
Verse 1: Always Hold Others as Dear and Precious

*By thinking of all sentient beings
As more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel
For accomplishing the highest aim,
I will always hold them dear.*

Every genuine dharma practitioner should hold fully to an aspiration like this: “I will think of all sentient beings who inhabit the three realms and are wandering in samsara, they are more precious than the wish-fulfilling gem; for this reason, I am determined to work for the ultimate benefits and well-being of all sentient beings, who I will always hold as dear and precious. This I will do gladly.”

a. Why sentient beings are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel?

The wish-fulfilling gem can only grant us temporary benefits, such as the treasures of property and money. It does not have the power to grant us the greatest benefit, which is ultimate nirvana. For this, we can look to the countless sentient beings who, in themselves, comprise a sublime field of merit. If we plant the seed of Bodhi in this fertile field, it will bring to us a harvest of both temporary worldly happiness, in the near term, as well as the eventual, transcendent, ultimate happiness.

For instance, with respect to the paramita of generosity, which is one of the six paramitas: if there were no sentient beings, there would be no focus for the practice of giving, which would mean that there would be no way for us to carry out an act of generosity. As for the paramita of discipline, since disturbing emotions arise due to sentient beings, there would be no way for vowed discipline to be conducted to counteract disturbing emotions if there were no human beings involved.

Furthermore, in the case of the paramita of patience, as Shantideva has said: “Transcendent patience does not come to be, when harm is absent.” If there were no sentient beings feeling resentment, there would be no patience that could be practiced, nor would there be the merit of patience. The list goes on; the paramitas of diligence, concentration, and wisdom, can only be completed by relying on sentient beings. If there were no sentient beings, there would be no perfecting of the six paramitas and the ten thousand performances of a Bodhisattva, and so the attaining of unsurpassed Buddhahood would merely be a dream too far away to be reached.

We should, therefore, work to fulfill both the temporary aspirations and ultimate aspirations of sentient beings through our spiritual practices, which include, holding a caring and cherishing mind towards sentient beings in every minute, in every second, of everyday life. Practitioners with such qualities can be considered to have a true mind of loving kindness and great compassion; such a mind is the true manifestation of the spirit of Mahayana, known as Bodhicitta.

b. The usual pitfall of ordinary dharma practitioners

The great Kadampa masters of the past, like Geshe Langri Tangpa, all had a noble morality and a virtuous personality. These are things that the Mahayana practitioners of today should endeavor to learn. Otherwise, the aspiration to become a Bodhisattva, or a Buddha, will only remain as empty words. It is a great pity that in today's society, most people, regardless of whether they are Buddhists or not, lack a noble personality, not to mention to have a Mahayana Bodhicitta mind!

Even among dedicated Buddhist practitioners, there are those who have shown extremely incorrect attitudes towards sentient beings. While, on the one hand, they may often treat sentient beings with anger and aversion, or may even act as if sentient beings were their enemies; at the same time, on the other hand, they may harbor in their mind, reverence and respect for the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Shantideva, in his *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, questioned this behavior by asking, "What kind of practice is it, then, that honors only Buddhas, but not sentient beings?" Instructions like– "You should only respect Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but not sentient beings"– can never be found in any of the Buddhist teachings. Shantideva criticized this incorrect behavior by asking this question.

If one is unable to manage such a great deed as fulfilling the aspirations of sentient beings, and always holding them to be dear and precious, even though he may seek the Dharma everywhere, his practice will definitely not be rewarded with success. There is a story that illustrates this in the sutra:

Once upon a time, there were a father and a son who were in possession of a wish-fulfilling gem. One day, while they were on a journey, the father became tired and wanted to take a short nap. Before laying down, he said to his son: "Take good care of the wish-granting gem, and during my nap, be sure not to give it to anyone." Soon after, the father closed his eyes and fell asleep. A short while later, a band of thieves came walking up the road. Seeing the child sitting there holding the wish-fulfilling gem, they demanded that he give it to them. The child replied: "I cannot give it to you because just before my father fell asleep, he told me not to give the wish-fulfilling gem to anyone." One of the thieves reached into his pocket and pulled out a bag of candy and held one of the sweet morsels out to the boy. "The shiny stone that you are holding is useless to you, but these candies are sweet and you can eat as many as you like right now. Come on, let's make a trade." The child looked longingly at the bag of candy in the thieves' hand and after only a moment of hesitation, handed over the wish-fulfilling gem in exchange for the bag of candy. When the father woke up, and heard that the son had traded the wish-fulfilling gem of all the magical properties for a simple bag of candy, he was very upset and disappointed.

Dharma practice is the same: once you have abandoned its essential principal, even if you receive some minor sense of happiness, you will never realize its greatest benefits. For example, if you judge one sentient being as inferior and another as unattractive, if you feel anger or resentment towards them, then you have abandoned the Bodhicitta mind and your so-called spiritual practice will bring very little, if any, true merit.

When we read the biographies of great spiritual masters in India, the Tibetan region, or the Han region, either in the past or in the present, we find that their minds and behavior, without exception, explicitly display the kind of great compassion that cherishes all sentient

beings and seeks to fulfill all of their aspirations. So here we can see that what this verse talks about is the ultimate, and the most sublime, pith instruction in Mahayana practice, that of benefiting sentient beings.