

46 Auxiliary Vows: No. 35 to 40
by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 1 Sep 93

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Review of Auxiliary Vow 35: (To Abandon) Not helping those who are in need

We've been discussing the Bodhisattva practices. Particularly here the Bodhisattva vows as guidelines that help us steer our energy in a proper direction in this life so that we can really act for the benefit of others. This last group of precepts from Number 35 to 46 is specifically to eliminate obstacles to the ethics of benefiting others. We have talked about the first couple of those: Not helping those who are in need. In other words, when people need things, to help them. And not make up our lazy excuses like finding ten million other "better" things, i.e. more pleasant things that I want to do, as excuses why we can't do it.

Review of Auxiliary Vow 36: (To Abandon) Avoiding taking care of the sick

Number 36 is: Avoiding taking care of the sick. Often we avoid taking care of the sick not only because it's too much trouble and we're lazy, but because somehow their illness reminds us of our own mortality. And because we don't want to look at our own mortality and look at the essence of our own life, and at the transience of cyclic existence, we just want to avoid people who are sick. Basically it is a way of avoiding a part of our own experience, which is that we have a body that will get old and sick and die.

So when we find ourselves in situations where our mind is really avoiding taking care of the sick, instead of building up lots of defenses and excuses and reasons why we can't, we can sit down on our cushion, and look at what's going on in our mind and really be honest with ourselves. Because if we can tap into that fear of suffering that we have ourselves and really acknowledge it, then it ceases to be so terrifying and so fearful. And if at the same time, we really think about the four noble truths, we recognize that this is the nature of cyclic existence. And recognizing exactly this gives juice and energy to our practice. So instead of being overwhelmed by that fear, we can really energize our practice. Because this shows us how important it is to follow the three higher trainings, to really purify our minds and gain the realizations that will lead to liberation and enlightenment. But we can't transform it if we can't acknowledge it, if we can't face it. And so that's why when we feel that resistance in ourselves, when we don't want to go near sick people or take care of them, we need to look at what's really going on in our minds.

Auxiliary Vow 37: (To Abandon) Not alleviating the suffering of others

Number 37 is: Not alleviating the suffering of others. People have suffering, problems or difficulties of one kind or another. They might have physical difficulties. They might be blind or deaf or paralyzed, have mental difficulty either in terms of retardation or different mental illnesses. They may have economic difficulties, or social difficulties. They may be looked

down upon. They may have lost their jobs. They may have lost their social status. Maybe their family has been shamed by the whole community. Or a scandal has broken out. People suffer from an incredible number of different things. Either being abused by others or they suffer from their own guilty conscious from having abused others. Or people live in fear and suspicion and paranoia. There are many different kinds of suffering. And so, whenever we can, if we have the skills and the ability, we can help. Of course, this precept is not saying that we have to become Mr. or Miss Fix-it. Bodhisattva precepts do not mean our American habit of "Let's fix everything."

It's real interesting when you come back here after living abroad. We have this idea in this country, "Oh, I'm sorry. Problems just shouldn't exist! I've got to get in there and fix the situation! It can't be like this. I'm going to go in there. I'm going to raise all hell and we're going to fix it and it's going to be all okay from now on. Amen." And we have this attitude. It's like we feel that if we don't have this attitude, then we're completely lazy. So we vacillate between these two extremes of I'm going to fix everybody else's problems (even though I can't even fix my own, and I don't understand theirs, but that's besides the point, I'm still going to fix it!), or we fall into the other extreme of total despair: "I can't do anything. The whole world's screwed!"

So we vacillate between these two extremes. And I think what Buddhism is saying here is as much as possible try to alleviate the suffering of others with wisdom. And just go slowly. Look at the situation. What really is the suffering? What is the cause of the suffering? What actually is the remedy to it? Because sometimes we fix the external symptoms but we don't change the root cause. Sometimes all we can do is fix the external symptoms. Sometimes we make it worse by fixing the symptom and not looking at the cause. So we have to really go slow and assess things. And recognize that we can't march into something and create a new world order. It just shows so clearly in our national policy, doesn't it? "We're going to create the new world order." We don't ask other countries for input on what they like that new world order to be. But we just go in there and we want to fix it. And in the course of it, we had several blunders along the way.

So acting to remove the suffering of others is a different kind of attitude than just fixing problems because we can't endure them. It's really understanding what's going on. Having some kind of understanding that goes together with the compassion that will really see the possibilities of the situation. And recognize that often, changing something requires an incredible amount of time. That it isn't a matter of making a new law or giving somebody a loan, or setting up a new school that's going to change all the problems in the community or in somebody's life. But it's going to really take time and support from many different directions. But here, what this vow is referring to is, if we're capable of it, if we have the time, (in other words, we're not doing anything that's crucial and more important), if we have the resources, then without falling prey to laziness or pride or anger, we give the help that we can give.

Sometimes, like if we have a grudge against somebody, when they want help, we say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't do that." We feel so good we have our pet little excuse why we can't help somebody who once has slighted us. So that kind of thing would be a transgression of this guideline.

Auxiliary Vow 38: (To Abandon) Not explaining what is proper conduct to those who are reckless

Then Number 38 is: Not explaining what is proper conduct to those who are reckless. This is when people don't understand what is ethical behavior, or what is unethical behavior. When people don't understand what is conducive and beneficial for happiness and what isn't, try to

help them as much as we can. In a previous precept, in Number 16, we have “Not correcting one’s own deluded actions or not helping others to correct theirs”. So there seems to be some similarity between that one and this one: Not explaining what is proper conduct is to those who are reckless. And again, different teachers have different ways of interpreting the difference between these two. One teacher says that Number 16 is referring to correcting people’s disturbing attitudes and pointing those out to people, whereas Number 38 is concerned more with their external behavior. Another lama has a different take on it and says that Number 16 is more concerned with specific, really heavy actions that somebody is doing that causes suffering, whereas Number 38 is more just reckless actions that don’t cause that much severe suffering but do create minor problems and chaos.

My own feeling about the wording of the vows is that Number 16 is referring again to things that a person is doing, whereas Number 38 is referring to when people don’t even know what is beneficial and not beneficial. And here, I think of guiding the young people, children and adolescents. This vow isn’t just going in and jumping in and telling people how to run their lives, or giving unwanted advice, but it’s rather thinking how to communicate this with people.

What is a good way to give people advice so that they can use it to reflect on their own actions and improve themselves? This is really hard in the West, especially here. Look at our own minds. We don’t like anybody to tell us what to do, do we? As soon as somebody comes and tells us what to do, what do we do? We say, “Who are you? Mind your own business! Pot calling a kettle black isn’t it?” We don’t like to be told anything. We do not like even if somebody with compassion comes to us and points out some incredible gross mistake or negative karma we’re doing. We don’t want to listen. We get really angry and upset and defensive, telling them they’re bossy and pushy and they should mind their own business.

If we act like that, and we’re Dharma practitioners, then what about other people who aren’t Dharma practitioners? I don’t know. Maybe they act better than us! If you look, our own mind sometimes is so tough and so of course, if we’re like that and we try and help others, very often in this culture, what we meet with is people with very tough minds who’re basically just like us and don’t like to be told anything. And so it’s a very delicate thing how to explain proper conduct to those who are reckless. If it’s an adult, then you really have to think of how to do it skillfully.

I asked in the Tibetan monasteries, how do they do that, like if one monastic is misbehaving. And what they do is, if there is a close relationship, sometimes they just tell the person directly. And sometimes what they do is, they just talk generally to that person and say, “Oh, this person over here is doing blah, blah,” kind of pointing out that behavior in another person, without pointing it out to this person, him- or herself is actually doing it. Or talking in a group situation and leaving everybody to get it themselves. Or using some of the skills of assertiveness but with a lot of gentleness and really owning it ourselves. And so these are ways of getting it across.

So it requires a great deal of skill here. But basically we should try to avoid the mental attitude that out of apathy towards another person, or anger, or laziness, or pride, or whatever, we don’t try and show them a path that is good for their own welfare. And really here for kids, I think this is really essential and since kids often don’t yet have the “Don’t tell me how to run my life” attitude, although they generally get that way quickly if parents are a certain way. If parents let the kids run the house, what do the kids do? They rise to the occasion! But I think especially with kids, it is important to really explain things to them. Why do we do this? To help children see if you do this, what’s the result; and if you do that, what’s the result. So that kids really begin to understand and develop their own wisdom. Sometimes in Buddhism, we think we have become Mickey Mouse Bodhisattvas and think,

"I've just got to make everybody happy. That means I can't discipline my kids, because whenever I discipline my kids, they become unhappy. So I'm just going to give them everything they want." And that's not very compassionate towards the child because then they become like us, completely spoilt and unable to function. I'm joking, by the way. (laughter). But I think it's really beneficial here to guide kids and really get them to think about things.

Audience: How do we know which is a beneficial way to correct others?

Ven: Well, sit down on our cushion and try and figure it out. Or just share the dilemma with somebody else. It depends very much on the situation and who it is, and what is going on. But sometimes it's just helpful to share with another person about, "I'm really stuck. I look at it this way and I look at it that way. What do you think? What are other factors?" I think that's when Dharma friends can be really helpful for us.

Auxiliary Vow 39: (To Abandon) Not benefiting in return those who have benefited oneself

Then Number 39: Not benefiting in return those who have benefited oneself. It is not repaying the kindness that other people have shown us. As somebody who's meditating on Bodhicitta, we're trying to see all beings as having been kind to us. Because all beings have been our parents in previous lives. All beings do different functions in the society and we're inter-related and they help us. So in that way we try to repay the kindness of others because everybody has been kind to us. And again to understand what it means to repay their kindness. It doesn't always mean going around being goody-two-shoes. And sometimes we might even get completely fanatic. "How do I repay their kindness? I don't know what to do!"

We have to recognize that doing our practice is repaying the kindness of others. We shouldn't think that the only way to repay kindness is to run around and fix things. Just doing our practice and generating the altruistic intention with our practice can be a very good way of repaying the kindness of others. Because before we can do things physically and verbally to help people, we have to get our own mind clear and our own intentions clear and understand things deeply ourselves. So taking time to sit on our cushion and looking at our own mind and processing what's going on in our life and thinking about things, and discussing them with friends can be a way of repaying the kindness of others. Another way is making prayers for people. If we can't do something, we can make prayers. We can do different virtuous practices. We might do prostrations and dedicate it for all beings, and especially for them. We might make offerings and dedicate it especially for them. Or we can do the Chenresig practice, or request the community to do the Chenresig practice. So repaying the kindness of others can be done in many, many ways.

Although all sentient beings have benefited us, this vow is also pointing out to us to pay special attention to repay the kindness of people who have really benefited us especially in this lifetime. That doesn't mean becoming partial to them. It doesn't mean, "These people, they're my friends and they have been kind to me this lifetime. So I'm going to repay their kindness and benefit them because they've helped me." It doesn't mean becoming partial in that way, just to the people who we like and who have been nice to us. It's not closing our minds off to other people and just helping them. But it's reminding us not to ignore the very direct benefit that other people give us, and appreciating that. This helps us to expand, to recognize the more subtle benefits that we've received from other people who maybe we don't know in this particular lifetime. So here when we're talking about repaying the kindness of specific people who've helped us in this lifetime, it is not to make us more attached to them or to make us people-pleasers or to make us more biased towards them. But to use them as an example and then from there extend that open heart to others.

Very often the people who we receive the most direct benefit from, because we're in such regular contact with them, we take them for granted, and we don't recognize their kindness and we don't repay their kindness because they're always around. Look at the people we live with and all those little kindnesses in the living situation – people taking out the garbage or doing the dishes or sweeping or answering the phone for us or doing any number of little things – but because we see that person all the time, we don't appreciate that kindness that they're showing.

Or, often, we forget the kindness of our relatives who have helped us – the kindness of our parents, the kindness of our teachers, or the kindness of our bosses who gave us the job, or who keep us on at the job. So be aware of the various ways in which people have really benefited us, and to take care of those people specifically and then from there, generate it out to others.

I think that this involves basic manners. One thing that I'm continually amazed at, is how people don't say thank you, or how they don't acknowledge receiving gifts. Like you give somebody something. You sent it to them. And they never write a thank-you note saying it arrived. So you're sitting there going, "Did this gift arrive or not arrive?" This is something for us to look at. When people send us things, do we write and say "Thank you"? Do we even acknowledge that they sent us some money or they sent us a Christmas present or a birthday present? I think this is incredibly important. And also for DFF as an organization. I think when people make special donations or go out of their way, it's really important for us to say "Thank you." And not just, "Oh yeah, we're all working so hard, so thanks for chipping in." Or just kind of tuning it out, "Well, it's about time you added something to the group energy." But really appreciate that we exist due to the kindness of others.

When I was a child, whenever somebody gave me something, my mother made me sit down and write a "Thank-you" note. And I'm so appreciative of her now for making me do that because it's made me so much more aware of these kinds of things. And so to really look in our life and acknowledging these things - when a colleague works overtime for us or takes some extra added pressure off of our back, or somebody fills in for us, or watches our kids. To at least say "Thank you" and really try and repay that kindness by doing something for them.

And again often towards our parents, "It's mum's and dad's job to take care of me! I'm their kid. It's their job to take care of me. But they shouldn't take care of me when I don't want to be taken care of. But when I want to be taken care of, it's their job." And we don't think so much about what we can do for our parents, even small things. Helping them out with this or that. Even small things can be incredible kindness.

I was so surprised. Several years ago, my mother had surgery. I went down and I saw her in the hospital because I don't live near my folks. And when it was the day to check out of the hospital, she had a few articles there and so I put them in her little bag and got them in the car. And it was amazing. I heard her afterwards telling all her friends, "Oh, do you know how helpful my daughter was?" I didn't do anything. It was some small thing but because she was sick and in the hospital and recovering from surgery, it became a big thing in her eyes. In my eyes, it's nothing. But just to be aware of those things. When our parents or older people need just that small kind of help that we can give. So with this again, do we through anger, or laziness, or not being conscientious, then not repay the kindness of others?

Audience: Does this vow apply only to people within the Buddhist community or others and is it our interpretation of the vows versus their interpretation?

Ven: It depends very much on the situation. There're certain things where it doesn't matter whether somebody is in the Buddhist community or not. We can give suggestions for conduct or behavior that can be helpful for them. Again it's depending very much on the relationship we have with the person and the situation. If it's something that's in terms of interpretation of vows, we can raise the issue with somebody else. If somebody else has the same precept that we do, and it seems like maybe they are doing something that isn't so right, then to raise it up and say, "Well, you know, this is kind of how I understood the vow to mean. What do you understand it to mean?" Or bringing it up in a community setting with many people to discuss what the meaning of the vow is. Or asking the teacher who gave it. It's not becoming moralistic and judgmental. Because if we're like that, that kind of attitude clearly shows through and it really puts people off and it generally makes them do the exact opposite. Or it makes them feel very guilty and resentful. So it's without a moralistic attitude. But you know, raise the point, raise the question and get people thinking about this.

Auxiliary Vow 40: (To Abandon) Not relieving the sorrow or distress of others

And then next one is Number 40: Not relieving the sorrow or distress of others. Maybe somebody is grieving because they've lost somebody that's dear to them. Maybe they have lost their job. Maybe they have had a traumatic thing happen in their life. Maybe they are refugees. People in distress. People who are filled with sorrow and anguish. Then trying to do what we can to alleviate that.

And so here, it's actually quite helpful, I think, to do some reading about social problems and stuff. I've begun to do some reading about trauma and what happens in abuse. Simply because it just helps you understand where people are coming from. It helps a great deal trying to figure out what it means to console people who've had different things happen to them.

And for example, somebody who's going in the hospital for surgery on cancer. It isn't necessarily consoling them to say, "Oh, everything will be perfectly all right. You will be up and out of the hospital two days after surgery." Consoling people doesn't mean lying to them. It doesn't mean being falsely optimistic. I think we can address the situation and be optimistic but also be realistic at the same time without giving people false hopes. Without saying, "Oh, I know everybody in your family died but don't worry, you'll get over it in a month and you'll be alright."

Sometimes the best way to console people is just to listen to them. Let them recount their story. And in that recounting, there can be real healing for them. And sometimes, asking questions, or guiding the recounting of their story so that they can see it in a certain way. So it's not just "I am telling my story to this person and I'm telling it to this other person, and I am telling it to the next 49 people along the street!" Because telling our story isn't necessarily healing and it can actually be creating another ego identity that we get very attached to. So sometimes in the process of consoling, we need to listen. Sometimes we need to come in and present other viewpoints that can help people go beyond too much identification with the problem. Sometimes we can refer them to other people. Or give them books written by people who have experienced similar things to what they've experienced because often it's very helpful for people to know that other people have gone through what they're going through and have been healed from it. That can be very inspiring. So that can be a way of consoling them.

So we try to do our best. But again recognizing that it's not a thing of "Here's somebody in this incredible anguish and I'm going to come in and make it all better. I'm going to put a Band-Aid on it so they don't feel the pain." We can't even control our own emotions, let alone control somebody else's. So people are going to feel what they're going to feel. But if

we can give them some encouragement or give a different viewpoint, or lend an ear, then that can really help them. But recognize that some of these things take time. And that with different people, it's going to be really different how you console them. Some people, you can really see where they're stuck and if you have a really close relationship, you can go right in there! I've seen my teacher do that sometimes with just that kind of situations. And if you have that kind of relationship, sometimes somebody might come in and go zoom! It really hurts at first. But in the end you realize it's actually right. So some situations we have to do that.

Other situations, it's more a thing of gently nudging somebody on, or giving them some support, or something like that. So what we're talking about here isn't any specific technique, but more an awareness of the situation, "How I can console those who are distressed? How can I repay the kindness of others? How can I help alleviate suffering?" It really involves some sensitivity to each situation and some creativity in each situation.