

Nine Considerations and Criteria for Benefiting Beings

By

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English translation by Karen Liljenberg
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A Bodhisattva¹ acts to benefit beings in the following ways.

All Bodhisattvas who genuinely take the Bodhisattva vow of ethical discipline do nothing but act either directly or indirectly for the benefit of beings. However, if one is not skilful in benefiting them, no matter how much one does, it may possibly not benefit beings, but actually cause them direct or indirect harm. Therefore, you should consider these Nine Considerations and Criteria when you act for others' benefit:-

1) Consideration of the benefit to both oneself and others

Anything that would be of direct or indirect help and benefit to both yourself and others should be done.

Anything that would not benefit but harm both you and others, directly or indirectly, should not be done.

Anything that would benefit you but cause harm to other beings should not be done.

If something would harm you but help others, act in accordance with your situation. If you are a beginner, the main thing is to protect yourself from harm. Like the shoot of a medicinal plant, protecting yourself from harm will be the source of benefit to others. If you are a Bodhisattva at the stage of "devoted conduct"², weigh up the priorities. From the point of obtaining the Bodhisattva levels³, the main thing is to act solely for others' benefit.

You should also examine the amount of help or harm that would be caused. If, directly or indirectly, it would be of considerable help to others and little harm to yourself, you should act to benefit them. If it would be of little help to others but would seriously harm you, do not act. If the amount of help and harm would be equal, act accordance with your situation. If you are a beginner, mainly protect yourself from harm. From the stage of "devoted conduct" up, mainly act to help others.

2) Consideration of the status of beings

If something would benefit lower beings such as animals but harm higher ones such as humans and so on, do not act for the benefit of the lower. Even if an action would harm some animals, if it would benefit humans and the like, then act for the benefit of humans. As above for ordinary

people and practitioners of Dharma. Among practitioners, it is the same as above for those such as Shravakas⁴ and Bodhisattvas.

3) Consideration of the number of beings.

If many beings would be helped and few harmed, you should act to benefit the many. But if many would be harmed and few helped, do not act. If the numbers and the help and harm would be equal, by relying on teachings of skilful methods of protection from harm, you will succeed in helping.

4) Consideration of this and future lives.

If it would benefit others in both this life and those to come, you should act to benefit them, absolutely. If it would benefit neither life, you should never act. If it would help in this life but harm in future ones, do not act. Even if it would harm in this life, if it would help in the next, being skilful with methods to protect this life from harm you should act to benefit the next.

5) Consideration of vows and non-virtue.

Even though you may hold vows of ethical conduct, if some sentient beings would be greatly aided and benefited solely by you committing a negative action, then, for the sake of others, and since it would be a training in spiritual accomplishment, you should act, committing any of the Ten Negative Actions⁵.

And if you should see someone thinking of committing many "actions with immediate result"⁶, such as killing numerous Shravakas, Pratyekabuddhas⁷, or Bodhisattvas merely for the sake of some petty material goods, while you avoid the karmic result, even taking their life with a loving motivation would not be a negative action, but would actually accrue a great deal of merit⁸.

If a Bodhisattva has the power, and sees robbers and such like stealing many offerings to shrines or monastic goods, with a loving attitude he should reappropriate them and restore them to their place in the monastery or shrine.

In that way, the action of a Bodhisattva who takes what is not given, and also of a Bodhisattva who, out of compassion, engages in sexual

intercourse with a laywoman who has no spouse and is tormented by sexual desire, although nominally negative, count as virtuous.

Also, uttering various falsehoods, if as a means to save many beings' lives, or to prevent them being captured and having their limbs cut off, and so on; out of loving kindness, disparaging and spreading discord to separate people from false spiritual guides and non-virtuous friends who they have become attached to; if talking calmly does not deter them, speaking very harshly to and humiliating, out of love, those who have fallen into error and negative behaviour; if someone is very stressed and miserable, and enjoys such pleasures as song, dance, music, joking chit-chat and so on, then, out of love, cheering them up with various kinds of idle talk - dancing, singing, playing various kinds of music, and teasing banter - these actions lead to virtue and are not an occasion for committing the Three Negative Mental Actions⁹, it is said. Rather, they become an exercise in accomplishing others' benefit.

If you see destitute people or beggars, and you have no items that you can give them yourself, but see a rich and miserly person, and take this miser's food and goods by various means, motivated by love, and give them to the poor, this covetous wondering about and longing for another's food and goods; acting to destroy some people who have become dangerously hostile to teachers, the Sangha, and so on - to the Three Jewels¹⁰ - out of a fierce wish to harm their bodies, and their lives; sometimes teaching a "Wrong View"¹¹ to those who are devoted to wrong Views and conduct, out of love and for their benefit, in order that, by teaching them the Wrong View, they may be brought under your control and drawn towards the Correct View; all of these ten actions are not negative, and, on the contrary, accrue a great deal of merit.

As it says in the "Twenty Verses on the Vows"¹², "There is no non-virtue in whoever has a loving heart".

If such a basis of non-virtue might later become a cause of quarrelling, or of strife among the Sangha, or might destroy the faith of many people of faith and cause Wrong Views to develop, since one is a beginner, one should not act.

6) Consideration of the pros and cons of generosity.

This has four parts:

1. Consideration of the pros and cons of material giving.

If you see some poor beings and you have some material thing that you can give, and would not yourself be harmed by giving it, but would help the others, then giving whatever material goods you have to the poor you should transform non-virtuous thoughts and engage in virtuous action.

If material giving should become an obstacle to one's body or life, or one's study, contemplation and practice, and be of little benefit to others, do not give, but, however little you give, do it smilingly, taking notice of the other person with kind words, and looking them in the face.

If material giving would cause harm to yourself and help others in equal measure, or you are not able to face the other person, you should give them clothing and food as appropriate.

Furthermore, when giving material things you should note the following:

Since an ordained Bodhisattva has renounced all material possessions, they should mostly not be given by him, but mostly by lay Bodhisattvas. Also, among the ordained, those who live as isolated hermits should mostly not give, while those who frequent the towns should share whatever comes into their alms-bowl collectively with the poor.

2. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving the body.

If a Bodhisattva who is an ordinary person is begged for their body, it is not the right moment to give it, since, if it were really given it would become the work of Mara¹³, so the body is not given in reality. The whole body and individual parts should be given to sentient beings using visualization.

Once one of the Bodhisattva levels has been reached, the body should be given in reality, since it will be of great benefit to sentient beings, giving the limbs, flesh, blood, and whatever is desired. Pray that from now on, you may find and be reborn again and again, in the body of an elephant or a great fish and so on, for the sake of those beings that are carnivorous. If flesh- and-blood is made beneficial then it will become the cause of longed-for higher rebirths and liberation even for those who have eaten a Bodhisattva's flesh.

3. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving Dharma.

When it causes no problem to a Bodhisattva's meditative stability, the Dharma should be taught to appropriate people who desire it, however much they wish. If it would cause a problem to your meditative stability and if those who desire the teaching are inappropriate, it should not be taught. If it would slightly damage your meditative stability but the person who wants the teaching is appropriate, it should be taught. Even if it would cause oneself no problem, if the person who wants the teaching is someone who delights in negative actions, a scoffing non-Buddhist who just steals teachings, he should not be taught.

If one does not know a teaching, but in expectation of respect and honour from the person who desires it, pretends to know it and wilfully teaches some false, made-up thing of one's own, this is said to be an incalculably negative act, so one should not do it.

If you do know it, unless it would be tossed aside and wasted by a greedy or blasé person, you should teach it. As it is said, "Of the various kinds of generosity, giving the Dharma is the best".

4. Consideration of the pros and cons of giving protection from fear.

If a Bodhisattva possesses the power to protect sentient beings from danger, he should act to do so. If he does not, he should not act. If you have the power but it would cause harm to yourself, you should not act. Even if your power is small, if it would not harm yourself or others, you should act to protect and defend endangered beings as much as possible.

7) Consideration of beings' various levels of devotion.

Although, in general, the types, capacities and motivations of sentient beings are incredibly diverse, if summed up briefly, they fall into eight categories:-

- i. those whose merit is exhausted, lacking any faith or interest in the karmic causes and effects leading to higher rebirths and liberation
- ii. those who are interested in the karmic causes and effects leading to better rebirths in the god realm and the human realm
- iii. those interested in the Shravaka path and result
- iv. those interested in the path and result of the Pratyekabuddhas

- v. those interested in the Bodhisattva path and its result
- vi. those interested in the Great Vehicle Secret Mantra¹⁴ path and its result
- vii. those interested in the instant enlightenment of the Profound Essential Meaning¹⁵
- viii. difficult cases who are do not fall into any definite category

Thus, if one looks at those eight categories, excluding those among them whose merit is exhausted and those who are indeterminate, the other six kinds should be benefited, in accordance with their individual interest, with Dharma that is appropriate to their mind, and also with material things. They should also gradually be drawn up from the lower to the higher paths. They should not be placed onto lower paths from higher ones. Teaching that is not appropriate to someone's mind-stream should not be given.

As for those who are of the indefinite category, they should be gradually brought into the Great Vehicle. They should not be introduced to lower paths. Even those whose merit is exhausted should not be abandoned and forgotten. By giving them material things, create karmic links with them and connect with them by praying that in future they may be reborn as disciples of the Three Jewels.

8) (Summary)

Furthermore, by giving them material things, one should judge the different degrees of peoples' devotion; examining the categories of beings, the amount of food and so on that they consume, their number, their purity or impurity, their suitability or unsuitability, and the help and harm, you should act to benefit whatever beings are worthy. As Shantideva¹⁶ says, "In this way, whenever giving (Dharma), take everyone's measure". Therefore, a Bodhisattva who has supernormal perception¹⁷, or is endowed with the Dharma Eye of Transcendent Knowledge, should examine the various degrees of peoples' devotion, and employ various means to benefit them accordingly with Dharma, material things and so on.

9) Consideration of the pros and cons for one's own Dharma practice

In brief, if acting directly to benefit beings will destroy obstacles to your study, reflection and meditation, which will be the cause of indirect benefit to countless beings, then you should act to benefit beings directly as much as you are able. Having examined the extent of your direct assistance to beings and the extent of the harm to your study, contemplation and practice, come to a conclusion. If they are equal, then mainly act to benefit others. As it is said, "Don't commit major acts for minor reasons. Chiefly think of others' benefit".

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So, if one carries out whatever actions are to be done from the outcome of these Nine Considerations, and refrains from carrying out whatever should not be done, the Bodhisattva will not transgress against their vows and will be helpful and beneficial. In the event that one does not do what should be done, and does what should not be done, one's vows will be damaged.

However, if in order to accomplish something of great benefit to beings a few unwholesome acts of little benefit to yourself are let go in a state of equanimity, and then you act for the sake of beings, this is what is known as "the façade of breaking one's vows", and though to a foolish person it might look like your vows have been damaged by some faults, in your own heart there is absolutely no transgression. Or, even though it may seem to people that there is great benefit, in your own heart there is a transgression. So, giving up any façade of either breaking or not breaking your vows, use the façade of vow-keeping or vow-breaking as part of your training.

These are ways to train in the ethical discipline of benefiting sentient beings. The Three Moral Disciplines and their various aspects are also in essence one. The Three Moral Disciplines of a Bodhisattva are, in a single essence, simply the awareness that aims at benefiting beings. But the various aspects set out in order are:

i. Discipline of refraining from negative action: For the sake of sentient beings, one's own benefit is accomplished.

ii. Discipline of collecting positive actions: Both one's own benefit and that of others is accomplished.

iii. Discipline acting on behalf of sentient beings: - Others' benefit is accomplished.

Discipline of refraining from negative action should mostly be engaged in by beginners. Discipline of collecting positive actions should mostly be engaged in by the Bodhisattva engaging in "devoted conduct". Discipline acting on behalf of sentient beings should mostly be engaged in by those who have attained the Bodhisattva Levels.

Also, the First Discipline completely abandons those disagreeable things that obstruct one's own and others' benefit. The Second Discipline completes the perfect accumulation of qualities that accomplish one's own and others' benefit. The Third Discipline, if it is not accompanied by the Wisdom that realizes Non-self, runs the risk of developing the attitude of the Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, when one becomes tired of sentient beings, because it takes a long time, since their constituent elements are never exhausted, and since not even all the Buddhas of the past have been able to liberate them, and because beings, by behaving in negative ways, pay back their benefactors by causing them harm. But if, through the Wisdom that realizes Non-self¹⁸, one knows that all phenomena, on the absolute level, are without substance like the sky, one will not become sad or disillusioned.

The Discipline of collecting positive actions is in order to gather together all positive actions in the Two Accumulations¹⁹. What is called the supreme aspiration, the perfect, sublime Bodhichitta²⁰, since it realizes that oneself and others are the same in wishing for happiness and not wanting to suffer, treats others who are deluded into believing in "self" as more important.

In actuality, the Three Vows²¹, from the perspective of the Essence, are present in a concrete, unconsciously stored manner. From the perspective of the individual, for a beginner the Three Vows are present in the manner of the Absolute Meaning. For the Bodhisattva engaged in "Devoted Conduct" the Vows of Individual Liberation are present in both the manner of the Relative and the Absolute Meaning²². After attaining the Bodhisattva Levels, the Three Vows are present in the manner of the Relative Meaning, since on the level of the Absolute Meaning there is nothing to vow.

In terms of time, the Vow of Individual Liberation is present both for as long as one may live and up until one attains enlightenment. On the level of the Absolute, there are no independently-existing sentient beings to be

wandering in Samsara; it is only on the delusory, relative level that illusory sentient beings are obscured by adventitious karma and conflicting emotions. Once this merely conceptual mind has been instructed, an individual experiences the suffering of Samsara as merely an illusion, and the conceptual mind is like the dream-world of oppressive sleep.

If whatever action one does, such as giving and so on, is held with both the View of Emptiness²³ and with Compassion, it will become the cause of the state of Omniscience²⁴, or part of one's spiritual Path.

First, the Bodhisattva, applying the Three Supreme Methods²⁵, should practice Generosity²⁶ and so on, the Path of Omniscience, guided by Supreme Bodhichitta, concluding with the Supreme Aspiration, and sealed with Supreme Wisdom.

The first is as follows: because, once one has quickly attained Supreme Enlightenment for the sake of all beings, one wishes to benefit them, a stable intention to do so enters into one's mind-stream.

The meaning of the second is as in the prayer "Through this merit, may all beings attain the Omniscient state of Enlightenment",²⁷ etc.

The third seals the action by not fixating on the Three Concepts²⁸.

¹ A Bodhisattva is someone who, for the sake of all sentient beings, wishes and works to attain complete Enlightenment.

² The stage of "Devoted Conduct" is when a Bodhisattva acts out of devotion, and it encompasses the first two of the "Five Paths", successive stages on the Path of Enlightenment, which are: The Path of Accumulation, the Path of Connection, the Path of Seeing, the Path of Meditation, and the Path beyond Learning.

³ Bodhisattva levels - this refers to the ten levels of realization (*bhumi* in Sanskrit, and *sa* in Tibetan, literally "ground") reached by Bodhisattvas on the Path of Seeing, the Path of Meditation, and the Path beyond Learning.

⁴ A Shravaka (*nyan thos* in Tibetan) is a follower of the root Vehicle of Buddhism whose aim is to be liberated from Samsara, but who, unlike a Bodhisattva, does not strive to attain complete Enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

⁵ The Ten Negative Actions are: Taking life, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, sowing discord, harsh speech, worthless chatter, covetousness, maliciousness, and wrong views.

⁶ Action with immediate result - there are five actions that are said to propel a person immediately after they die into the most serious hell-realm (the hell-realms being one of the six realms of Samsara, into which beings are born or from which they emerge according to their karma, rather than a permanent state). These five actions are: Patricide, matricide, killing an Arhat (a realized Shravaka), drawing blood from a Buddha's body with evil intent, and causing a schism within the Sangha, the community of Buddhist practitioners.

⁷ A Pratyekabuddha, (in Tibetan *rang sangs rgyas*, literally "self-Buddha") is someone who finds Buddhahood by himself, without a teacher in his final life.

⁸ Merit is good karma, through positive actions of body, speech and mind.

⁹ The Three Mental Negative Actions are the last three of the Ten Negative Actions, listed above, i.e. covetousness, maliciousness, and wrong views.

¹⁰ The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. In Tibetan Buddhism the teacher or lama is often added.

¹¹ A "wrong view" is a false belief, particularly one that causes negative acts leading to further suffering.

¹² "Twenty Verses on the Vows", written by Chandragomi, 10th century C.E.

¹³ Mara is a "demon", the personification of influences that create obstacles for practice and enlightenment, in particular one's own ego-clinging.

¹⁴ The Great Vehicle, the Mahayana, is that followed by all Bodhisattvas. It is called "great" because its aim or scope is great - the enlightenment of all sentient beings. The Secret Mantra Vehicle is part of the Mahayana, and is otherwise known as the Vajrayana or Diamond Vehicle.

¹⁵ "Instant enlightenment of the profound essential meaning" is a reference to Dzogchen, which strictly speaking, is a non-gradual Path.

¹⁶ Shantideva is the author of the famous Bodhicharyavatara, or "The Way of the Bodhisattva".

¹⁷ Supernormal perceptions include divine sight, divine hearing, recollection of former lives, cognition of the minds of others, etc. These kinds of powers are regarded as merely "ordinary accomplishments" of Bodhisattvas as they attain higher levels of realization, as opposed to the "supreme accomplishment" of Enlightenment.

¹⁸ The Wisdom that realizes non-self is the wisdom which sees the lack of true, independent self-existence of the individual personality and/or of phenomena. This lack of self-existence is also, roughly, referred to as Emptiness.

¹⁹ The Two Accumulations are the accumulation of Merit and the accumulation of Wisdom. Both need to be complete in order to attain Enlightenment.

²⁰ Bodhichitta, literally the mind of enlightenment, in the relative sense is the wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings. On the absolute level, it is direct insight into the true nature of the mind and phenomena.

²¹ The Three Vows are the Pratimoksha Vow of Individual Liberation, the Bodhisattva Vow, and the Secret Mantra or Vajrayana Vows.

²² The Absolute Meaning - the ultimate truth, realized by those who are enlightened. The Relative meaning - the provisional or conventionally-agreed truth as understood by beings in Samsara.

²³ The View of Emptiness and with compassion - these two correspond to Wisdom and Merit, the Two Accumulations.

²⁴ The state of Omniscience is a term for Enlightenment.

²⁵ The Three Supreme Methods for any practice are: beginning with the compassionate motivation of bodhichitta, practising without concepts and ego-clinging (see Three Concepts, below), and ending with the dedication of the merit to the Enlightenment of all beings.

²⁶ Generosity and so on - this refers to the Six Transcendent Actions (or Six Paramitas), which are: generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, concentration and wisdom. These six comprise Bodhichitta in application.

²⁷ The full prayer is as follows: "Through this merit, may all beings attain the omniscient state of enlightenment, and conquer the enemy of faults and delusion. May they all be liberated from this ocean of Samsara and from its pounding waves of birth, old age, sickness and death".

²⁸ The Three Concepts, (in Tibetan '*khor gsum*, literally "three spheres") are those of subject, object, and action, (wrongly) viewed as having a real, unchanging, independent existence.