

# **Karma Chagme (1613-1678) on How to Guard the Three Vows: The Sun that Dispels the Darkness<sup>1</sup>**

English Translation by Jan-Ulrich Sobisch

Homage to the Guru Śākyamuni!  
I bow to the feet of the omniscient Sage.

The bhikṣu vajra holder<sup>2</sup> Tsöntrü asked:  
What are the boundaries for guarding the vows and pledges?

This [theme] is vast, has many [topics], and it cannot be  
exhaustively expressed in words  
It is the basis of debates among all the scholars in Central Tibet and Tsang.

The matchless king of tantras, Hevajra, teaches that  
first, one requests the vows of prātimokṣa,<sup>3</sup> of the bodhisattvas,  
and of mantra one by one,  
and then one has to perform the conduct of mantra.

In the mantra system of the ancient ones one obtains  
empowerment in the nine vehicles  
and thereby also all the three vows one by one.

These are practices that are trained.  
Already in India, there existed a threefold teaching system for them.  
The Sakyapas maintain the transformation of the three vows,  
the Kagyüpas maintain that the occasions for losing them are different,  
and Tsongkhapa maintains that one vow is respectively supported by another.

There are vajra holders among householders and bhikṣus.  
They have correct and incorrect tenets.

The Indian mahāpañḍita Śraddhākara  
was the father of Tipu Sang Ngag Dongpo.<sup>4</sup>  
He had obtained the ordinary accomplishments, but not the supreme ones.  
As a sign of his accomplishment, he placed vajra and bell in space.

The first of the three times he came to Tibet,  
he was called Śraddhākara by name.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is chapter five of vol. A of the *Ri chos mtshams kyi zhal gdams*, in: *rTsib ri spar ma, dKar rnying skyes chen du ma'i phyag rdzogs kyi gdams ngag gnad bsdus nyer mkho rin po che'i gter mdzod*.

<sup>2</sup> A “bhikṣu vajra holder” is a fully ordained monk who practices vajryāna.

<sup>3</sup> “Prātimokṣa” is sometimes translated as “individual liberation,” however, scholars do not agree on an etymology of the Sanskrit term. It refers to the teachings of the Buddha that are concerned with the disciplined conduct necessary to lay the foundation of and for advancing on the paths of meditative practices and wisdom. It includes teachings for householders and ordained persons. Since it is, like “vinaya,” such an essential term of Buddhism, I leave it untranslated.

<sup>4</sup> Tipupa Sang Ngag Dongpo, an Indian mahāsiddha of the 12th c. He is said to have been the reincarnation of Marpa’s son, Dar ma mdo sde.

He served as Lochen Rinchen Zangpo's guru.  
They translated the *Sarvavid* [*Vairocana*] and other yoga tantras.

When he came to Tibet for a second time,  
he was known by the name "Red Ācārya."<sup>5</sup>  
During that period, he only spread the path of desire and evil spells.  
Accepting payment for his magic, he made 300 *srang* of gold.

That period coincided with the Lord Atiśa's time,  
who was not pleased with his promotion of the path of desire  
and scolded and criticized him greatly.  
This topic is mentioned in the *Kadam Legbam*.<sup>6</sup>

According to his teaching system, at first, one requested the refuge vows,  
and so forth, up to the vows of a fully ordained monk one by one  
and maintained each of them for some years or months.

Then, by requesting the cultivation of the resolve for awakening (*bodhicitta*),  
the vows of prātimokṣa became the bodhisattva vows.  
From then on, not even a single Vinaya rule had to be guarded.  
The training of the bodhisattvas and the exchange [of happiness and suffering]  
(*tonglen*) were practiced for a few years.

Then, by requesting the four empowerments of mantra,  
those bodhisattva vows turned into the mantra vows.  
From then on, neither the vows nor the training of the bodhisattvas had to be guarded.  
Since one had become a mantra holder, it was allowed to take a wife,  
and taking one was free from the fault of the loss of [vinaya] vows.

Since the number of his followers increased significantly,  
"yellow householders"<sup>7</sup> spread everywhere in Ngari, Central Tibet, and Tsang.  
This is called "the perverted teaching of the Red Ācārya."  
It was scolded and rejected by all scholars and accomplished masters.

### **[The System of the Sakyapas]**

The system called "transformation and single essence of the three vows" is like this:  
When all the three vows have been requested one by one,  
they have been transformed into just the mantra vows.  
However, since they have a single essence, all three need to be guarded.  
Nowadays, this is maintained by those who follow the system of the Sakyapas.

When Śraddhākara came to Tibet for the last time  
and the translator Drogmi attended him as the guru,  
he taught many profound teachings such as the *Path with Its Fruit*

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<sup>5</sup> The "red Ācārya," together with the "blue robed ones," serve in Tibetan history books as the trouble makers of that time. They are accused of practicing vajrayāna in reckless ways. There is no historical evidence for Śraddhākara, the red Ācārya, and Gayadhara (who is mentioned below) to be one and the same person.

<sup>6</sup> The *Kadam Legbam* text was believed by some to have been taught by Atiśa to Dromtön. Its subject are the stories of the previous lives of Dromtön.

<sup>7</sup> "Yellow householders" are lay people who wear the yellow outer garments of monks. According to the vinaya, these garments are actually reserved for celibate ordained ones.

and the twenty-four *Cakrasaṃvara Rāle* tantras.

During that period, he was known under the name Gayadhara.

Both systems, i.e., the latter [Sakyapa system] and the one before that [i.e., of the ancient ones], are systems where the vows are transformed.

### [The Correct Nyingma System]

When the three vows have been requested one by one and individually guarded,  
and the channels and winds have become pliable,  
the vows of prātimokṣa are not lost  
even when one relies on the path of desire,  
and the vows of a full monk are not lost  
even though one practices forceful mantras, black magic,  
and the liberation of those on the ten fields.<sup>8</sup>

This too is a system of the transformation and a single essence of the three vows,  
as in the case of the Lord Orgyan and his twenty-five followers,  
who wore Dharma robes even though they engaged in union<sup>9</sup> and liberation.  
This is the correct system of the Nyingmapas.

### The incorrect Nyingmapa system

Having obtained the empowerment of the nine vehicles  
such as the [Düpe]-Do empowerment  
they fancied themselves to have obtained all the three vows,  
and not having requested the rules and vows of the Vinaya elsewhere,  
they wore the yellow dharma robe and carefully maintained the vows to be guarded.

This was stated in the prediction of the Great Orgyan:

They reckon to have obtained the vows from the empowerment.  
This is taught to be a sign of the deterioration of the Vinaya teachings.

This does not constitute a great fault or transgression.  
Such guarding of the Vinaya rules without having requested them  
has the one fault that great benefit does not arise.<sup>10</sup>  
This system spread from the Eastern border of Dokham.

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<sup>8</sup> “Liberation” is here a euphemism for killing and guiding to a buddha field. “Those of the ten fields” refers to people that act particularly harmful to the dharma, the guru, and fellow practitioners. Gampopa has taught that such a practice can only be done by someone who is able to revive a corpse (sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen, *Collected Works*, ed. Khasdub Gyatsho Shashin, 1975, vol. 1, pp. 163–168).

<sup>9</sup> “Union” refers to the “path of desire” (*chags lam*). Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön understands the term both in a wider and a narrower sense. In a wider sense, it refers to all practice methods that involve the cultivation of great bliss based on yogic exercises such as holding, reversing, spreading, etc., the breath (cf. his “inner profound teachings,” *Bri gung chos mdzod*, vol. sha, p. 200 ff.). Here, the cultivation of bliss does not necessarily (and actually: not usually) involve sexual activity, even though great desire may suddenly arise. Actual sexual activity is the basis for the path of desire in the narrower sense. Here, however, Jigten Sumgön showed himself extremely reluctant to teach these instructions. He says that he and Thaklung Thangpa were the only ones who received them from Phagmodrupa. When he bestowed them on his close disciple Dragpa Jungné, he made clear that they were only to be practiced at the very end of the tenth stage of the bodhisattvas, as the final leap to Buddhahood (*Spyan snga grags 'byung gis zhus pa'i zhu lan bco lnga pa, Jigten Sumgön's Collected Works*, vol. 8, 43–67, p. 55 ff.; also in the book edition of the *Nang gi zab chos*, vol. 5, p. 267). It thus appears that he taught these instructions because they were part of his spiritual heritage and needed to be passed on to keep the transmission intact, but not so much because there was an immediate need to put them into practice.

<sup>10</sup> Since vows are a very subtle kind of form, they cannot produce qualities in a person on whom they were not bestowed. The subtle form of a vow can only be transmitted in a proper ceremony.

**[The principle maintained by all the great masters]**

The Lord Atiśa , the great Paṇḍita Śākyaśrī,  
and all the pure scholars and masters taught  
that one must request the three vows one by one  
and guard all rules that are to be individually guarded.

**[The system of Tsongkhapa]**

The root of all [vows] are the vows of prātimokṣa.  
They are like a water vessel without any fissures.  
Its interior space is filled with water, which is like the bodhisattva vows.  
On that appears the reflection of the moon, which is like the mantra vows.  
If the receptacle breaks, the water is spilled, and the reflection of the moon vanishes.

Similarly, when the vows of prātimokṣa are lost,  
both the bodhisattva and the mantra vows are destroyed.  
Therefore, Tsonkhapa, the actual Mañjuṣa himself, maintained  
that it is necessary to guard the vows of prātimokṣa carefully.  
Therefore the Gelugpas appear to be so strict with the Vinaya rules.

**[The system of Vibhūticandra]**

The meaning of the Indian treatise *Garland of the Three Vows*<sup>11</sup>  
composed by Vibhūticandra,  
a lesser paṇḍita from among the great paṇḍita Śākyaśrī's disciples,  
is that the vows of prātimokṣa resemble the stars,  
the bodhisattva vows are like the moon, and the mantra vows like the sun.

They exist individually<sup>12</sup> in the mental continuum of a person.  
Even if one of them is lost, the others are not.  
Even though the faults and transgressions of the losses exist individually,  
one must not fall into the lower realm through the loss of the lower vows:  
Even though, for instance, the moon and the stars vanish,  
there must not be harm through their darkness as long as the sun remains.

Therefore, if you can do so, you must guard all the vows,  
but if you are not able to cope with all of them, you should keep to the mantra vows as the  
highest and as the principal ones.

Since [most of] the Kagyūpas are practicing this system,  
the Kagyūpas are a bit lenient with the rules of the Vinaya.<sup>13</sup>

**[The teaching of the Drikungpa Jigten Sumgön]**

Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön, however, taught [in the *Single Intention*]:

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<sup>11</sup> Karma Chagme, who taught all this from memory while in retreat without the possibility to check his sources, has 'Od 'phro as the title. It is actually 'Od phreng as I have translated.

<sup>12</sup> That is to say that the three vow systems do not merge in the mental continuum, but continue to exist as separate, individual vows.

<sup>13</sup> Since the views of Karma Trinlepa (1456–1539) and Padma Karpo (1527–1592), which were quite different from Vibhūticandra's, must have been known to Karma Chagme, his claim that "[most of] the Kagyūpas are practicing this system" must have been a critique of the way the vows were actually handled by most people in the Kagyū school, but not of the views of the other great masters. He uses this statement as a polemical device to then introduce the teachings of the Drikung Kagyū master Kyobpa Jigten Sumgön (1143–1217), which he regarded as very precious.

“The three vows become increasingly more rigorous.”<sup>14</sup>

Therefore the mantra vows are not easy—they are very difficult to guard!

### [Dromtön’s Statement]

That sense was also expressed by the Victorious Drom[tön], who said:

Those who say that they guard the pledges of mantra practice  
—which cannot be practiced by those who are not among the Noble Ones—  
without guarding the rules of the vinaya and keeping its vows pure  
—which can easily be guarded even by ordinary beings—  
are great liars,

and he laughed.

### [The pure householder vajra holders]

Those who are called “householder vajra holders”  
are laypersons (*upāsaka*) who guard the vows of refuge,<sup>15</sup>  
the vows of approximation,<sup>16</sup> and the “few rules,”  
or they guard the three rules,<sup>17</sup> albeit not those of celibacy.  
Besides that, they guard the bodhisattva and mantra vows  
in accordance with the authoritative scriptures.

Even though they have children and wives, and so forth,  
they bestow mantra empowerment and teachings and occupy the position of a guru  
like the family lineages of the Sakyapas, Drugpas, and the revealers of treasures.  
These are the pure householder vajra holders.

### [The impure householders]

On the other hand, when someone requests the Vinaya rules and vows, and then,  
claiming to stem from a family lineage, increases his offspring  
while he is unfit [to practice] channels and winds,  
this perverted teaching of the red Ācārya will be the cause for the lower realms.

### [Sautrāntikas and Vaibhāṣikas on prātimokṣa]

Likewise, concerning the prātimokṣa vows, too,  
there also existed in India two systems,  
namely those of the Sautrāntikas and Vaibhāṣikas.  
If, according to the teaching system of the Vaibhāṣikas,

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<sup>14</sup> *dGongs gcig*, chapter 8, vajra statement 14.

<sup>15</sup> The “vows of refuge” are presented in three groups of three rules each. After one has taken refuge, one observes the following: 1a) One continually strives to worship the three jewels, b) one does not abandon the three jewels even at the cost of one’s life, c) one recollects the qualities of the three jewels and continually practices taking refuge; 2a) one does not turn to other deities, b) harm other beings and c) rely on non-Buddhist teachers, 3) one worships the images and representations of a) the Buddhas, b) the teachings and c) the community, even if they only consist of mere clay figures, single letters or shreds of robes.

<sup>16</sup> The “vows of approximation” approximate the ten vows of the novice ordination for the period of one day. See also next note.

<sup>17</sup> The “few” and the “three rules” refer to the five vows of the lay followers of the Buddha. One avoids 1) killing, 2) stealing, 3) sexual misconduct, 4) lying and 5) the consumption of intoxicating substances. Either two (“the few”) or three of these are to be observed (but one can also take all five). In the approximation vow (*upavasasamvara*), one enters into all five commitments for the duration of one day, but “sexual misconduct” is replaced by chastity, and there are other additional vows such as avoiding elevated seating, singing, dancing, jewelry, perfume, and “untimely meals.” Literally, *upavasa* means “approach” or “approximation,” i.e., a lay person approximates the lifestyle of the ordained ones for the period of one day.

one of the four principal Vinaya rules<sup>18</sup> was lost,  
all the vows were lost and disappeared.  
If, for example, there exists a precious wish-fulfilling jewel  
in a house with four entrances,  
this is as when a thief comes into the house through any of its entries.  
It is similar since after the jewel is lost, there is no more jewel.

According to the system of the Śrāvaka-Sautrāntikas,  
all the vows did not get lost through a single loss.  
Even if, for instance, a full monk lacked chastity,  
if, since they continued to exist without loss, he guarded the three other vows,  
they said that there was a benefit, and he was called a “monk with damaged vows.”

The Kagyupas also maintain this [system of the Śrāvaka-Sautrāntikas].  
Jigten Sumgyi Gönpö taught in his vajra-statements (3.10.):  
“Even guarding one [vow] will be the cause for nirvana.”  
The meaning [is like this]: [Once] a disciple, a full monk, went wrong  
when he, even though killing hen and pigs to sustain his male offspring,  
still kept his vessel of consecrated water fastened [to his girdle]  
and took water from it.  
Therefore, all of his fellow monk students complained about him.

Jigten Gönpö said: “Do not complain about him!  
Even guarding one [vow] will be the cause for nirvana.  
Even if a full monk has completely lost all of his vows,  
he is still a ‘full monk with damaged [vows].’  
Whenever he commits an unchaste act, etc.,  
a fault consisting of a transgression that is like newly losing that vow occurs.  
Thus, the [stream of] faults consisting of transgressions is [only] interrupted  
when the ‘corpse of the vows’ has been surrendered.<sup>19</sup>  
Therefore, as long as the ‘corpse of the vows’ is not surrendered,  
even those revered ones who have gone wrong are counted among the revered ones!”

Thus, because a full monk with rotten Dharma robes  
had left his son and wife at the edge of a field,  
had hung his begging bowl on a branch of a tree,  
was plowing and cultivating a field,  
and had his iron plow red with blood  
since many sentient beings like wiggling worms had died,  
the householder called Iron-leg said  
at the second of the three times he went to the Potala:<sup>20</sup>

“If you, a monk-gone-wrong, need to plow,  
at least do not hold on to your begging bowl and Dharma robes!  
You hurt the teachings!”

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<sup>18</sup> The four roots of the vinaya: Not to kill, steal, lie and engage in sexual conduct. The roots are only considered to be completely destroyed in the case of particularly serious violations, such as when a human being has been killed or one lies to the guru about one’s spiritual abilities.

<sup>19</sup> “The corpse of the vow“ is the expression for vows that are no longer maintained and returned to the teacher. One hands back the robes and states clearly that one does not want to continue to maintain the vows.

<sup>20</sup> This refers to the Indian mountain Potala, the seat of Avalokiteśvara.

Since he said that, [the monk] gave [them to him], he took them away,  
and hid them at a clean place.

Then, when he had reached the Potala,  
he did not see even a single assembly of gods, as he had before.  
Therefore, after he had performed immeasurable prostrations and circumambulations,  
he [still] did not see the Tārā with the furrowed brows,<sup>21</sup> and so forth,  
and when he reached the peak, it was utterly enveloped with fog.  
He was unable to open the gate of the palace and was held up for a long time.

When he, having done many prostrations and circumambulations, was admitted inside,  
he inquired: “Why isn’t it like before?” The reply was:

You are veiled because you separated the person on the path,  
who [once] had sought disciplined conduct, from the garbs of the revered ones.  
If that person would not be separated from his garbs now,  
he would still possess in his mind the mindfulness of the life of a revered one.  
Now, he is without attentiveness towards virtue, and he will be born in a hell.  
That evil obscures you.

Then he returned to that path and handed back the dharma robes and the begging bowl.

The meaning of this is expressed in the *Sūtra of the White Lotus*:

All those who have been ordained by the Lord of the Sages into the teachings,  
no matter which nonvirtuous deeds and heinous crimes  
they have committed in this life,  
will obtain—even though they will experience the suffering of the three lower realms  
during a period of many hundred thousand lives—a human body  
at the end of the period of the teachings bestowed by Buddha *Mos pa*,  
the last one of the one-thousand Buddhas [of this eon],  
and they will obtain the state of an Arhat if they are of the hīnayāna family,  
and the joyous level, if they are of the mahāyāna family,  
and not a single one of them will be left behind in samsara.  
This is due to the power of the Buddha’s aspiration.

Therefore that was the purpose of bestowing ordination to everyone  
without investigating whether they would be able to keep the vows or not,  
even though it was clear to the learned and accomplished ones,  
such as the father [Jigten Gönpo] and his sons, what would happen to them  
and how it would turn out.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This is one of the Tārās from the group of twenty-one Tārās.

<sup>22</sup> Jigten Sumgön is known to have ordained a vast number of monks. Several of the vajra statements in his *Single Intention* are the basis for such a practice, such as the one mentioned here that even guarding only one vow will lead to nirvana, or another one (3.10), according to which “it is taught that the fault of not obtaining [the vow] is greater than the fault of an impaired vow” (3.18). He maintained that once one has received a vow, one has the opportunity to recall it and develop regret for breaking it. Not having received the vow, one simply continues to practice nonvirtue without that opportunity, either because one remains ignorant about the nonvirtue one has committed or because one mistakenly believes that most of the rules of the ordained ones are mere regulations for the ordained sangha, but do not pertain to actual nonvirtue. That the vinaya vows were not only meant for nuns and monks, but for everyone since they are all based on the Buddha’s insight into the true reality

Someone who—after having taken the vows—is not able to follow the rules, will suffer terrible sufferings in the lower realms and hells, but he will be liberated in the end.

This is called “limited samsara.”

Those who commit nonvirtuous acts without having taken the vows will never be liberated from their samsaric existence.

This is called “unlimited samsara.”

The meaning of this was explained in the *Single Intention*:

"It is taught that the fault of not obtaining [the vow] is greater than the fault of an impaired vow."<sup>23</sup>

“A campaka flower, even when withered, cannot be matched by ordinary flowers. My hearer [monks] may be bad, but they should never be disparaged by ordinary people!”  
The Bhagavan Sage himself said this.

In the future, when the teachings of the Sage will be destroyed, all red and yellow dyed clothes will be collected by the gods and used as objects of worship. They will erect a stupa on the top of Mount Meru, [place the clothes in it] and worship the stupa. After the teachings have disappeared, clothes no longer take on color. The meaning of this has been clearly taught in some sutras, such as the *avadānas*.

The meaning of this is the following: The Buddha taught that after one has taken refuge in the sangha, one must henceforth pay respect to all those who wear yellow garments. Ngog, the great translator, an emanation of Mañjuśrī,<sup>24</sup> put yellow shreds of clothing, which he found amidst the dirt of the rubbish heap, on the middle of his hat, which was made up of patches, and said: “The minds of those who wore such clothes has never been without at least one virtue.”

Chökyi Wangchug,<sup>19</sup> my unsurpassed teacher, rolled up the sitting mats of the [monks’] assembly hall and placed them on his head. He put the dust that trickled out of the mats on his tongue. Whenever he entered the hall, he offered prostrations to the assembly. When he left, he walked backward and never turned his back on them.

If I examine the meaning of all these facts carefully,

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of virtue and nonvirtue is one of the most fundamental teachings of the *Single Intention* (vajra statements 3.10–15).

<sup>23</sup> *Single Intention* 3.18.

<sup>24</sup> Ngog Lotsāva Loden Sherab, 1059–1110.

<sup>19</sup> The sixth Sharmapa Ngawang Chökyi Wangchug (1584–1630). He was a brother of the first Chetsang and Chungtsang Rinpoches, Konchog Rinchen (1590–1655) and Rigdzin Chökyi Dragpa (1595–1659). Like his brother, the first Chungtsang Rinpoche, the sixth Sharmapa—teacher of Karma Chagme—wrote a commentary on the *Single Intention*.

I conclude that one must not wrongly ascribe mistakes,  
have wrong views about, and reprimand or slander  
all those, without distinction, who wear yellow garments.  
They should all be seen as the sangha refuge.  
Thereby one will gain immeasurable merit.

### **[The disadvantages of damaging the vows]**

One should not think  
that ordination alone is sufficient!  
How could for us who wish to go from one happy existence to another,  
the mere fact that samsara is limited will be sufficient?

Even if you have a correct view,  
if you do not confess in the confessional ceremony with every detail  
your violations of the rules of the Vinaya through your actions  
and promises not to commit them in the future,  
then, as the *Sāgara Nāgarāja Paripṛcchā Sūtra* clearly states,  
you will be reborn as a naga.

Born as a naga, you harm others and [cause] leprosy,  
and fear such things as the raining down of hot sand,  
the blazing hot sun, punishment by the king, and garudas—  
how can you endure such suffering?  
Presently, all beings believe in you and consider you a practitioner of the dharma.  
When you die and are reborn among nagas and maras,  
what could be dirtier and worse than this?

Similarly with those who have impaired pledges of mantra:  
they will never leave the vajra hell.  
If you practice mantra and consider the guru as your foe,  
you will be born in the families of demons, such as mara, gyalgong or damsi.  
Mostly, all practitioners of the dharma who have impaired pledges  
will be born in the retinue of king Pekar.  
Oh, dear! Look at yourselves with compassion!

### **[Summary of all vows]**

The three vows of refuge, the five of the householders,<sup>25</sup>  
the ten vows of ordained novices,<sup>26</sup>  
the two hundred and fifty-three vows of fully ordained monks,<sup>27</sup>  
the vows of the bodhisattvas,<sup>28</sup> the four white and the four black dharmas

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<sup>25</sup> These were explained above.

<sup>26</sup> These are the four roots of the vinaya, including celibacy, and additional vows such as avoiding intoxication, elevated seating, singing, dancing, jewelry, and perfume.

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the ten vows of the novices, the fully ordained ones have to follow a large catalogue of vows concerning the life in the sangha and regulating the contact with the layity. As mentioned in footnote 22, Jigten Sumgön maintained that these vows were formulated by the Buddha due to his insight into the nature of reality. Thus, those who do not hold these vows, but still act according to them, avoid nonvirtuous acts.

<sup>28</sup> There are different sets of vows for the bodhisattvas. Candragomin has summarized them in his *Twenty Verses (Bodhisattvasaṃvaraviṃśaka 6–7)*, translation by Mark Tatz), forming the Yogācāra tradition of the bodhisattva vows:

(6) With attachment to gain and respect,  
Praising oneself and deprecating another;

that are to be accepted and rejected,<sup>29</sup>  
the eighteen and the twenty transgressions,<sup>30</sup>  
the fourteen root pledges of the mantra vows<sup>31</sup> and the eight grave transgressions,<sup>32</sup>

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Stingily not giving Dharma and wealth  
To the suffering, [poor] and forsaken.  
(7) Heedless of another's confession,  
Striking him out of anger;  
Rejecting the Greater Vehicle,  
And showing what appears like good Dharma.

The *Twenty Verses* are a summary of the ethics chapter of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

<sup>29</sup> The four white dharmas: (1) Never consciously telling lies, ranging from “even if it costs one's life” to “even for fun;” (2) always maintaining an altruistic motivation, never deviating from it, and not deceiving the beings; (3) cultivating the certainty that all bodhisattvas are buddhas and praising them; (4) motivating the beings regarding the unsurpassable awakening and the great vehicle, without giving up the lesser vehicles.

The four black Dharmas: (1) To deceive the guru; (2) to slander those who have cultivated the resolve for complete awakening; (3) to have no faith in spiritual merit and repent virtuous actions; (4) To deceive the beings.

<sup>30</sup> According to the *Madhyamakās*, depending on which basic text they follow, there are eighteen or more root vows of the bodhisattvas. In his *Sikṣasamuccaya*, Śāntideva cites the *Ākāśagarbhasūtra* with nineteen transgressions, the first six of which apply to “kings and ministers.” The remaining twelve roots are for beginners and average bodhisattvas:

- (1) To teach emptiness to the unprepared so that they lose faith;
- (2) to induce someone to give up the great vehicle;
- (3) to induce someone gifted only for the small vehicle to enter the great vehicle;
- (4) to believe that one cannot remove the stains in the small vehicle;
- (5) out of greed for wealth and fame, to praise oneself and disrespect others;
- (6) falsely claiming that one has realized emptiness;
- (7) inducing others to punish a monk;
- (8) inducing a monk to abandon his meditation;
- (9) giving up the decision to awaken;
- (10-12) being stingy, angry, or hypocritical.

Only one root is taught for those bodhisattvas who are particularly blunt, namely at least not to give up the resolve for awakening.

<sup>31</sup> There are countless pledges in the different tantras and tantra classes. After one has been initiated into one of the highest tantras, the fourteen root transgressions mentioned here are especially important:

- (1) To disrespect the vajra master;
- (2) to disobey the Buddha's instructions;
- (3) to be angry with one's vajra siblings;
- (4) to give up love, even for a single being;
- (5) to lose bodhicitta;
- (6) to disregard religious teachings;
- (7) to reveal secrets to the immature;
- (8) to disregard one's psycho-physical constituents as something ordinary;
- (9) to disregard that which is pure by nature;
- (10) to feel affection for the wicked;
- (11) to construct mental concepts of the ultimate truth;
- (12) to cause someone to lose faith;
- (13) to reject the substances of the pledges of mantra;
- (14) to disrespect women.

<sup>32</sup> The eight serious violations are:

- (1) To engage (in the activities of the mantra) with women who have no pledges;
- (2) to get into conflict with others during the activities of the mantra;
- (3) to accept the external and internal nectar of the pledges from women who are not qualified in the sense of the mantra;
- (4) not to teach mantra although it has been requested by qualified students;
- (5) to answer qualified questions about mantra evasively;
- (6) to spend more than one week with those who despise the great vehicle;
- (7) to consider oneself a mantra adept if one knows only some of the rituals of the stage of cultivation;
- (8) to reveal secrets to unqualified persons.

the roots of the body, speech, and mind of the Nyingmapas  
and the twenty-five branches.  
These were taught in detail as the hundred thousands of millions.

In brief, the roots of all these vows are as follows:  
The entire prātimokṣa is included in avoiding harm for others  
together with the mental basis for that.  
The entire system of the bodhisattva vows is included in bringing benefit to others  
together with the mental basis for that.  
The entire system of the pledges of mantra is included in one-pointed devotion to the guru.

If you say: “In detail, it is too detailed, in brief, it is too brief;  
but what is practiced concretely?”  
[I reply]: Preserve the four roots as if they were your life,  
abandon alcohol and meat [of animals killed] for your sake, etc.—  
these are the purest vows of this day and age.  
They are also of utmost importance for the vows of the bodhisattvas and mantra.

Whatever activities of virtue accumulation one pursues,  
the core of the entire training of the bodhisattvas  
is the cultivation of the resolve to awaken for the sake of all beings,  
and to make wishes for the dedication of the root of virtue  
for the benefit of all beings  
and for attaining perfect awakening.  
The meaning of this [is explained in the sutra of] detailed advice to the king.

Whoever your root guru is  
—whether ordinary being or a buddha—  
think of him as being inseparable from the lord of the [buddha] family  
on the crown of your head.  
This is the pledge of the guru’s body.

Practice whatever is appropriate for you:  
The deity of meditation with your body, recitations through your speech,  
holding the breath or vajra recitation.  
This is the pledge of the speech of the deity of meditation.

View your mind as emptiness, mahamudra,  
perform as best as you can on days such as the tenth of the month timely offerings,  
the tantric feast, and torma offerings!  
Never explain to those who hold wrong views the vital points of mantra.  
This is the pledge of the dakini’s heart.

Continue your efforts regarding the offering of tormas and the torma  
of the twenty-ninth day of the last month.<sup>33</sup>  
Perform as best you can on the appropriate days of the year, the appeasements  
and petitions, and the feast offering.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The twenty-ninth day of the last month is the penultimate day of the Tibetan year. The focus of this torma offering ritual is to come to a conclusion with the past year by repelling negativity and misfortune and thus averting it for the next year. The ritual is traditionally performed in all households, monasteries, and retreat places all over Tibet on this day.

In it are contained the pledges concerning the gods of wealth [who provide] qualities and the protectors of the teaching [who engage in various] activities.

Watch at all times the essence of your mind.

That is the pledge of liberating one's mental continuum through realization.

From time to time, train in the visualizations of the compassionate exchange of yourself and others,<sup>35</sup>

fulfill the hopes of your trainees concerning empowerments, transmissions, instructions, and so forth.

This is the pledge of bringing the mental continuum of others to maturity through compassion.

Make aspirations and dedications that everyone who is connected [to you] through seeing, hearing, remembering, and touching, may be born in the buddha field of great bliss.

This is the pledge of the great vehicle that samsara is to be completely emptied.

In this way, the pledges are differentiated and summarized.

They are clearly differentiated and easy to practice.

### **[Colophon]**

This was taught by Rāga Asya (Karma Chagme) during the noon session of the twenty-fourth day of the eighth month of the horse year.<sup>36</sup>

It was written down by Tsöntrü Gyatso, who had requested the teaching.

If there are mistakes in it, I confess them before the scholars.

May all beings bring the three vows to perfection through this virtue.

[This translation was made in August 2000 in Hamburg and slightly revised in 2020 by Jan-Ulrich Sobisch.]

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<sup>34</sup> Since one cannot avoid mistakes in ritual practice regarding the protectors, etc., “amendments” must be made on certain days to appease these deities. “Petitions” are requests to the deities regarding fortunate conditions in the future. The “feast offering” is one of the obligations one has towards the *yidam* deity.

<sup>35</sup> Literally, the “sending” of one’s happiness to others and the “taking” upon oneself the suffering of others.

<sup>36</sup> The text literally says “the ninth day of the red half of the month,” which refers to the second half of the month with a waning moon. Since only the animal sign is mentioned, three years are most likely, namely 1642, 1654, or 1666.