

The Benefits of the Mahāyāna Sojong Vows

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Namo Guru!

To briefly explain the benefits of the Mahāyāna Sojong [vows], here are the general benefits, specific benefits, and the elimination of doubts with respect to them both.

PART ONE: THE GENERAL BENEFITS

First, [with regard to the general benefits], there are three sections.

Benefit in terms of time

1.1. **The greater benefit in terms of time.** It is said in the *King of Samādhi Sūtra*, “When comparing someone with a pure mind who, for eons as numerous as there are sand grains in the Ganges, has honored trillions of buddhas with [offerings of] food, drink, parasols, flags, and rows of light offerings, to someone who has practiced a single precept day and night during an era when the holy Dharma is being destroyed and the Sugata’s teaching is coming an end, the latter will possess merit that is far greater than in the first case.” Thus, it is of far greater benefit to keep even a single precept for even just a single day during evil times such as these; a time when the teachings greatly decline, than it is to properly offer—for as many eons as there are sand grains in the River Ganges, all material things such as food and drink to many trillions of buddhas—at a time when the teachings have not declined. Thus, if one keeps the Sojong vows for even just a single time, merit equal to [the reaches of] space will arise of its own accord, and for however long that merit arises—for that long—perfect happiness will gradually arise. [Thus], if you can adopt this attitude, and you are able to take the Sojong vows for just a single day during evil times such as these, it is a far greater fortune and far more meaningful than finding millions of wish-fulfilling jewels.

Benefit regarding location

1.2. **The greater benefit in terms of location.** In the sacred words and commentaries, it is taught, not only once, that it is a far greater merit to practice a single virtue in an impure land such as this for as long as it takes to snap one’s fingers, than it is to practice perfect virtue for eons in the pure lands. Therefore, [the benefits] are greater within impure [conditions]. [Thus], having taken up the eight-branch Sojong vows in an impure place such as this, if one keeps them even for the duration it takes to snap one’s fingers, the merit is infinite. If such merit were to materialize, [even] a highest order thousand-fold world system could not easily contain it.

The nine-fold benefit in terms of essence

1.3. The greater benefit in terms of its essence in nine parts.

1.3.1. **The benefit of being unaffected by harmful spirits.** In the Vinaya there is a story that says, “Long ago, there was an old woman who took the one-day eight-branch Sojong vows. One night, at around midnight, she was sent by King Prasenajit to deliver food to a prisoner. Along the way she met with three types of non-human beings, but they were each unable to affect her adversely.” Thus, during the time one keeps the vows one has accepted, no non-human being whatsoever can affect one adversely. This is the true nature of interdependent connections. In the *Sūtra of Totally Pure Discipline (Śīlasaṃyukta Sūtra)* it says, “If even a black great nāga—a venomous snake—is harmless to one endowed with discipline, what need is there to mention any other [kinds of harm]?” Thus, it is said that if even the Black Nāga Devil—the most vicious being among non-humans—cannot harm someone endowed with vows, what need is there to mention [harm caused] by anyone else? Therefore, the observance of inner vows as a method of protection from outer harm is the greatest pith instruction.

1.3.2. **The benefit of being protected by the deities.** It is taught in many sūtras that if you properly keep the vows you have accepted, the deities who delight in the forces of goodness will protect you unremittingly, day and night. [Thus] it is sure that you will be

protected by the deities for however long you do not impair the Sojong vows you have received.

1.3.3. The benefit of any kind of virtue becoming more powerful. It is said that, in general, it is a far greater merit to offer to the Three Jewels a single drop of ghee [in a butter lamp] with a wick as thin as a needle, than it is to offer a butter lamp the size of an ocean and a wick the size of Mount Meru, without [having taken] a vow. It is clearly of far greater benefit to practice a single root of virtue for the briefest moment after having taken the Sojong [vows], than it is to practice many roots of virtue for eons when one has not taken [the vows].

1.3.4. The benefit of accomplishing all aspirations. In general, it is said that by keeping pure discipline, one's aspirations will be accomplished without a doubt, just as one has wished. Thus, [regarding] all the aspirations one makes after having taken the eight-branch Sojong vows, for as long as the vows remain unimpaired, [your aspirations] will be accomplished.

1.3.5. The benefit of obtaining the excellent support of gods and humans. It is said that if one observes of the eight-branch one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows for even a single time, one will obtain the exceptional physical support of gods and humans. There are infinite stories corresponding to this, so there would be no end to writing them down.

1.3.6. The benefit of encountering the teachings of Maitreya. [Maitreya] has said, "Whoever listens with faith to [the Buddha] Śākyamuni's teachings and keeps the eight-branch one-day vows will be born within my following." Thus, Maitreya himself has recognized that if one keeps the Sojong vows, one will be reborn within his retinue. But in the future, [when one] encounters Jetsün Maitreya's teachings, even though one may wish to bring saṃsāra to an end, one must [still] make efforts in taking up and keeping the Mahāyāna Sojong vows. If you think that, because the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) and Sojong vows are not the same, that it is not suitable to apply the benefits of the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows to the Sojong [vows], you are wrong, [since] the number of vows to

be kept and their essence are the same. Therefore, not only will all the benefits of the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows [also] arise in [the context of] Sojong, there are great differences in the object of intent—of whether or not all sentient beings are one’s object of attention, and so forth. Thus, it stands to reason that it is said to be of far greater benefit than the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) [alone].

1.3.7. The benefit of becoming worthy of honor by all gods and humans. [When Indra] said [to Lord Buddha] that “a person who keeps the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows on the full moon, the new moon, and the eight day [of the lunar month] will become like me,” the Buddha replied, “Please don’t say that! [Actually], such a person will become like me.” Accordingly, before one has taken vows, one might be inferior, like a dog. But from the moment one takes on vows and guards them, and until those vows decline, one is like Lord Buddha and is worthy of honor and respect by all gods and humans. [Thus], it should be understood that the difference between superior and inferior lies in whether or not one has taken vows.

1.3.8. The benefit of ease in practice. It is said that “[He who knows reality has taught that] all recitations and austerities, although practiced for a long time, [are meaningless if done with a mind distracted elsewhere]”.¹ Thus, it is [usually] a requirement that one’s mind remain undistracted in the beginning, middle, and end whenever one engages in recitations, austerities, or other spiritual practices. If one does not, hardships will become meaningless, since the benefits (as explained here) will not arise. However, with this practice it is not like that. If one’s awareness was focused when one initially took [the vows], even if one becomes distracted, it will not constitute a hindrance to [receiving] the benefits. Thus, this [practice] is easier than other spiritual practices, as the observances are few and the duration of observance is short, [so this practice] is carried through with ease and so on. In brief, there is no practice that is easier to perform or is more meaningful than this and similar practices.

¹ Śāntideva’s *Bodhisattva-caryāvatāra*, chapter five, verse 16.

1.3.9. **The benefit of attaining liberation and omniscience.** The *Sūtra Requested by Indra* says, “One who keeps the eight-branch one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows on the eight and fifteenth day, and during the month of great miracles, will become a Buddha.” There are infinite [accounts] such as this, so there would be no end to writing them down.

PART TWO: THE SPECIFIC BENEFITS

Second, regarding the specific benefits, there are temporary benefits and ultimate benefits.

The eight temporary benefits

2.1. **The eight [temporary] benefits to abandoning the eight things to be abandoned.** (1) By having abandoned killing, one’s life will be long in successive lives, and illness will not arise. (2) By having abandoned stealing, one will obtain perfect wealth in successive lives, and one’s wealth will be enjoyed freely, without travail by others. (3) By having abandoned non-celibate conduct, one will enjoy a good body and a beautiful complexion throughout the succession of all of one’s lives. (4) By having abandoned speaking lies, one will not be deceived by others, and one’s words will be trusted throughout the succession of all of one’s lives. (5) By having abandoned alcohol, one’s mindfulness will be firm, one’s sense faculties will be clear, and one will be perfectly endowed with intelligence throughout the succession of all of one’s lives. (6) By abandoning sitting on high and luxurious seats, one will be praised and honored by others throughout the succession of all of one’s lives, and one will enjoy many excellent seats and mounts. (7) By having abandoned eating at inappropriate times, one will obtain perfect food and drink, and there will be good harvest throughout the succession of all of one’s lives. (8.a) By having abandoned perfume, garlands, and so forth, one’s body will have a pleasant smell, a fine complexion, and an attractive shape throughout the succession of all of one’s lives, and (8.b) by having abandoned dancing, singing, and so forth, one’s body and mind will be tamed, and one’s speech will be virtuous, proclaiming the pleasing sound of Dharma throughout the succession of all of one’s lives.

The eight ultimate benefits

2.2. The ultimate benefits, of which there are also eight. (1) The result of having abandoned killing is the accomplishment of vajra-like form. (2) The result of having abandoned stealing is that one becomes marked with wheels on the palms of one's hands and on the soles of one's feet. (3) The result of having abandoned non-celibate conduct is for one to have perfectly complete faculties and a [perfectly] developed body. (4) The result of having abandoned speaking lies is having a [Buddha's] tongue, [so long and broad that it can] cover one's own face, and [one's voice] will be sweet, like Brahma's melodious voice. (5) The result of having abandoned alcohol is [obtaining] a body [so beautiful] that no one can take their eyes off it. (6) The result of having abandoned eating at inappropriate times is that one will have all forty teeth, and they will be straight and well-arranged. (7) The result of having abandoned perfume, garlands, and so forth is that one's body will be totally pervaded by the sublime scent of discipline. (8a) The results of having abandoned dancing, singing, and (8b) sitting on high thrones, luxurious seats and so forth is that, (a) one's body will become adorned by all the excellent marks [of a Buddha] and (b) one will come to fully enjoy the three Dharma seats. All of these were recorded according to how they appear in the *Sūtra Requested by the Mendicant Senring*.

PART THREE: THE ELIMINATION OF DOUBTS

Third, [regarding the] the elimination of doubts, there are four [parts]: (1) an examination as to whether or not it is suitable to take [the vows] for less than a full day, (2) an examination as to whether or not [the vows can] arise beyond [the duration of] a full day, (3) an examination as to whether or not it is suitable to take [the vows] a single time to cover many days, and (4) an examination as to whether, if one breaks one vow, one can still keep the other vows.

Suitability for Less Than a Full Day

3.1. Regarding the first examination, the *Auto-Commentary to the Abhidharma* says that, "Although some butchers took the Nyen-ne (one-day) vows at night time and some adulterers took them at day time, practicing in this way could still have a result. "Thus, it

is taught that if one takes and keeps the Nyen-ne (one-day) vows for even just half a day, it is not an object of negation, but rather, there is a great purpose [in doing so]. Ideally, one should try to keep [the vows] for an entire day; however, if one is unable to do so, it is also suitable to take [the vows] for a half-day, or even for just a half an hour. Whichever way one takes them, [though], Bodhibhadra said that if one takes them properly just for the day time, one should determine that time as being “from this moment on until the sun is setting.” So whichever way one takes them—such as, only for the night and so on—one should take them based on [this example].

Whether or Not the Vows Can Arise Beyond a Full Day

3.2. Regarding the second examination, according to the lower vehicles, there is a one-day limit to the Nyen-ne (one-day) vows. Thus, even if one takes them, [the vows] do not arise beyond one full day, and they also do not arise if [taken for] less than a full day. However, it is different according to the Mahāyāna, where it is taught that [the vows can] arise until [one has attained] complete awakening. In Gyaltsab’s [Dharma Rinchen] detailed commentary on the *Abhidharma Samuccaya*, it says, “The assertion that the Nyen-ne (one-day) vows cannot arise for more than a single day is the tradition of some śrāvaka schools, and should thus be understood as a mis-apprehension.” However, Hevajra has said, “First, the Sojong [vows] should be bestowed.” To explain the meaning of this, Maitripa said, “With regard to bestowing the Sojong [vows] in the beginning, [one supplicates]: ‘Venerable One’ or ‘Master, please heed me! I the upāsaka, who am called ____, up until [attaining] the heart-essence of awakening [...]’.” The Omniscient Jamyang Zhepa therefore said that the practice of the eight-branch one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows, which are taken until [the attainment of] awakening, is mentioned in many sūtras and tantras. So if the one-day (*bsnyen gnas*) vows, [that are] taken until complete awakening, arise, then even more so will the Sojong vows arise. This will be also understood when the essential point that it is necessary to be imbued with the resolve of bodhicitta is considered.

Suitability of taking the vows a single time to cover a duration of many days

3.3. Regarding the third examination, even in the traditions of the lower vehicles, which assert that the arising of the Nyen-ne vows is limited to one day, one may take at one time [the vows] for many days. Thubten Jidor said, “For this reason, although there is a definite one-day limit for the Nyen-ne vows, it is suitable to take them at one and the same time when one will be observing them uninterrupted—for instance, for half a month during the [month] of great miracles. In this way, since one takes the one-day vows and recites [the vow-taking] up to fifteen times, there is no fault, [as] one has not altered the one-day vows.” Therefore, it says in the *Treasury Commentary* [on the *Abhidharmakoṣa*] that “[The vows] of half a month and so forth are recited on one day.”

So, in whichever way one takes [the vows], the liturgy that says, “From the first to the fifteenth day...” should be paraphrased according to how one intends to take [the vows]. [If one wishes to take them] on the full moons, the new moons, and the eighth lunar days for an [entire] year, it is taught that one should take them by paraphrasing [the liturgy] so that it says, “From this time on, for an entire year, on all the full moons, new moons, or the eighth lunar days...” This is how the [various] other [ways of taking the vows] should be understood. If it is suitable to take at one time the Nyen-ne vows for many days, then it is even more [suitable to do so with] the Sojong vows, so there is no need to explain [this here]. It is suitable to take [the vows] for however long one wishes to keep them. However, it would be best if one were able to take [the vows] anew every day, since there are many compelling reasons to do so, such as the [development] of stable mindfulness.

If one breaks a vow, one can still keep the other vows

3.4. Regarding the fourth examination, if one wonders whether or not there is still a point in keeping the other vows if one has broken an essential [vow] of the fundamental precepts, there is. There is a story about two mendicants in the past. One of them kept all of the eight vows, and he was reborn as a king in the human world. [But] the other [mendicant] ended up eating a warm meal, unable to resist his wife’s urging for him to do so. So, although he was not able to be reborn in the human world due to the fact that

he did keep the remaining vows, he was born as a nāga king, and eventually, both of them became arhats. Accordingly, the benefits of whichever [vows] one has kept and the disadvantages of whatever [vow] one did not keep come about separately, without becoming intermingled. So, even if one loses one [vow], it is still worthwhile to keep the others. Even just these [vows] alone are certainly worthwhile to keep during the times one is able to keep them without having to give them up. The benefits of keeping even just a single precept for a single moment are unfathomable due to the manner in which [these vows] arise as explained above. However, the benefits of keeping [the vows] do not arise merely by not engaging in transgressions. Thus, each of [the vows] must be preceded by the driving force of thinking: “From this time one and until...” In brief, do not deceive yourself, it is not [the same] as eating a big [piece of garlic] versus eating a small [piece] of garlic. In terms of the vows to be kept, even if one is not able to keep more than a single precept, one should keep it. In terms of the time of observance, even if one is not able to keep them for longer than a brief moment, one should keep them.

By the virtue arising from this composition, may all beings, following the steps of the fundamental precepts, ascend to the palace of great awakening! These words were put into writing by Ngagwang Phüntsook. [May it be] auspicious!

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