

46 Auxiliary Vows: No. 1 to No. 5
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Contents (click on any heading to view text)

- Preface
 - *Death: The Teacher of Impermanence*
 - *Dropping the Guilt Trips and 'Shoulds'*
 - *Letting Go of Self-denial*
 - *The Integration of Daily Life with Spiritual Life*
- The 46 Auxiliary Bodhisattva Vows
 - *No.1 - No.7: Vows to Eliminate Obstacles to the Far-reaching Attitude of Generosity*
 - No. 1: Abandon: Not Making Offerings to the Three Jewels
 - No. 2. Abandon: Acting Out Selfish Thoughts of Desire
 - No. 3. Abandon: Not Respecting One's Elders
 - No. 4. Abandon: Not answering Sincerely Asked Questions That One is Capable of Answering
 - No. 5. Abandon: Not Accepting Invitations From Others
- Conclusion

Preface

Death: The Teacher of Impermanence

I hadn't planned on talking about this but somehow it is coming out from my mouth. I was going to talk about it later. On Friday, I went to visit a person who is a Buddhist and has AIDS. He has become a hospice patient and is very much requesting help from the Buddhist communities in terms of meditating with him and, especially, reading to him; also some practical things around the house and maybe taking him out for a walk. So if people are interested, please talk to me afterwards. I have a little list and I think Lee will gather everybody together and describe the situation. Going to meet him made me think very much about the whole transience of life. He is 45 and he knows he is going to die soon. Of course it's always *mañana, mañana, ...* even if one has a terminal illness. We never feel like we are going to die now, it's always going to be later somehow.

And I just got news today, too, that another person from the Buddhist community has AIDS-related lymphoma. The doctor told him he has three months unless he does chemotherapy and then maybe he has nine. And it hit me, listening to that, "How would that feel, if that were me?" For so long we meditate on death and impermanence. "Oh yes, I am going to die. Oh, yes, my life is so useful and yes, I really understand that," but always somewhere in the back of the mind, ego has its little thing that is always saying, "Yes, it's not really going to happen to me, or if it does, it's not really for a long time. I'm never going to get the news that I have three months to live. That just happens to other people." Somewhere at the back of the mind, ego's always playing that story. And it really hit me. That day when the doctor tells you and when you cannot get around that, when ego cannot do its usual denial trip, then how do you feel? "Oh, only three months left." This whole life. This whole ego identity I've been building up. All my possessions that I have been accumulating. All my reputation, my popularity and everything that I have been working so hard at. I've got to give that up in three months. And then I think not only just this thing of giving: "Ok, I've got to give that up, okay, that'll manage." But, then, only three months left to practice the dharma. Panic! "Oh! Only three months left." It's really making me think a lot.

This is precisely why the Buddha taught the meditation on death and why it was the first in the whole teaching on impermanence. Because, if we can somehow really get it in the heart then we are not going to freak out and the ego isn't always back there saying, "No, this is not really going to happen." It'll just be basically something that we've already known and accepted the whole time. To use that understanding, not to feel hopeless and depressed but, rather, to feel full of hope and to know that life really has some meaning and some purpose. And to really use that understanding to clear away a lot of the things that usually drive us nuts, all the usual things we get so worried and anxious about. So, I think, within the next few months, a little group, or whoever wants to get involved, will have that opportunity with at least two other people in the Buddhist community to help with their dying processes and to use what they are going through as something we can learn from. Because sometimes that's the greatest gift that people give us.

Dropping the Guilt Trips and 'Shoulds'

I want to talk, too--because we have been talking so much about the Bodhisattva practice of cherishing others more than ourselves--about the fact that it's real easy at this point for people to get into guilt-tripping themselves, "Oh, I am so selfish, I am so selfish. Look how awful I am," and pushing and pushing, "I should do more, I should do more!" But, that's coming more from guilt and "should" and obligation than it is from genuine love and compassion. So we have to really make sure we do the meditations on love and compassion and not just jump to the conclusion of the meditation. Because if we jump to the conclusion, we wind up with the "shoulds" of "I *should* take better care of everybody else than myself." But we don't really feel that and then we develop this internal civil war. And that's because we're just going to the conclusion. But if we really go through the steps of the meditation, and really do this thing of equalizing self and others and really consider the disadvantages of the self-centeredness and really consider the advantages of taking care of others, then when we come to the conclusion, we are not going to have an internal civil war but, instead, it's going to be a very natural heart-felt conclusion. So having done it wrong a number of years, I am trying to help you benefit from my internal civil war. [Laughter] So really do the meditation and don't get into obligation and guilt.

Letting Go of Self-denial

And, also, at the same time we are talking about benefiting others, it's really important that we don't fall into the extreme of neglecting ourselves. One thing that those of us who grew up in a Judeo-Christian culture commonly do is we feel we can only benefit others as long as we are miserable. In other words, I'm not really taking care of others if I get some pleasure and satisfaction out of it. If I feel good, that's not caring for others. So I have to feel part of me is being denied. I have to really sacrifice in order for it to be genuine caring for others. We very easily get into this thing. And, again, that isn't what the Buddha was saying. We want to train our mind to the point where taking care of others really gives us pleasure. So it's not a thing of feeling that we have to deny ourselves and make ourselves miserable.

It's also important that we don't go into not only this thing of feeling we need to deny ourselves and stuff like that, but also feeling that anything we enjoy is bad. For example, despising our body or disregarding our own needs to have some peace in our own life. It's very important, for example, to take care of our body and to be healthy, because if we are not healthy, it's very difficult to practice and difficult to benefit others. So taking care of our body, is that necessarily selfish? It can be, but it doesn't have to be. We can take care of our body and keep ourselves healthy, but we do it for the benefit of other sentient beings, because that's the precondition to be able to take care of them. In the same way, we try and really be practical about things in our life and not completely give away all our money and be negligent about our own financial situation. We have to keep our financial situation together. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to practice, it becomes difficult to benefit others.

The Integration of Daily Life with Spiritual Life

It's just day to day practical things. It's really important that we don't ignore these and say, "I am on the spiritual path." We in the West tend to make this big gap between practical, down-to-earth things and spirituality. If you are in one, you can't be in the other. But, again, that isn't what the Buddha is saying. Buddha has a really integrative thing, so we have our feet on the ground and we're spiritual at the same time. We keep our body healthy for the benefit of others. We keep our financial situation together for the benefit of others. We cook and we clean, and we keep our house nice and we maintain our friendships, but, again, for the benefit of others and not just out of some selfishness.

So we don't throw all those things out, thinking I am a holy person so I don't have to worry about paying the bills. Or, I am practicing the Dharma, so. . . . They always tell this great story (it confused me for so long) about one practitioner. He meditated so much on death and he felt so strongly the impermanence of his life. And when he came out of his cave, there was this thorn bush there, and every time he came out, he would scratch himself, but he wouldn't cut the bush because he always thought, "I can't take time out to cut the bush, because I might die first and that will be time wasted." So he never cut the bush because each time he went in and out he was so aware of the imminence of death that he didn't want to waste his time doing that.

This story confused me for so long, because I just interpreted it as, "Well, then I don't need to take care of the practical things of my daily life because I might die first, and it's better that I should push myself and meditate all the time." And that is a completely wrong interpretation of the story. In other words, what the story is getting at, is I think he could really have cut the thorn bush. I think it is possible to cut the thorn bush for the benefit of sentient beings. And this is the whole way the thought transformation practice comes in. You are cutting the thorns of the defilements of sentient beings and their negative karma. In other words, you are transforming that into something that's the Dharma, and not just negating day to day occurrences in the name of practicing the spiritual path. Are people understanding? Those of you who have thorn bushes outside your caves? [Laughter]

Audience: Can you explain how "going for the root of the thorn bush" relates to the realization of emptiness?

Venerable: Yes, there are a few ways to see what going for the root of the thorn bush means. It does mean realizing emptiness and bodhicitta but it also means putting everything into practice in the moment. Because the thing is--and I was thinking about this--that sometimes we think being in the moment means that we dissociate from everything else in our life. But, being in the moment doesn't mean you pretend the past didn't exist and pretend the future doesn't exist. Because the past did exist, and the future does exist. And we have to deal with them. So being in the moment doesn't mean we dissociate from our whole life and go into some state in which we block everything else out except what's happening. Being in the moment actually means experiencing what is happening now, which is also a global awareness of how it evolves into what is going to come afterwards. I think, often, we misinterpret "being in the moment" and use it, like I said, to dissociate instead of to actually examine our life and the whole dependent arising that we're a part of. OK? Making some sense?

The 46 Auxiliary Bodhisattva Vows

We've been reviewing the bodhisattva vows and we finished the review of the 18 root vows. So let's go on to the 46 auxiliary vows. Once again, remember that the guidelines set forth in these vows are not commandments. They are things we undertake voluntarily. And we undertake them with an awareness that we can't keep them perfectly, because if we could keep them perfectly, Buddha wouldn't have needed to set them out. It's good to have an awareness that these vows

are pointing to very specific things that can really act as a guideline in our daily life to make us more mindful--not mindful in the sense of being paranoid of doing something wrong, but just mindful of what our real heart-felt values are and how we want to live. This involves being mindful of what is going on in a situation, including what we are thinking and feeling and saying and doing, so that we can make wise choices in our life instead of just being on automatic and not making the choices that present themselves to us in our life.

The whole thing with the vows is that in order to live ethically, we have to know what the unethical actions are so we can know to abandon them, and know to do the opposite. In hearing all these different things--to abandon this and abandon that--it's not saying, "Don't do that," or, "you're bad!" It's just saying, if we want to live an ethical life, to be really aware of those things and how we get involved in them, and make a choice when those situations arise, not to do that. And then, look at what the opposite of those unethical actions are, and you can see some things you can choose to get involved and engaged in. So that's the scope in which the Bodhisattva vows are set up. And, like I said, the Bodhisattva vows are really for focusing on helping us put into practice our wish to free ourselves from all the disadvantages of self-centeredness and our wish to reap all the advantages--for self and others--of cherishing others.

The 46 auxiliary bodhisattva precepts are broken down into seven major groups. Six of the groups are based on the six far-reaching attitudes and the seventh group specifically refers to the ethics of benefiting sentient beings and going into details of that. If you look in "Pearl or Wisdom Book II", on page 62, you can see the different clumps of the bodhisattva vows. The first seven have to do with the far-reaching attitude of generosity, eight through 16 have to do with ethics, 17 through 20 with patience, 21 through 23 with joyous effort, 24 through 26 with meditative stabilization, 27 through 34 with wisdom and, finally, 35 through 46 with the ethics of benefiting others. Categorizing groups in this way makes it easier for us to practice them.

No. 1 - No. 7: Vows to Eliminate Obstacles to the Far-reaching Attitude of Generosity

This first group is about generosity. Generosity is the wish to be able to give our body, possessions, and positive potential to others without any feeling of poverty, without any regret. It's just the wish to be able to give when it is appropriate, when the circumstance presents itself. There are two chief obstacles to generosity: attachment and miserliness. Attachment involves clinging to things we want for ourselves or wanting to get more things for ourselves. Miserliness involves not wanting to share what we have. It's interesting, there are two ways to look at it. When we see generous people and, if we value that quality, we think about what it is like being generous and we develop some aspiration towards that because we really see it seems like a wonderful thing to be able to be. So if we have that regard for generosity, then we will see that attachment and miserliness are things that we want to counteract.

On the other hand, if we look at it from the other way, and we think, "When I'm attached, this and that happens, and when I'm miserly, this and that happens," and we recognize all the faults of the miserliness and the attachment, and how much harm they cause to ourselves and others, then we'll wish to practice generosity because that's the antidote. So you see, you can go back and forth between these two. If I want generosity then, of course, I have to give up the miserliness and the attachment. And if I want to give up the miserliness and attachment because it makes me miserable then, of course, I have to practice generosity. So you can approach it from both wings that way.

Auxiliary Vow 1. Abandon: Not Making Offerings to the Three Jewels

Okay, so the first guideline here is to avoid not making daily offerings to the Triple Gem with body, speech and mind. Now, our mind might say, "Oh, this sounds like I have to do all these nice things for the Triple Gem otherwise I'm going to get punished and sent to hell." That's what a

person who grew up in a Christian environment thinks. Immediate thought: "I've got to do this because otherwise what happens." That's not what it's talking about. It's coming from the viewpoint that, if we admire generosity, and we want to develop it, and we really see how miserliness and attachment make us miserable and we want to get rid of them, the easiest way to practice generosity is with the Triple Gem because they have so many good qualities that our heart gets very pleased and wants to make offerings.

Sometimes it's harder to practice generosity with people that we don't like because we can always fudge our way out of it by saying, "They are so rude and nasty, why should I do anything for them?" But we can't do that with the Triple Gem because their kindness to us is there. So, somehow, it's easier for us to be generous that way. And, again, they don't need that at all so we can really see that the offerings are done for our own cultivation.

Now, what does it mean to offer with the body, speech and mind? Offering with our body is, for example, doing prostrations. If you can't do long prostrations, just go like this. Even if you can't do short prostrations, maybe you're sick, you can't get out of bed, you just go like this. That's okay. Even if you can't do that, you're really sick, just go like this. Really, they say just lifting one finger can be a prostration. It's a way of physically showing our respect. And then, verbally to offer some praise to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. For example, it could be the request prayers that we do, or when we talk about the kindness of our teacher, the illuminators of the path and those who have the eyes of wisdom, and so on. This is the verbal praise. Or, doing the mantra OM NAMO MANJUSHRIYE, NAMO SUSHRIYE, NAMO UTTAMA SHRIYE SOHA while we are prostrating, that's also verbally praising Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. And then, mentally, is remembering their qualities. So again, just to mentally, inside of our heart, remember their qualities and even when we are bowing, or when we are offering or something like that, just to do the visualization remembering their kindness and their qualities. That's mentally offering prostrations.

If we do that, it really helps our own mind, because the more we can remember the Triple Gem, the more we feel this underground support in all of our actions. We don't feel like we are alone in this polluted world, "I'm all alone, what's going to happen?" The more we remember the Triple Gem--and making offerings helps us remember them--the more the refuge becomes stronger and we feel this underlying support, so that whatever's going on in our life, we can fall back on that refuge, we can fall back on that relationship. So that's why it's really nice if you can have a shrine in your house, and then make offerings everyday. You can offer water, or fruit, or whatever in the morning when you get up, bow three times, and in the evening before you go to bed, bow three times. It becomes very helpful.

Auxiliary Vow 2. Abandon: Acting Out Selfish Thoughts of Desire

The second precept involves abandoning acting out selfish thoughts of desire to gain material possessions or reputation. Remember, I told you, I used to review these vows daily and there were some that I looked at every night. This is one of them. Everyday, "Oops! Again, I transgress that one." This one is really tricky because we see how easily the mind thinks of something, and then we act it out. Mind says, "I want this," and we go to the store and buy it. Mind says, "I want to do this," we go and do it. Mind says, "I want to eat this," we go to the refrigerator. Or, mind says, "I want praise," so I do something to put myself in a situation where I'm praised. Mind says, "I feel insecure, I want a good reputation," then I do stuff so that I get a good reputation. So, really follow out this mind of desire that's seeking material possessions and reputation and praise.

Again, that doesn't mean we are bad people when we do that. REPEAT, it does NOT mean we are bad people when we do that. It just means that when we notice we are doing it, it's a signal to us, "Ah, I have to reconnect with what is important in my life. I've forgotten." So, instead of beating ourselves up and telling ourselves we are bad, go back and say, "Hold on, I need to

reconnect what is really important in my life. Is it running around and making a big name for myself, is it stuffing my house full of stuff, or stuffing my stomach full of stuff or...? What is really important in my life?" Reconnect with that. That doesn't mean we should never go out and buy stuff, because there are things we do need. So this is a thing of balance. This is talking about when the mind is really full of clinging desire, and doing things with this really desiring mind. It's like we feel we have a hole inside, so let's go buy something to fill up the hole. Or let's go eat something to fill up the hole. Or let's go talk up the store to fill up the hole. It's that attitude that we want to counteract. But, we do need to go to the store and buy food. We do need to go to the store to buy the clothes we need to wear when it's hot or cold or whatever. This, again, isn't going to the extreme of saying that everything I like or everything I want is an object of attachment.

Audience: Are you saying it's not necessarily a matter of giving up things we find pleasure in, but, rather, it's a matter of being aware of the attachment?

Venerable: You are right. There are things we do that we take pleasure in. And there's nothing wrong with that pleasure. We don't want to get into this thing of, "Oh, everything I like, I have to deny myself." Because that is going into what I was talking about before. We dissociate, we go into extreme asceticism. But, it's more of an awareness of, "Why am I doing what I am doing?" So, you still like to go out to breakfast on weekends -- that's great! It gives you pleasure and you do it, and you understand why you are doing it. And you want to share that pleasure. That is quite different from the mind that says, "Oh, I really want to go and have pancakes and blah blah blah," or, "I've got to go out to breakfast on Sunday morning or I am going to be totally miserable!" This is the whole mind just getting obsessed with something. There's nothing wrong with enjoying things, but take care to not get so stuck on them that we have to do them, and that we are going to be miserable if we can't.

Audience: What's the reason for doing pleasurable things?

Venerable: We do things we enjoy because we know it keeps us balanced. We are all not Buddhas yet, so, it keeps us balanced. But, we do those things with an awareness of trying also to make it something more than just immediate gratification, with the awareness of, "wouldn't it be nice if the people in Sarajevo could also go out to breakfast on Sunday mornings." And there is some charity in that feeling, hoping that others can have that nice thing too.

Auxiliary Vow 3. Abandon: Not Respecting One's Elders

The third precept is about abandoning not respecting one's elders. Elders are those who have taken the Bodhisattva vows before us or who have more experience than us or, if you are an ordained monk or nun, those who ordained before you. The idea here is that, by respecting those who are more practiced in the path than we are, it helps open us to develop their qualities and it also helps us to abandon our pride and arrogance. Pride and arrogance are also big obstacles on the path and sometimes we really have this fear that we're going to lose our position or we are going to lose our dignity if we show respect to somebody else. In American culture, especially, it's like, "If I show respect to somebody else, that means I am acknowledging that they are better than me and I am the underdog. Urgh! How can that happen?" Whereas, from a Buddhist viewpoint, seeing others' qualities and acknowledging them and showing them respect is coming from a point or feeling of valid self-confidence and a point of internal strength. Where we usually see it in the West as coming from weakness and lack of confidence, it's exactly the opposite.

Apologizing to people is a good example. Being able to apologize is coming from a point of having good self-confidence and internal strength, whereas, defending ourselves to the very end is really coming from a point of weakness. So this thing here of showing respect to elders is something that really helps us on the path. And by developing our good qualities--because we appreciate those qualities and those of others--it helps us to free ourselves from this incredible

individualism that demands we have to be noticed all the time. We don't want to show respect to others, because then I won't be noticed. And if I don't make myself noticed, then, what is going to happen, who I am going to be? Whereas, it's actually quite nice to relax and feel I don't have to make myself be noticed all the time. I can be in this group and I don't have to be the big star in the group. I can be here and respect other people and learn from them, and I don't have to go around selling myself like a product on the market, telling everybody I am so knowledgeable in this way and I know so much about that. So this is done very much to counteract the pride and arrogance.

Audience: Does 'elders' not refer to all of those older than us?

Venerable: Well, the precept here is specifically about religious elders. But, I think, in a general way, it's just helpful in our general relationships in society. If we are with our boss, we have a certain respect for their position. It doesn't mean we think everything they do is right. Same way, just because someone is ordained before you doesn't mean everything they do is right. But, it's a matter of valuing that position, valuing what they might know because they are our boss, or what they might know because they are older than us.

Actually I think there is a lot of wisdom to be gleaned from older people. I think it's a real tragedy in our society that we put so much emphasis on youth. Because when you sit down and talk to some old people, and you get them to tell you about their lives, it's so incredible really hearing about people's lives and what they lived through, and what they have gone through and how they dealt with situations. It's incredible. There's one woman who is probably the oldest Buddhist in the whole community in Seattle. She's 80-plus. Incredible. She doesn't live very far away from here. Incredible person, so sharp and so bright and it's just nice to go over there and get her to tell you stories about when she was 18 years old and converted from being a Catholic to a Buddhist and what she went through. Even the elders in our families, learning some of the family history and the family legends, can help us a lot to understand things.

For me personally, even in the Tibetan community, I listened to some of the people's stories, and got some of the oldest to tell their stories and what it was like especially when they fled Tibet and everything like that. It really gives me a feeling of confidence that, if for some reason I find myself in that horrible situation, if I can remember these people's stories, it will keep my own spirits up, because, when you meet some of these people and know they went through absolutely incredible things and you look at them, and they are well adjusted, happy people now. It's just so nice to know that can happen and if I ever get into that situation, with incredible trauma going on, if I can remember these people's stories, then it's going to help me. So I think having that respect, and wanting to listen to the elders and learn from them can really enrich our own lives.

Audience: Why is this vow under the "Generosity" category?

Venerable: Because I think it's the generosity of positive feelings, generosity of respect, generosity of praise, or reputation, like that.

Auxiliary Vow 4. Abandon: Not answering Sincerely Asked Questions That One is Capable of Answering

The fourth vow is abandoning not answering sincerely asked questions that one is capable of answering. For instance, people ask us sincere questions, they really want to know something, they really need to know something, but we don't want to answer them. We don't want to answer them because if they have that information, then our own status is going to go down. You find this in work situations and it can even happen in Dharma situations. I have a friend who is a lawyer, and when they got certain assignments, the first person who got to the library would check out all the books concerning that topic even if they wouldn't read all of them at the same time, because it

prevented the other people from using them and learning that information. So that is a real miserliness and a clinging on to information.

Often, you can see this in work situations, too. People don't want to share information, because if you show your colleague how to do something well, they may get promoted instead of us. Or, if we share information, and people are going to know stuff, then the information doesn't belong to us, it's public, and then I can't use it just for my own self. So this precept is really about combating that miserliness in terms of information and knowledge and wanting to cling to it or keep it for ourselves. Or, if somebody asks a question and it's not a sincere question, for example, somebody is just testing you and, instead of asking you a sincere Dharma question, you can tell they are just doing it because they want to punch holes and pick flaws and chop things down, and be argumentative, then, there is no need to answer those kinds of questions.

So this vow is talking about sincerely asked questions where people really want to learn. It's not referring to people who are just being competitive and cynical. Also, when somebody is just being antagonistic, I won't engage because it's useless. Depending on the situation, I might try and say, "What are you really trying to say?" Or I might say, "That question makes me feel uncomfortable," or something along that line. Sometimes, people are asking one thing, but what they want to engage in is something else. Or, what the issue is, is something else. So if you can switch it to what the issue is, or, if they are asking a real cynical question, determine what they are really trying to say when they are asking that.

Audience: If someone is asking a cynical question but they're asking sincerely would you answer them?

Venerable: Sure, sure. Everything is fair game. When people are asking sincerely, everything should be able to be asked and discussed. When people aren't asking sincerely then it's fruitless, because that doesn't help them unless you can get into what the issue really is for them. So it's not a thing of, "You don't agree with my viewpoint, so we're not going to talk about that." You don't want to come across that way. You don't want to feel that way either.

Audience: What about impatience in not wanting to answer people's questions? How does that tie in with irritation?

Venerable: It's probably an overlap. When you are not wanting to answer questions because of impatience, yes, that definitely has to do with irritation, the anger thing. But then, it's real helpful to remember this thing about answering questions. Because, often, it's a matter of being generous with our time. Sometimes the impatience is because we feel rushed: "I explained it already, why haven't you gotten it right?" Or, "You should know this, blah blah blah." And we don't want to spend the time or we don't want to spend the energy. Maybe we have the time, but we don't want to spend the energy. So in those times, it really helps me to remember again very much my teachers and how they have painstakingly repeated the same thing again and again and again to me. And, how they haven't gone in to the thing of, "Why don't you know this already, didn't I teach this before?" Again and again, really taking that time and care to cultivate. And thinking, "Wow, other people cultivated me in that way, and this is only my impatience that's getting in the way here, that's becoming a block."

And also remembering the times when I haven't gotten it right after the first explanation, either. And when I've forgotten stuff and not even Dharma ways, but just regular ways, when people had to remind me and explain things again and again to me, because I didn't understand it the first time, or I forgot it or I spaced out. And just to remember, "Oh yes, I am like that too. I am not always on top of every situation." So it's a matter of being generous with our time, being generous with our energy.

Audience: I work with kids and notice in myself that when they try my patience it's really difficult to cultivate any generosity.

Venerable: They definitely go together. It's hard to be generous if you are impatient. I think it's real good that you mention being with kids, because that is so important. I really saw when I was teaching in school that no two kids are the same. When you explain something once, one kid gets it, and another kid doesn't get it after ten times. But that's okay. Commitment is important. If we're committed to helping other people and training them, then we're committed to spending time with them.

Audience: I have difficulty with people who disagree with me because I interpret them as being more interested in looking for an argument than in having a sincere conversation.

Venerable: Sincere question. Ok, the fact that somebody doesn't agree with what we've said doesn't mean that they are insincere. And I think, very often, people are quite sincere when they don't agree with us, and they really sincerely want to debate this out. They're really sincerely interested in finding out, "how are you thinking and what is going on here and maybe you know something that can enrich my viewpoint, maybe I know something that can enrich your viewpoint." So disagreement doesn't mean insincerity. Insincerity is more--the classic example just comes to me--I remember, there was one time, I was in Delhi, in a market place, being stopped by an evangelical Christian from Singapore. I was trying to buy some flowers in this marketplace to take back to the center, and this guy stopped me and he just wanted to talk and he didn't want to listen, he didn't want to discuss and he would ask these questions but not wait for answers. Or I would start an answer, and he would interrupt and say, "No, no, no, this is not really true, blah, blah, blah. And the Bible says, blah blah blah." At the beginning, I thought he was sincere, but after one or two times of trying to discuss things, it became evident that he didn't want to listen, he didn't really want a discussion.

Audience: Do you find that sometimes questions don't pinpoint what the questioner really wants to know?

Ven: Yes, I find that oftentimes what people ask us is not really what they want to know. And sometimes, also, I see myself asking what isn't really what I'm trying to get at. I figured, especially, when you ask Tibetan lamas questions, you have to know actually how to ask the question, otherwise, you're not going to get an answer to what you are asking. Learning how to ask the question is half of it.

Audience: Why is that?

Venerable: Why is that? Because there is a big cultural difference and also there is a translator. Lots of times I find, when I am giving talks, people ask questions that are a few minutes long, and I'll just try and sum it up in one statement and say, "Oh, you are asking..." to check out if that is what they are asking. And very often, the Tibetan translators aren't used to how we ask questions. So they will give the whole thing, and the whole sense of what the person's underlying question is doesn't come true, because the person didn't explicitly ask it.

Here is a good example: In the early days, we would ask something like, "Do Buddhists believe in God?" Now, there is no Tibetan word equivalent for God. So they translate it as "wangchuk" which is the Tibetan word for Ishvara, who is one of the Hindu gods. Because the whole idea of there being a supreme being is different, and, so this Hindu god who is a supreme being is kind of like the Christian God who is a supreme being. They're both supreme beings, they're both in-charge of the universe, so the Lama would give this whole answer about why "wangchuk," the Brahma, is one of the form realm gods who got born there because of his good karma. And it

doesn't answer the person's question at all, because they are asking it from a completely different cultural viewpoint.

Audience: In that type of situation would you ask the question again until you got an appropriate answer?

Venerable: [Laughter] Yes. One of the things that is really required when you want to learn the Dharma is incredible patience and to really try and figure out how to help your teachers teach you. As in this example, you ask a question and you get an answer that's a million miles away. So how can I ask this again, in such a way that it might be more aligned with the way they are thinking. And really have the patience to do that. Because, sometimes it requires asking the question several times, and hoping they don't get impatient with you for asking that question again and again. [Laughter] That's why these dialogues with His Holiness are real interesting. I've been present at these conferences and very often people would try and explain to him again and again what they really mean.

Audience: What if someone asks a question you don't know the answer to?

Venerable: If somebody asks you a question, and you don't know the answer to it, tell them you don't know. Don't make up answers when you don't know the answers, especially in Dharma things. Just say, "I don't know." And it's OK not to know. Rather than feel embarrassed when you don't know the answer to the question, really be appreciative to the person for asking it.

Auxiliary Vow 5. Abandon: Not Accepting Invitations From Others

Auxiliary vow number five has to do with abandoning the practice of not accepting invitations from others out of anger, pride or other negative thoughts. So this is when people, out of genuine, sincere, wishing to be with us, invite us to some place. It's good if we accept with the idea that by having contact with them we can benefit them. Or, if they invite us to a meal or something, they create good karma by generosity. This doesn't mean that you have to accept every invitation that's given you. It's perfectly okay to decline an invitation if you have something more important you need to do. If you're sick, you can decline invitations. If it is dangerous to get there, then you can decline the invitation. There's lots of places people ask you to go that are dangerous to get to. So you can decline. If the person has a really bad attitude toward you, or if going there would cause discord, or if going would put you in a situation of having to break your precepts, or if there is some other good reason for not going, then it is perfectly alright to decline invitations.

This vow particularly addresses attitudes of miserliness, anger, hostility or pride towards somebody with the thought of, "I'm too good to be with those people." Or, "Those people slighted me, so I'm not going to spend time with them now, this is my way of retaliating and getting even." Or, "I'd much rather sit and watch TV than go and be with these people because they are just going to sit there and ask me all these Dharma questions, and it's such a drag. I'd much rather watch TV."

These kinds of motivation are the kinds of things that this precept is getting us to look at: when we turn down invitations out of pride or anger or laziness. But again, we shouldn't misuse this precept to say, "Oh, somebody invited me to this party. I had actually planned to meditate that evening but I have to keep my vows so I better go to the party." I think we do have to be quite discriminating about the invitations we accept and reject. If there is some benefit and meaning for us to go, then do that. But, if there are more important things or if going there would be dangerous and make discord, then we can turn down the invitation.

Audience: What can you suggest about being invited somewhere that would be an extremely difficult situation? For instance, I know of a place where I become very agitated because the people there really push my buttons.

Venerable: I think it's okay to decline if you're pretty certain that you're not ready for it. But then, if you decline the invitation, use the time to do some meditation so you can cut down on your buttons. Instead of just saying, "Oh, those people drive me nuts and I'm not going," really recognize that you are not ready to handle it. Perhaps it's too intense and you're likely to lose it and get into a fight, and that would make them unhappy. So, this time you could say no, but really try and pinpoint what the issues are for yourself and next time, hopefully, you can say yes.

Conclusion

It's really interesting, maybe over the next few days, to be real attentive to these first five vows. And really think about them. You can rethink a lot of situations that happened in the past: "Oh yes, that time somebody invited me some place and I turned them down. What really was my motivation there? Was I being angry and nasty or was it really a genuine thing that I did have something more important to do?" Or, "I didn't answer that person's question, what was really going on there?" I think it can be really helpful, to help us get to know ourselves. Think of situations in the past and situations you might encounter and reflect on these guidelines.

Ok, let's sit quietly for a few minutes.