

An Exhortation to Generate the Bodhisattva Vow, by Great Master Sying An

[Audio](#)

Eight Aspects of a Vow

I, the unworthy Shr Syan, a lowly, ordinary Sanghan, weeping blood and bowing to the ground, exhort the great assembly and present-day men and women of pure faith: please listen and consider what I am about to say.

We have heard that having a clear intention is foremost among the essential doors for entering the Path, and that making vows is first among the crucial matters in cultivation.

By making vows, we can save living beings. By becoming completely clear about our intention, we can realize the Buddhas' Path.

If we do not make our resolve great and our vows absolutely firm, we will remain on the turning wheel throughout as many kalpas as there are particles of dust. Any cultivation will be only bitter toil done in vain. As the Flower Adornment Sutra says, "If you forget your determination to awaken, free yourself, and benefit others, your cultivation of even wholesome dharmas becomes the karma of demons."

From this it is clear that forgetting our vow is (almost) worse than having never made the resolve. Thus we know that anyone wishing to study the Vehicle of the Thus Come Ones must first make the vows of a Bodhisattva without delay.

But becoming clear in this way and making vows are various and they have many aspects. If they are not pointed out, how can we

know what direction to take? I will now explain them in general for the great assembly.

There are eight aspects of a vow: off course, proper, true, false, great, small, partial, and complete.

What is meant by off course, proper, true, false, great, small, partial, and complete?

A cultivator's vow is mistaken in its aim, or off course, if in his practice he does not investigate his own mind but knows only about external matters. Perhaps he seeks benefit and offerings, likes fame and a good reputation, is greedy for objects of pleasure in the present, or he may hope for reward in the future. A vow such as this is mistaken- it is off course.

When a cultivator seeks neither gain nor fame, and has no greed either for pleasure or for rewards, but wishes only to settle the matter of birth and death, and to attain Awakening, then his vow is correct.

If, in moment after moment, he seeks the path of the Buddhas above; in thought after thought, he transforms living beings below; if he hears that the road to Buddhahood is long and far, yet does not retreat in fear; if he observes that beings are hard to transform, yet does not become weary;

if he proceeds as though climbing a ten-thousand-foot mountain, determined to reach the summit, or proceeds as though ascending a nine-storied stupa, fixed upon advancing to the top, then his resolve is true.

If he commits offenses but does not repent of them; if he has faults but does not change them; if he is turbid inside but makes a show of purity; if he is diligent at the start but lax later on; if he has good

intentions but mixes them with a quest for name and gain; if he does wholesome practices, but defiles them with the karma created by committing offenses, then his motivation is false.

*When the realm of living beings has come to an end,
then my vows will end.*

*When the Bodhi Way is realized,
then my vows will be fulfilled.*

Such a vow is great.

If he views the Triple Realm as a prison; if he treats birth and death as an enemy; if he intends to save only himself and has no wish to save others, then his motivation is small.

If he sees living beings as existing outside of his mind; if he does wish to save others and to realize Buddhahood, but does not forget his own accumulation of merit and does not get rid of his worldly knowledge and views, then his intention is partial.

If he knows that his own nature is the same as living beings and, therefore, vows to save them; if he knows that his own nature is the same as the Buddha Path and, therefore, vows to realize it; if he does not see even one thing as existing apart from the mind; if his mind is like empty space;

if he makes vows that are like empty space; if he cultivates practices that are like empty space; if he attains a fruition like empty space, and yet does not grasp at the characteristic of empty space, then his resolve is complete.

Having understood these eight different aspects of a vow, we should know how to investigate and contemplate them. Knowing how to investigate and contemplate them, we know which to keep and which

to discard. Knowing which to keep and which to discard, we can then develop our minds.

What does it mean to “investigate and contemplate them?” We must ask ourselves, “Which of these eight aspects does my vow have? Is my it off course or correct in its aim, based on what is true, or false, great or small, partial or complete?”

What does it mean to “keep or discard?” It means that we discard the incorrect way, the false, the small, and the partial, and that we keep the proper, the true, the great, and the complete. To make a vow in this way is truly and properly to have the clear intention to awaken.

Ten Causes and Conditions

The Bodhisattva Vow is the foremost among all good things. It can arise only due to certain causes and conditions. In general, there are ten causes and conditions, which will now be discussed.

What are the ten?

The first is mindfulness of the Buddhas’ deep kindness.

The second is mindfulness of our parents’ kindness.

The third is mindfulness of our teachers’ and elders’ kindness.

The fourth is mindfulness of donors’ kindness.

The fifth is mindfulness of living beings’ kindness.

The sixth is mindfulness of the suffering in birth and death.

The seventh is reverence for our own spiritual nature.

The eighth is repenting of karmic obstacles and reforming.

The ninth is the wish for rebirth in the Pure Land.

The tenth is the wish to cause the Proper Dharma to remain in the world for a long time.

The Buddha's Deep Kindness

What is mindfulness of the Buddha's deep kindness? After our Thus Come One Shakyamuni first made his resolve, he walked the Bodhisattva Path for our sakes and passed through an infinite number of kalpas, enduring all manners of suffering.

When I create bad karma, the Buddha pities me, and with expedient means teaches and transforms me. I, however, remain ignorant and do not know how to accept the teachings with faith.

When I fall into the hells, the Buddha again compassionately feels the pain and wishes to undergo suffering on my behalf, but my karma is heavy, and I cannot be pulled out.

When I am reborn as a human, the Buddha uses expedient means to cause me to plant roots of goodness. In life after life, he follows me and does not forsake me in his thoughts for even an instant.

When the Buddha first appeared in the world, I was still sunk in the lower realms. Now that I have a human body, the Buddha has already passed into still quietude.

What are my offenses that have caused me to be born in the Dharma Ending Age?

What are my blessings that have made it possible for me to leave the home and family life?

What are my obstacles that have prevented me from seeing His Golden Body?

What good fortune has made it possible for me to encounter His sharira?

I contemplate in that way...

If I did not plant good roots in the past, how else could I be able to hear the Buddhadharma?

And if I had never heard the Buddhadharma, how could I know that the Buddha is always kind to me?

His kindness and his virtue are greater than the highest mountain...

If I fail to make a vast and great resolve to cultivate the Bodhisattva Path and to establish the Buddhadharma in order to save living beings, even to the point that in making this effort my bones wear away and my body is wrecked, then how can I possibly hope to repay his kindness?

This is the first cause and condition for the bodhisattva vow.

Our Parents' Kindness

What is mindfulness of our parents' kindness?

Alas for my parents! I was born through much toil. I was nurtured nine months in the womb and was suckled three years at the breast. My bottom was dried and my diapers were changed. I was fed delicacies while my parents toiled bitterly. Only then was I able to

grow up. They hoped only that I might glorify and carry on the family name and continue the ritual offerings to our ancestors.

But now I have left the home and family; I am gratuitously called a disciple of Shakyamuni, and have dared to assume the title of Shramana. I neither offer delicacies to my parents nor sweep the ancestral graves. While they live, I cannot take care of their physical needs; after they depart, I cannot guide their souls. In this world, I have thereby hurt them greatly, and as they leave this world, I am of no real help. To cause them such a double loss is a serious offense. How can I possibly avoid the consequences!

I contemplate in this way:

I must always cultivate the Buddhas' Way through hundreds of kalpas and in thousands of lives and save living beings everywhere throughout the ten directions and three periods of time.

I will rescue not only my parents of this life but will do the same for my parents of every life.

I will save not only one person's parents but everyone's parents.

This is the second cause and condition for making the vow to attain Bodhi.

Our Teachers' and Elders' Kindness

What is mindfulness of our teachers' and elders' kindness?

My parents bore me and raised me, but if not for educators and elders, I would know nothing of propriety or righteousness. If not for spiritual teachers and elders, I would understand nothing of the Buddhadharma. One who knows nothing of propriety or

righteousness may be considered a mere animal. One who understands nothing of the Buddhadharma is no different than an ordinary person.

Now we know the rudiments of propriety and righteousness and have a rough understanding of the Buddhadharma. The kashaya sash covers our bodies; the various precepts permeate our being.

We have obtained these through the deep kindness of our teachers and elders.

If we seek a small accomplishment, we can benefit only ourselves. Within the Great Vehicle our wish is to benefit all people. In that way, we can benefit both secular and world-transcending teachers and elders.

This is the third cause and condition for making the resolve to attain Bodhi.

The Donors' Kindness

What is mindfulness of donors' kindness?

None of the materials we use in our daily lives belongs to us. Porridge and rice for our two meals, clothing for the four seasons, medicines for our illnesses - all the expenses for our physical needs - come through the strength of others.

In order to provide for us, they work hard to plow the fields, yet can barely provide for themselves, while we sit comfortably to receive our food and still feel dissatisfied.

Our donors spin and weave without cease and still suffer hardship, while we are comfortable, with more clothes than we can wear. We are even unaware that we should cherish what we have.

They live to the ends of their days in poor and humble dwellings amid nerve-wracking clamor, while we dwell among vast courtyards and in vacant halls amid refinement and ease throughout the year. They offer the fruits of their labors to supply our idleness; how can our hearts be at peace? Is it reasonable to use others' goods to nourish our own bodies?

If we fail to be both compassionate and wise and to adorn ourselves with both blessings and wisdom, so that the faithful donors are blessed with kindness and living beings receive bounty, then even one grain of rice or one inch of thread will incur a debt. It will be hard to escape an evil retribution.

This is the fourth cause and condition for making the vow to attain Bodhi.

Living Beings' Kindness

What is mindfulness of living beings' kindness? In life after life since distant kalpas onwards, every living being and I have been each other's father and mother. We have been kind to one another. Now although the passage of time has separated us, and in our confusion we do not recognize each other, it is only logical that we repay them for their toil.

How do we know that we were not sons in lives past of those who now fur -wearing and capped with horns? How do we know that those who now crawl on the ground and fly in the air were not our fathers in lives past?

Our parents constantly looked after us, but we left them when we were young; we have grown up and have forgotten their faces. Even less do we remember our family and friends of lives past, and now it is difficult to remember if we were once named Smith or Jones.

As our ancestors wail and cry out in the hells, or are born over and over again as hungry ghosts, who can know of their suffering and pain? They are starving- to whom can they appeal? I cannot see or hear them, but they must be seeking rescue and release.

The Sutras reveal this situation with exceptional clarity. Only the Buddhas could have spoken these words. How could people with wrong views know of this? For these reasons, Bodhisattvas observe that even grubs and ants were their parents in lives past and have the potential to be Buddhas in the future. They always think of benefiting them and remember to return their kindness.

This is the fifth cause and condition for making the vow to attain Awakening.

The Suffering in Birth and Death

What is mindfulness of the suffering of birth and death?

Since distant kalpas past, living beings and I have always been involved in birth and death and have not attained liberation. Whether among people or in the heavens, in this world or in another, we have risen and sank down myriads of times.

We ascend or fall in an instant- suddenly a god, suddenly a human, suddenly an animal, a hungry ghost, or a denizen of the hells. We leave the black gate at dawn but return at night. We climb out of the pit of iron briefly but then fall back in again. As we ascend the

mountain of knives, our bodies are slashed until not a bit of flesh remains. As we climb the tree of swords, our hearts are slit open. The hot iron does not cure hunger; swallowing it roasts the liver and intestines. The broth of boiling copper does not quench thirst; drinking it dissolves the flesh and bones. Sharp saws dismember the body; once cut, it comes back together again. Clever breezes fan the body; it dies but quickly returns to life.

In the city of raging fire, we endure the sounds of bloodcurdling screams and wails. In the pot of boiling oil, we hear only cries of excruciating pain. The body begins to freeze and harden and resembles a blue lotus forming a bud. Then the flesh and veins crack open and the body looks like a red lotus in bloom.

In a single night, the denizens of the hells pass through ten thousand births and deaths. In a single morning, the sufferings in the hells are what humans would go through in a hundred years. The harried wardens of the hells become weary. Who believes that King Yama is not teaching us with this warning?

Only while actually experiencing suffering do we know its bitterness, but our regrets come too late. Once free, we forget again, and then we create the same karma as before.

We whip the mule until it bleeds; who could know that it is our mother in anguish? We lead the pig to slaughter; who could know that it is our father in agony? We eat our own sons without being aware, just like King Wen. And we gulp down our own relatives without recognizing them. This is the way of all ordinary people.

The loved ones of yesteryear are now sworn enemies. Rivals of days past are now our blood relatives. Our mothers of past lives are our wives of the present. Our fathers-in-law of old are now our husbands.

Those with knowledge of past lives recognize these changes; they feel shame and embarrassment. Those with the Heavenly Eye see these situations; they find them laughable and pathetic. Amid excrement and filth we pass nine difficult months. We emerge from the path of pus and blood in a pitiable state.

When young, we know nothing and cannot tell east from west. As adults, we become more aware, but our greed and desire arise. In an instant, old age and illness overtake us; suddenly death arrives. Amid the blaze of wind and fire, our spirit becomes disordered; our essence and blood are exhausted. Our flesh and skin wither and dry up. We feel as if iron needles are piercing our every pore and as if knives are hacking our every orifice.

When the spirit leaves the body at death, it feels more pain than does a live turtle having its shell ripped off before it is thrown in the pot.

The mind has no fixed purpose. It flits hurriedly from place to place like a traveling peddler. Our bodies have no fixed shapes. We continually exchange them as if we were moving from room to room in a house.

We have had and lost more bodies than there are particles of dust in a billion worlds. We have cried more tears at parting than all the water in the billows of the four seas. The stacks of bones rise higher than mountain peaks. The heaps of (our) corpses are more vast than the earth.

If the Buddha had not spoken of this, who would have recognized or even imagined these things? If we do not read the Buddha's sutras, how can we know and be aware of these truths? If we continue our hankering for love and pleasure, we will forever remain stupid and confused. Then the grave concern is that one mistake leads to another and another for ten thousand kalpas, through thousands of lives.

A human body is hard to obtain and easy to lose. Good times soon pass and cannot be brought back. The road is dark and gloomy, and separations last a long time. I must endure evil retribution in the Three Paths alone. The pain is unspeakable; who would stand in for me? Even discussing this subject chills my heart.

We, therefore, must halt the flow of birth and death, get out of the ocean of love and desire, save ourselves and save others, and together reach the other shore.

Of all things from the beginning of time onward, this is the most extraordinary achievement, yet one only needs to begin.

This is the sixth cause and condition for making the vow to awaken.

Reverence of the Spiritual Nature

What is reverence for our own spiritual nature? It is that in the present, single thought, I can immediately be one with the Thus Come One, Shakyamuni, without any difference at all. Why is it, then, that the World Honored One realized proper enlightenment an infinite number of kalpas ago, yet we are still muddled, confused, and upside down, Why are we still only ordinary people?

The Buddha, the World Honored One, has also perfected infinite spiritual penetrations, wisdom, and the adornments of merit and virtue, while we only have an infinite number of karmic ties and afflictions and are bound to birth and death. Our minds and natures and his are one, but our confusion and his enlightenment are as far apart as the sky and the abysmal deeps. In stillness, contemplate this matter: how can we not be ashamed? It is as if we had dropped a priceless pearl into a mud puddle, considering it as worthless as a broken tile, neither cherishing nor esteeming it.

We should, therefore, use an infinite number of wholesome Dharmas as an antidote to our afflictions. By cultivating virtue, we gain merit, and the virtue of our nature can then appear. Thus we wash the pearl and set it up high, where it releases a penetrating radiance that outshines everything. Then we can say that we have not been ungrateful to the Buddha's teaching and have not failed our own spiritual nature. This is the seventh cause and condition for clearly setting our intention on accomplishing the path.

Repenting of Karmic Obstacles

What is repenting of karmic obstacles and reforming? The sutras say that a precept holder who commits one duskrita will fall into the Nirtaka Hell for a period equal to a five-hundred-year lifespan in the Heaven of Four Kings. Duskrita are small offenses, yet precept holders who commit them will receive such retribution. Serious offenses evoke even more suffering; the retribution they bring is indescribable.

We constantly break the precepts by everything we do in our daily lives. With each meal we take and with each drop we drink, we transgress the sila. A single day's transgressions are beyond reckoning. How much more numerous are the transgressions committed during kalpa after kalpa! They are indescribably many.

Moreover, it is said, "Of ten people who receive the Five Precepts nine will transgress them." Few admit their errors; most conceal them. The Five Precepts are the Upasaka Precepts; yet we fail to perfectly uphold even these, not to mention the Shramanera, Bhikshu, and Bodhisattva Precepts.

If you ask our titles, we will reply, "We are Bhikshus", but in fact, we do not even come up to being Upasakas. How can we fail to be

ashamed? We should know that receiving the precepts set forth by the Buddhas is the choice of the individual. If we have received them, we must not transgress them. If we do not transgress them, we have no need for concern. Transgress them, and in the end we will certainly fall.

If we fail to have pity on ourselves and others, if we fail to have compassion for ourselves and for others, if we fail to be harmonious and sincere in word and deed, if we fail to sigh and weep, if we fail to painfully seek repentance and reform together with all living beings everywhere, then our evil retributions due from thousands of lifetimes throughout tens of thousands of kalpas will be difficult to escape. This is the eighth cause and condition for making the resolve to awaken.

Rebirth in the Pure Land

What is the wish for rebirth in the Pure Land? Progress on the spiritual Path is difficult when we cultivate in this world, but once we have been reborn in that world, becoming a Buddha is easy. Because cultivating is easy there, we can be successful in a single lifetime.

Because it is difficult here, many kalpas have passed and we still have not accomplished our goal. Therefore, each and every sage and worthy of the past has taken the path that leads to that land. And passage after passage in all the thousands of sutras and myriads of Shastras points in this direction.

For cultivators in the Dharma Ending Age, nothing surpasses this method. The Sutra says, however, that we cannot be reborn there if our good deeds are few. Only through many acts deserving of blessings can we be successful. They say that none of the many acts

deserving of blessings equals maintaining the recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name.

They say that none of the many good deeds equals a great resolution of the mind, a great vow. Therefore, reciting the Sage's name even briefly is superior to practicing giving for a hundred years, and by simply making the great resolve, we transcend kalpa after kalpa of cultivation.

Thus, we may practice mindfulness of the Buddha with the hope of becoming Buddhas, but if we fail to make the great resolve, our mindfulness will not be sincere.¹

We may be determined to cultivate, but retreat is easy, despite our resolve, unless we are reborn in the Pure Land. Therefore, plant a Bodhi seed. Till with the plow of mindfulness of the Buddha, and the fruits of the Path will naturally grow. Sail the ship of great vows to enter the ocean of the Pure Land. Then we will certainly be reborn in the West. This is the ninth cause and condition for making the bodhisattva vow.

The Proper Dharma

What is the wish to cause the Proper Dharma to remain long in the world? Our World Honored One, for our sakes, cultivated the Bodhi Path for an infinite number of kalpas. He could practice what was difficult to practice and could endure what was difficult to endure. His causes were perfect, his results were complete; thus, he became a

¹ The translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra is more clear in this verse: "Now, as for mindfulness of the Buddha (Amitabha, with the aim to be reborn in his Pure Land), its very root is the aspiration to become a Buddha."

Buddha. After becoming a Buddha, he finished teaching those with whom he had affinities, and then he entered Nirvana.

The Proper Dharma Age and Dharma Semblance Age have already ended. Now we are in the Dharma Ending Age; there are teachings but no adherents. No one can distinguish the deviant from the proper; no one can tell right from wrong. We compete and struggle with each other. We pursue fame and fortune. Look around: the deluge has spread throughout the world.

No one knows who the Buddha is, what the Dharma means, or what constitutes the Sangha. The decay has reached such a perilous point that one can scarcely bear to speak of it. Every time I consider it, my tears fall without my realizing it.

I am a disciple of the Buddha, yet I am unable to return the kindness that has been done for me. I do not benefit myself; I cannot benefit others. While alive, I am of no benefit to my time. After death, I will be of no benefit to posterity.

Although the heavens are high, they cannot cover me. Although the earth is thick, it cannot bear me. If my own offenses are not extremely grave, then whose are? My pain is, therefore, unbearable. I have no recourse but to immediately forget my baseness and quickly make the the strongest vows.

Although I cannot reverse the fate of the Dharma's end in the present, I certainly must plan to protect and uphold the Proper Dharma in the future.

Therefore good friends, gather together at the Way Place, perform the Karmavachana, and establish Dharma assemblies. Make the forty-eight vows; make vow after vow to save living beings. Make a deep

resolve that will last for hundreds of thousands of kalpas; in thought after thought, clearly determine to be a Buddha.

From this day to the end of future time, vow to return to the peace of the Pure Land at the end of every life, to ascend to the nine grades of lotuses, and to then come back to the Saha World.

Make the Buddhas' sun gloriously shine once more.

Open the gate of the Dharma again.

Let the ocean of the Sangha be clear and pure in this world.

The people of the East will be taught and the kalpa will be prolonged. The Proper Dharma will long continue.

Such is the meager but genuine vow I strive to fulfill. This is the tenth cause and condition for making the resolve to attain Bodhi.

Exhortation

Thus we know the ten conditions and are fully aware of the eight dharmas. We consequently have a gateway through which to progress and a basis for our development. We have a human body and live in a favorable country. Our six sense organs are intact and our bodies are healthy. We have complete faith, and fortunately we are without demonic obstacles.

Furthermore, we Sanghans have been able to leave the home-life and to receive the complete precepts. We have found a Way Place and have heard the Buddhadharma. We have looked reverently upon the Buddha's sharira and we practice repentance; we have met good friends and are replete with superior conditions.

If we fail to make the great vow today, what are we waiting for?

I hope only that the great assembly will sympathize with my simple-minded sincerity and share my earnest intent.

Let us take these vows together.

Let us make this resolve together.

Whoever has not yet made the resolve should do so now.

Whoever has already made this vow should bolster it. Those who have already bolstered it should continue to advance.

Do not fear difficulty and make a cowardly retreat. Do not consider this matter easy and frivolously waste time. Do not wish for quick results and fail to persevere. Do not become lax and fail in your courage. Do not become dispirited and fail to rouse yourself. Do not let procrastination cause you to delay. Do not let stupidity and dullness keep you from making the resolve.

Do not assume that you have shallow roots and are, therefore, unworthy of taking part. For example, after a tree is planted, the once-shallow roots deepen every day. Similarly, as a knife is sharpened, the blade which was once dull becomes sharp. Because the roots are shallow, would we choose not to plant the tree and allow it to wither away? That the knife is dull is no reason not to sharpen it and to set it aside as useless.

Conclusion

Moreover, if we feel that cultivation makes us suffer, it is because we do not know that laxity will make us suffer even more. Cultivation entails a brief period of diligent toil, but it yields peace and joy for kalpas without end. One lifetime of laxity and of shirking work results in suffering for many lifetimes to come.

Furthermore, with the Pure Land as our ship, what fear is there that we will retreat? Once we attain the power of patience with the non-existence of beings and phenomena, what difficulty can trouble us?

When we know that in past kalpas there were even offenders in the hells that were able to set their mind upon awakening, how can we human disciples of the Buddha fail to make great vows in this life?

Since time without beginning, we have been muddled and confused. It is useless to remonstrate with ourselves about the past, but we can wake up now, and in the future we can make amends. Since we are confused and not yet enlightened, we are certainly to be pitied, but if we know that we should cultivate yet we fail to practice, we are especially pathetic.

If we fear the suffering in the hells, we will naturally be vigorous. If we remember the imminence of death, we will not become lazy.

Moreover, we must take the Buddhadharma as our whip and find good friends to urge us on. For this short time, do not leave them. Rely on them to the end of your life. Then you need not fear retreat.

Do not say that one thought is a small matter.

Do not feel that vows are empty and useless.

If our intentions are clear and powerful, then we can realize our goals.

When our vows are vast in scope, then our practice will go deep.
Empty space is not big, but the ultimate resolve is gigantic. Vajra is
not durable, but vow-power is the supremely durable.

Great assembly! If indeed you can accept my words, then from now
on, let us all affirm our unity in the retinue of Bodhi and pledge to
each other our kinship in a lotus society.

We vow to be reborn together in the Pure Land, to see Amitabha
Buddha together, to transform living beings together, and to attain
Right Enlightenment together.

How do we know that our future perfection of the thirty-two marks
and the hundred blessings' adornments does not begin on this day
that we make this clear resolve and set our vows?

I hope and pray that the members of the great assembly will urge
each other on.

What good fortune! How lucky we are!