shuts people out.

If somebody is asking for something, and you think that they're lying to you, or you think that they're going to misuse what you give them, or they're asking for something that seems dangerous, then unless you're completely convinced that their cause is legitimate and their motivation is good, it's wiser not to give. If somebody is asking you for money and you think they're going to use it for a drug deal, it's much better to say "No." Our acts of charity must be tempered with wisdom.

No. 42. Abandon: Not Working for the Welfare of One's Circle of Friends, Disciples, Servants etc.

This is talking about people who are very close to us. Very much the example in this is somebody who is a Dharma teacher, and not taking care of the people who are their students. But this vow applies whether you're a Dharma teacher or not. Because often, we get this kind of idealistic view of bodhisattvahood: "I'm going to save all these mother sentient beings!", and we completely ignore the people who are very close to us. It's kind of like the doctor's child who is malnourished and sick, because the doctor is out treating other people. Or the psychologist's child who's completely screwed up and neglected because the psychologist is treating somebody else. So this is reminding us to not forget the people that we live with, people we work with, our colleagues, our employees, people who help us, people who are our students, who are our friends. In other words, those people we rely upon a lot, not to neglect them in the name of helping everybody else.

No. 43. Abandon: Not Acting in Accordance with the Wishes of Others If Doing So Does Not Bring Harm to Oneself or Others

Another way of saying that is not behaving sociably. As much as possible when we're with others, to be sensitive to what their wishes are, and if their wishes are not in conflict with our ethical precepts or our ethical norms, and what they're asking is not going to bring damage to self or others, then it's good to go along with it. So you're with your friend and your friend wants to have Chinese food and you may feel like eating pizza, but you refrain from making a strong case for pizza. So just being amenable, being a nice person, is basically what this vow is all about. Listening to others, taking their needs into consideration, not always having to get our way and do what we want, make our stand and have things the way that we want. To give space to others and to go along with their wishes and their wants, even though it may not be the thing that we particularly choose or feel like doing at that time.

Softening up on "My" opinions

Of course that doesn't mean everything somebody else wants to do, we go along with it. If a friend is asking you to a party, where you know there's going to be a lot of alcohol, you're completely free to say no. Or if you would prefer to meditate, and your friend's asking you to go to the movies, you can say no. If there's something more important, some Dharma work that you want to or need to do, something more important to help others, then it's fine to say no. Or if what the person's asking seems a little risky or dangerous or insincere, then it's okay to say no.

So what it's talking about here is to overcome that mind that we're so attuned to in this country, "What do I feel like doing?" "My opinions." I was thinking about it: from the time we're very little, we've been raised

to have opinions. We feel like we have to have opinions about everything, from the time we were little. For example, "What's your favorite color?" We have to have an opinion. We can't just say, "Oh, I never thought about it." or "They're all okay." It's like we have to have an opinion. Or somebody says, "What do you think about Bosnia?", you can't say, "I don't know," you have to have an opinion. And so we're so full of our opinions – "What do you feel like drinking?" "Well, let's see, I have to have an opinion. I want peach juice." So, always our opinions, our wishes, so much importance... And if we look, so much conflict in our life comes out of trying to get our way with these little bitty things. An incredible amount of conflict and confusion comes.

So we may try to soften up a little bit about going along with our opinions and our wishes and being a little bit easier to get along with and doing things other people's way. The person you live with may like the house vacuumed in the morning and not in the evening. But it's basically the same to use the vacuum in the morning. So these kinds of things.

Minding our manners

Also included under this is manners. This is something I learnt so much when I was staying in the Chinese nunnery. Because they really stress to us our manners. It's amazing. You have people in their twenties, thirties, forties and fifties and they are getting told to mind their manners. But I really tuned in that there's so much conflict happening because we don't mind our manners. I mean very simple things. We tell a person we're going to be somewhere at some time, and we don't call them when we know we're going to be late. We just show up late. How many fights start because of not making a simple phone call to say that we'll be late?

Or the way we eat: we might be at somebody's house, and it's just so easy to eat according to their way of doing it, and not make a big fuss. Or saying "thank you" when people give us things. And another thing is writing "thank you" notes, and really saying "thank you". It's just amazing how many times we receive things from other people, we never say "thank you". I know from direct experience. I've sent things to people in other parts of the country or other countries: they never write to even say that they received it. So you're stuck here – "Did they get it? Did they not get it?" And meanwhile, the person who got it doesn't even think that you might be concerned about this. And so for us, when we're on the receiver's end, to realize that when people send these things, they want to know that we got it okay. Even if we don't want to say "thank you", at least have the courtesy to say we got it.

Just so many things like this of being sensitive to other people's needs and minding our manners. If we're in somebody else's house, helping to clean up instead of just making a mess. Or if we're staying at someone's house, not running up the phone bills that they have to pay, unless of course we ask them first. Just basic things of being a thoughtful person. There's a lot which is included in this vow, and I think if we all went home and spent some time thinking about this, we could all think of very specific things in our life where we could use some improvement about being thoughtful of other people's feelings and needs. It's very helpful, because just even small things can set up huge amounts of conflict. Whereas if we really take care, stop and think and mind our manners, it can be a tremendous boost to harmonious relationships.

No. 44. Abandon: Not Praising Those with Good Qualities

It's actually quite a bodhisattva practice to get in the practice of praising people; to get in the practice of training our mind to look for people's good qualities. And again, in our society, we're very quick to find faults. You look at journalism. Journalism, very often, what it is, is about finding faults with a person or a policy or something, one thing or another. We learn to be critical, put other people down. And actually, the more we train our mind in this attitude of looking for people's faults and mistakes, the more unhappy we get. Because we're only seeing part of what a person is, we only see what we look for basically, and meanwhile all the positive qualities, all the ways in which they help us, all the things which they do good or are acting kindly, we just take those things for granted.

It's very important to start to notice those things and make it part of our practice to notice those things and to praise the people for them. It doesn't have to be stupendous things that we praise people for. It's not like, "Oh you won the Nobel prize. I'm going to praise you." But just even small things that people do very well that we appreciate. E.g. somebody calling us to tell us that they were going to be late, to say, "Thank you. I really appreciate that." Or somebody who goes out of their way to drive us home. Whatever. To be thoughtful in that way. And to praise the people's good qualities.

And not only noticing people's good qualities and comment to their face, but also when we discuss other people, instead of talking behind their back – they did this and they did that, ... and psychoanalyzing people: this person, when they were in their childhood, must have done this, because look how they're acting at work. Instead of getting into this whole thing of how we're going to put other people down, even if the people do have some weaknesses or make some mistakes, we look at what they do well and comment on those things to them and to other people.

Be specific in our praises

And when we praise people, it's good to be specific. Instead of just saying, "Oh, you're such a wonderful person." Because that doesn't give somebody much information, does it? So it's good, when we praise, to point out specific behaviors that somebody did that we appreciated. Whatever it is. "You're a very thoughtful person because on such a day, you did this and such." Or "You paint very well because I saw such and such a picture." And so instead of this vague praise that leaves people in the middle of space, to point out the things that they do well.

And especially with children, I think this is very effective. Because if you just say to a kid, "Oh you're a good boy." "You're a good girl." It doesn't tell them much. Because you might be thinking of something that they did yesterday and they're thinking of something that they did half an hour ago, and they don't know what they did was good, what it is that you're pleased with. But especially with children, if you say, "Oh, you did your homework without me having to remind you," or "Oh, you turned off the TV set at dinner time, I'm really glad." Whatever it was, to say specifically, then it gives people – children and adults – a lot of very solid information and things that help them know exactly what pleases other people. So in our practice, to get into the habit of praising people with good qualities.

No. 45. Abandon: Not Acting with Whatever Means are Necessary According to the Circumstances to Stop Someone Who is Doing Harmful Actions

With the preceding vows, we've been talking about more peaceful ways of helping others. With the last two vows, we're talking about more forceful ways that we might use to intervene to help people. If somebody is doing something quite harmful, if peaceful methods fail to dissipate their energy, then we might have to act in very forceful ways. So this vow is saying that when there's a situation that calls for forceful intervention, but we don't intervene out of laziness or apathy or ill-will, then we transgress this vow.

For example, if one child is beating up another child, you may have to forcefully intervene and grab one of them. In our society, if somebody is harming people and beating them up, or murdering or raping, or whatever, they may have to be in prison. If somebody is doing something harmful, they may need some severe discipline. And so again, to give the discipline with a kind heart but not to avoid disciplining because we're attached to the person, or because we were apathetic towards the other person that they're harming, or something like that. So there are situations where forceful energy is called for and we need to do that with kindness.

And so you'll see in the monasteries, for example, in the Tibetan system, they often ordain little boys and little girls, who enter the monastery when they are seven, eight, nine, ten years old. Now they're not little angels. They will do the regular childhood pranks and they will get beaten sometimes. And at first you might be shocked to see – in the monastery and with all these people meditating on compassion – that they're beating the kids. But you have to look very much at the motivation. I'm not saying that they all get beaten up out of compassion. It depends very much on the person who is doing it. But there might be a certain situation in a particular culture where that behavior (of beating somebody) fits. Or of forcefully intervening. Or of loudly scolding somebody and yelling at somebody to get a point across. Or restricting their physical movement.

So there might be certain situations where that's helpful, and so this vow is talking about doing that, but doing it with a compassionate heart, not with a mind that's full of revenge. So for example, in a criminal justice system, if we want to lock people up because "These people are so evil. They hurt so many people and they deserve to suffer in prison!", that's not what we're talking about here because that kind of motivation is wishing other people suffering, it's not what bodhisattva training is about. On the other hand, you might say, "Well, these people, they definitely have some kind of very harmful behavior pattern, and to protect the other people who might be their victims, and to protect them from creating

more negative karma, then we need to imprison them.” So you might imprison them, but it’s with a compassionate attitude, not one that’s wishing them harm. It’s a big difference.

No. 46. Abandon: Not Using Miraculous Powers if One Possesses This Ability, In Order to Stop Others from Doing Unwholesome Actions

That’s one vow I know I won’t break [laughter]. What it’s saying is if you have miraculous abilities, some kind of psychic powers, and the situation calls for them, then to use them in that situation if it’s for the benefit of others, if it would stop harm or inspire faith, or something like that. So one should try and do this. On the other hand, the lamas emphasize too that if you have psychic abilities or whatever, not to be flamboyant, but to keep them very closely guarded and not let other people know. Because sometimes it just creates more misunderstandings for people.

Okay, so those are the bodhisattva vows – the 46 secondary vows.

Q&A session

[Audience:] Why are they saying what not to do instead of what to do?

The “what to do” is inferred. But the “what not to do” is like saying something quite specific. It’s pointing out the very specific behavior that’s to be abandoned, so it doesn’t leave it nebulous and vague. It’s pointing out something quite specific to abandon, and then from that, you can generalize the more broader thing of what to do. We can see this, like if somebody says “Be kind to others.” “Oh yeah, that sounds good, be kind to others.” But if somebody says, “Don’t insult somebody and avoid kicking them.” Then it’s like giving very specific ways about how to be kind to them.

[Audience:] Can you really beat somebody with a good motivation?

Remember we talked earlier in the bodhisattva vows, there’s one about not doing one of the ten negative actions if it’s actually for the benefit of others (Auxiliary vow 11: (To Abandon) Not doing non-virtuous actions of body and speech with loving-compassion when circumstances deem it necessary in order to benefit other)? And so the question comes: could you kill Adolf Hitler with a good motivation? So there, it gets a bit touchy. You have to look at your mind quite clearly, and there’re two kinds of motivation. There’s what’s called the causal motivation, and the motivation at the time of the action. It might be that the causal motivation is good, but the motivation at the time of the action is a harsh one. What’s important is that the causal motivation is good, and that you try and make the motivation at the time of the action also as good as possible.

It’s the same thing: can we give negative feedback to somebody with kindness? It’s something to check up. Yes, we can have a positive motivation in giving the negative feedback, and at the time that we do it, unless we’re bodhisattvas, it’s quite easy for a little bit of “Now I got you!” to sneak in there. So to pay attention to that. Be careful.

And don’t get me wrong. I’m not advocating beating children. [laughter]

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>