

The 37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

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The first time I was asked to read *The Thirty Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*, a word I couldn't even pronounce, I was so pissed. I hate being told who or what to believe in. Even after years of making a shit show of things, I'm still mostly allergic to anyone or thing that says, "*this is the way.*"

I went to see my friend and teacher, Venerable Bhante Sujatha, for clarification. "Monk, these are bullshit. What happened to the Buddha's own philosophy of "come and see, don't come and believe"?"

Bhante was quiet a moment. Never a good sign.

"Tyler, don't be stupid. Don't judge what you have not tried. I'm leaving for a few months. When I come back, tell me what the Thirty Seven Practices really are. Explore them. Form a relationship. Then tell me if your life gets better."

Although I had studied buddhist teaching long before Bhante, while Bhante was gone I did this new work. I read countless versions of the Thirty Seven Practices and tried figuring out what they each meant. It was awesome and deeply frustrating. As I progressed I experience the ripping apart of old thoughts and

judgments and a re-aligning of my heart and brain to work in better harmony with each other. The process resonated deep, especially the teaching about Bodhisattva's, what the spiritual life of a Bodhisattva looks like. That landed hard. I'm fascinated and desirous to live in a way that allows me to have sturdy happiness amidst the enormous shit storm that is our current world.

A Bodhisattva is an ordinary person who takes up a spiritual practice in order to move them towards nobility, or what Buddhist's might call "Buddhahood".

All of us who direct our attention and life to practicing loving-kindness could be considered a bodhisattva. It's a coined term from Buddhism but I know many followers of Christ or Mohammad or science that I would describe as Bodhisattvas. It's a verb more than a noun. A person doing good. I've also seen it sported on numerous tea bags and on the side of Starbucks coffee cups. Mindfulness is so trendy these days, but that's not what I'll be talking about here.

Researching Bodhisattvas, you'll find miles of words strung together. Big words, little words and intellectual dissertations that I can hardly decipher. I find the language of our great religions and wisdom so unfortunate, written in a way a logical mind cannot interpret. I recently read a book about a dude who for one year attempted to "live the Bible" literally.

Christianity is not the only offender of this unfortunate wordsmithing. I can't find a religion or guru or philosopher who doesn't offend the logical mind. Even Buddhism, a set of wisdom teachings I find nearly unobjectionable, is riddled with language and descriptions that require inquiry and debate. Take for example this 600-year-old list of the Thirty Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva. Taken literally they can appear ridiculous. To figure it out, I've had to break them down and work my way through one by one, often word by word.

As an example;

*Right now, you have a good boat, fully equipped and available — hard to find.
To free others and you from the sea of samsara,
Day and night, fully alert and present,
Study, reflect, and meditate — this is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

What? I could re-read this mumbo jumbo a hundred times and come up with a different understanding. I researched Buddhist scholars to see what they all said about this practice. I found as many interpretations as I did people, each putting his or her own spin on it (just like I'm about to do!). For a while I declared it all bullshit. I hate things that are not simple and straightforward. I expressed my frustration to Bhante who rudely responded: "Tyler, if the thirty seven practices are written in a way you don't understand, stop complaining. Get to work!"

Simplify them. Make them meaningful to your daily life. Then share them with the world”

I hate it when he does that. I love it too.

According to Buddhist teachers, there are two reasons to understand and study these practices:

1) so you can solve your current problems and find sturdy happiness in this life.

2) so you can attain liberation and enlightenment.

These reasons were not enough for me. Despite resonating so strongly with Buddhism even in my early 20’s, I continued for years to bounce around and resist particular teachers or paths because I so firmly believed (and still mostly do) that we should just take what we need and leave the rest. But then one day a Buddhist nun invited by Bhante to speak at our temple asked me a simple question that forever changed me: *“If you always just take what you think you need and what feels good to you, how do you protect yourself from your own delusions? Isn't it within the framework of a proven path and exploring the uncomfortable that all real change happens?”*

With that simple query, she knocked my entire approach on its ass. I began a more sincere look at what The Buddha called the Middle Path. I stumbled upon an entire community of people to help me along. Eventually I came to understand why Bhante introduced the thirty seven practices and recognized that he had been teaching me a simple pre-determined path to live in truth and achieve the sturdy happiness I was after.

The 37 practices of a Bodhisattva have been incredible guideposts for me. Integrating each one into my life has been a long and arduous process. But I didn't give up— I would keep digging till I got to the roots because I wanted the peace, joy, authentic truth and sturdy happiness I've seen other people have who've followed this path.

You could practice these in order, but they aren't written that way. Life is not chronological. Grab the practice that works for you now. Things resonate most when we're ready.

Perfect Buddhas, source of all well being and happiness,

arise from accomplishing the excellent teachings,

and this depends on knowing the practices,

So I will explain the practices of Bodhisattvas.

THE 37 PRACTICES OF A BODHISATTVA

1. Extract the essence of goodness in all people and just focus on that.
2. Give up the stuff that's comfortable. Comfort triggers ignorance, anger or attachment.
3. Find a conducive place and lifestyle to learn and cultivate a deeper life.
4. Give up this (worldly) life, change your surroundings, become willing to go to any length to find happiness.
5. Give up negative friends.
6. Rely on teachers and wisdom teachings, don't always trust yourself and your delusions.

7. Take refuge in the Triple Gem, The Buddha, the dharma and the Sangha.
8. Reflect on the suffering, understand how it comes and goes and what triggers it.
9. Reflect on the overall suffering of life and accept it.
10. See our inter-connectedness, see all sentient beings as having been our own mother.
11. Practice the exchanging of self for others.
12. Transform your mind - see all harms as opportunities to cultivate virtue.
13. Transform suffering into your spiritual practice.
14. Return sincere praise in the face of criticism and slander.

15. View your critic and all difficult people as a spiritual teachers.
16. Practice the great heart of patience in the face of betrayal and disappointment.
17. Regard those who harm you through ill-will and jealousy as one's spiritual master.
18. Transform failures into life lessons and transform successes into gratitude.
19. Conquer pride.
20. Transforming the objects of anger and attachment into spiritual lessons.
21. Abandon pleasures of the senses which give rise to attachment.
22. Train your heart for ultimate compassion.

23. View objects of attachment as illusions, let them go.

24. View unpleasant situations like a dream, let them go.

25. Practice generosity.

26. Uphold morality.

27. Practice patience.

28. Cultivate joyful effort in helping everyone and everything.

29. Develop the power of concentration.

30. Cultivate wisdom by realizing emptiness.

31. Examine your own conduct for faults.

32. Avoid criticizing anyone.

33. Practice non-attachment.

34. Never express harsh words.

35. Apply antidotes to disturbing emotions.

36. Apply mindfulness and introspection for the welfare of all living beings.

37. Dedicate all merits towards the happiness of all living beings.