

The Method for Observing the Eight-Branch One-Day (*bsnyen gnas*) Vows

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Now listen with a motivation of bodhicitta set upon supreme awakening, and think: “Having taken the ‘healing and purifying’ (*gso sbyong*) vows of the Great Vehicle, I will keep them so that all sentient beings, limitless as space, may attain the state of perfect and complete buddhahood.”

The observation of the eight temporary vows of the lesser vehicle referred to as “the eight-branch one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vow” is observed by householders. When [these vows] are observed while imbued with the intent of bodhicitta in accordance with the Mahāyāna, they become the discipline of refraining from misdeeds. In this practice, one combines the observance [of the temporary vows] with the generation stage practice of the deity yoga of Noble Avalokiteśhvara, and, for this reason, it becomes a yogic practice of the Action Tantra (*kriyātantra*) class of the Secret Mantra, and a branch of the Secret Mantra vows. Thus, when one commits to apply one’s own mind-stream in the manner of the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past, and one does not transgress their ways, it is called “the discipline of vowed restraints” or a “vow.” The following is a brief commentary on the meaningful parts of the text, one by one, beginning with: **Just as the previous [tathāgatas, arhats, the perfectly complete buddhas...].**

Since the perfectly complete buddhas are those who have proceeded in accordance with the natural state just as it is, they are **tathāgatas** (thus-gone ones). Because they have separated from the enemy—the four māras—they are **arhats** (foe-destroyers). And since they have completely perfected the qualities of renunciation and realization; having awakened from the deep sleep of ignorance, and having come to understand all knowable phenomena, they are **perfectly complete buddhas**.

For example, when the heavenly steed of a wheel-turning king enters into battle with the enemy, it does so intrepidly and without travail; it is willing to forsake its own life in order to protect the king. Likewise, because they show the unmistakable path to liberation and omniscience to all sentient beings, and because they are solely devoted to the purpose of others, [the tathāgatas] are **like a heavenly steed**. Furthermore, because it is with great compassion that they carry the burden of benefitting all sentient beings as limitless as space without being asked, and since they [also] demonstrate the unsurpassed meaning of the Mahāyāna, they are **like a great elephant**.

[Furthermore], having brought [their task] to completion, they **did what needed to be done**; having actively sought the benefit of others, they have **completed their tasks**, abandoning the obscurations of karma and afflictions. They have **laid down all their burdens** having achieved nirvāṇa: the state beyond sorrow, and they **reached their own goal**. Due to eliminating all distorted views—which prevent escape from the saṃsāric state—and all the afflictive emotions, they have **completely destroyed their bonds to existence**. By demonstrating the Dharma that is virtuous in the beginning, middle, and end, their **speech is utterly perfect**. Having severed all ties with saṃsāric existence, their **minds are perfectly free**. And because they possess the wisdom that knows everything, their **wisdom is completely liberated**. This describes the qualities [that arise in] whomever follows the example of the tathāgatas.

Thereafter, since [the tathāgatas] have forsaken concern for themselves, [in order] to show [others how] to train in the motivation of bodhicitta, [it says that they act] **for the sake of all sentient beings**. Because they temporarily establish [beings] in a higher birth, they **benefit them**. Because they ultimately establish [beings] in definite goodness, they **liberate them**. Because they have purified karmic results of stinginess, [it says] they **eliminate famine**. And, because they have purified the karmic results of hatred, [it says they act] **to heal beings from illness**. [Furthermore], **the complete perfection of Dharma directed towards awakening** [accomplished by them] is the path, and **the definitely realized unsurpassed, perfectly complete awakening** [accomplished by them] is the result.

[Regarding this practice], the second Buddha, [Padmasambhava] of Uddiyāna has said, ‘It fully “restores” (*so*) all virtue, and “purifies” (*jong*) all negativity without exception. Since it restores virtue and completely purifies negativity, the Tathāgata has called this the practice of Sojong.’ Thus, it is said that one should think, “I shall take up and keep the Sojong vows properly. And for the sake of all sentient beings I shall benefit them, and thereby liberate them, and so on. [With this intention] I shall take up the eight-branch vows and keep them properly and without corruption from this very moment until sunrise tomorrow” [Keeping this in mind], one repeats accordingly.

[The words starting with], **Just as the previous [...]** constitute the *Prayer of Taking the Eight Temporary Vows*. [These eight branches are then further divided into] the four branches of discipline, the single branch of attentiveness, and the three branches of subduing discipline.

The first branches are the four branches of discipline which restrain one’s own mind from unwholesome actions. Since these are the roots of all vows, they are known as the four roots. They are as follows: The first is **to not kill** [any being]. Besides [not killing] a human being, [one should not] even [kill] a louse or its eggs, which [also] belong to [the realm] of living beings. The second [root] is **to not steal**. Besides [not stealing] large possessions owned by others, [one should not] even [steal] a morsel of food. The third [root] is **to abandon non-celibate conduct**. Besides [not] pursuing the meeting of males and females for the enjoyment of sexual intercourse, [one should not] even look at one another with a lustful mind. The fourth [root] is **to not speak lies**. Besides [not] telling a great lie, [such as] falsely proclaiming oneself as having high human qualities or lying about having qualities on the bhūmis and paths that one does not have, [one should not] even fool others jokingly while playing around.

The single branch of attentiveness is **to abstain from alcohol**. If one does not abandon this [action], one’s mind will become careless. When intoxicated by alcohol, one cannot not be aware of every aspect of what to do and what not to do, and one also forgets about the vows one has taken. Due to this, one engages in non-virtuous actions and is therefore unable to keep any of one’s vows. For this reason, one should abandon all intoxicating food and

drink, such as alcohol made from fermented grain such as wheat or barley, or alcohol made from honey, flowers, or any other fermented substance, as well as intoxicating fruit or roots.

As for the three branches of subduing discipline, in order to refresh the recollection of one's vows, one subdues all of one's activities as a lay householder and follows after the excellent conduct of bodhisattvas. Thus, one engages in subduing.

First, one, (a) abandons dressing up and looking attractive, or applying sweets scents like camphor and sandalwood, which are applied with the intention to charm; [then], (b) one abandons adorning one's body with garlands of flowers, jewels, and so on; (c) one abandons earrings, bracelets, and so on; which are **the three kinds of adornment**; (d) one abandons moving one's limbs for the sake of frolic and laughter, and, (e) one vows to remain silent in various ways, which refers to abandoning **the three kinds of entertainment**: dancing, singing melodiously by elevating and lowering one's voice, and playing instruments, such as string instruments or flutes.

Second, one **abandons eating at inappropriate times** and does not consume, from noon until sunrise the next day, any food (such as grains and fruit) to quell one's hunger. One may, however, drink liquids (such as water and tea) to quell the pangs of thirst.

Third, one **abandons sitting on high and luxurious seats**. This means not to sit upon any seat higher than one cubit, or upon seats [bedecked with] silks and brocades, or tiger's and leopard's [skin], which are unsuitable for ordinary people.

[Thus], when the three kinds of entertainment, including dancing, and the three kinds of adornment, such as garlands, are considered as one branch, these are the three branches of subduing discipline. Thus, thinking, "I shall keep these eight branches without corruption until sunrise tomorrow," one repeats the following: **From this moment, I will not kill [...]**

In order to develop such discipline to perfection, the *Dhāraṇī of the Essence of the Six Pāramitās of the Noble Amoghapaśha Sūtra* mentions the numerous benefits of this dhāraṇī such

as: by reciting this dhāraṇī of pure discipline, the entire accumulation of ethical discipline of the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the three times will be brought to perfection within one's own mind-stream, and all faults of one's previous violations of discipline will be purified, and henceforth [one's discipline] will not decline. Thus, repeat [the dhāraṇī]: **OM**

AMOGHA [...]

Furthermore, when the bodhisattvas of the past performed enlightened actions out of love—having made fervent aspirations throughout the three periods of the day and the three periods of the night—they [enjoyed] ease on the path, [the path] was applied with ease, and they completed the accumulations of many eons. Thus, one repeats the aspiration that completely perfects the pāramitā of discipline, which has arisen out of an aspiration of love:

[Through flawless] discipline in accordance with the rules of conduct, [...]

The glorious protector Āryā Nāgārjuna said, “Grant the vows of Sojong to men and women alike [so that they may obtain] the pleasing bodies of the gods who act as they wish.” Thus, in the past, when Lord Buddha was alive, even those who kept the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows a single time—with merely a selfish mind—were reborn in the God Realm of the Thirty-Three. Since even those who have slightly transgressed the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows will be reborn in the God Abodes of the Four Great Kings, it is said that the benefits [of taking the vows] are unfathomable. Moreover, it specifically states in the *Moon Lamp Sūtra* that, “The merit of practicing a single precept for a single day and night during an era when the holy Dharma is being destroyed and the teachings of the Sugata are coming to an end, is far greater to making offerings to millions of buddhas for inconceivable eons.”

Thus, it is of greater benefit to keep a single vow for a single day during the final times of the present Buddha's teachings, than it would have been to keep vows for a long time during former times when the teachings flourished. Furthermore, the benefits of taking vows with a mind of bodhicitta are immeasurable like space, and will lead to the attainment of the state of complete buddhahood. In particular, in the present context, by engaging in this practice in relation to a deity of the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna and the profound yogas of the Mantrayāna, one will join the ranks of the vidyādhara in this very life. And however long it

may take, it will not take more than sixteen lifetimes to attain the supreme siddhi of Mahāmudrā. Thus, rejoice! However, if you do not seal such virtues in the end with dedication, they can become exhausted through various conditions, such as anger. Therefore, please dedicate these roots of virtue toward great awakening by repeating the following: **By this merit [...]**, and thereby adorn the conclusion with a dedication.

This is a new, expanded version of the original text of the same title.

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