

The Eighteen Root Bodhisattva Vows



The eighteen root vows require that you abandon below actions of body, speech and mind:

1. Praising yourself and denigrating others.

You must avoid praising yourself and, with delusion, criticizing and denigrating others through wanting to gain offerings, respect or some sort of profit. Praising yourself and criticizing, denigrating or complaining about others creates heavy negative karma as well as breaking this root bodhicitta vow.

2. Not giving wealth and Dharma.

If you refuse to help others with financial assistance or Dharma teachings when you are able to do so in response to their requests, you will break this root vow. You must practice generosity of material things and generosity of Dharma to those who are suffering, confused and dissatisfied. You should teach those who want teachings and show them how to meditate and remove their suffering. This root vow is part of the perfection of generosity

3. Not forgiving though someone apologizes.

Refusing to accept the apology of some one who wrongs you and then apologizes, breaks this root vow. Also, if someone breaks vows or precepts and confesses that negative action to you, you must be prepared to accept their confession.

4. Abandoning the Mahayana.

If you reject the Mahayana, or any part of it, saying that it is not the teaching of the Buddha, you will break this root vow. To some, the Mahayana seems complicated and overly mystical. The teachings assert the existence of countless manifestations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Some people are unable to come to grips with this vast scope and such things as the sophisticated tantric methods contained in the Mahayana. They may come to think, or even say to others, 'The Mahayana is mixed with non-Buddhist practices. It is not a pure teaching of the Buddha as is the Hinayana.' By thinking in this way you abandon the Mahayana and break this vow

5. Stealing offerings to the Three Jewels. ("Kings vow")

You break this root vow if you steal anything that was offered, or intended to be offered, to the Three Jewels. Even stealing from others or taking things intended for others will break this vow.

6. Abandoning the Dharma. ("Kings vow")

Criticizing or claiming that any part of the Hinayana, Mahayana or Vajrayana is not part of the Buddha's teachings will incur this root downfall. You should not criticize or denigrate a teaching from the Vinaya, sutra or Abhidharma baskets of the Dharma.

7. Disrobing monks or nuns. ("Kings vow")

If you force monks or nuns to give up their ordination by disrobing, or force them to do actions which break their ordination, you break this root vow. Harming the Sangha must be avoided as they are essential to the continuation of Buddhist teachings.

8. Committing the five heinous crimes. ("Kings vow")

The five heinous karmas are killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing a Foe Destroyer

(Arhat), wounding a Buddha and creating a schism in the Sangha. Doing any of these very heavy negative actions will break this root vow.

9. Holding wrong views.

Wrong views are such as denying the existence of the Three Jewels, the law of cause and effect, the conventional and ultimate truths, the four noble truths, the twelve links of Dependent Origination and so on. Holding such wrong views will break this root vow because you will be unable even to benefit yourself, let alone others. For example, by denying karma you will not be concerned about the consequences of your actions and, with such carelessness, will continue to create negative karma and hurt others.

10. Destroying towns and so on. ("Kings vow")

If you completely destroy any place inhabited by living beings, you will break this root vow. Destroying a city or country habitat, whether by means of fire, bombs, black magic or any other means, will kill many living beings.

11. Teaching emptiness to the untrained. ("Minister vow")

If you teach the profound subject of emptiness to those who are not able to interpret it properly, or perhaps do not wish to practice it anyway, you will break this root vow. The danger is that some may misinterpret emptiness to mean nothingness, or non-existence, and fall to the nihilist extreme denying the relationship of cause and effect. The true meaning of the emptiness of inherent existence of self and phenomena is very profound and difficult to understand. Many believe that the great Acharya Nagarjuna, who strongly propagated this system, was a nihilist, but this was because they missed the brilliant subtlety of his thought. You should therefore only teach the final view of the nature of phenomenon to those who are ripe to understand it.

12. Reversing others' aspiration for complete enlightenment.

Inducing someone who is practicing the Mahayana into the Hinayana path will break this root vow. If you were to tell someone that the six perfections are beyond his capacity and suggest that, since he will never attain enlightenment, it is better to practice the Hinayana - whereby liberation is attained quickly. You will then lead him or her from a greater goal into a lesser one and break this root vow.

13. Causing someone to abandon individual liberation.

You must not cause others to abandon their individual liberation vows, whether they are the two hundred and fifty three precepts of a monk, the thirty-six precepts of a novice, the eight or five precepts of a layman, or the practice of the ten virtues. You should never suggest that these are part of the lesser vehicle and not important for the Mahayanist. Neither should you encourage someone to ignore their vow not to drink alcohol, or other vows, by implying that such vows are of a lower level than the Vajrayana vows and therefore not important. If you cause others to abandon their individual liberation vows, you will break this root vow

14. Denigrating the Hinayana.

If you disparage the Hinayana with a negative mind, especially in the presence of a Hinayanist, you break this root bodhicitta vow. Some say that the Hinayana is a very low vehicle and it takes a long time to traverse that path, and therefore it is better that to practice the great Mahayana and rapid Vajrayana. This is not a suitable attitude because both the Hearer and Solitary Realiser paths lead to liberation and to the realization of renunciation, which are fundamental to the Mahayana path.

15. Falsely claiming to have realized emptiness.

Falsely claiming to have the full realization of the emptiness of inherent existence of self and phenomena breaks this root vow. It is a specific form of lying, whereby you deceive others into believing that you have special attainments. It is not necessary to claim explicitly that you have high realizations to break this vow. Just implying that you have high realizations also incurs the downfall.

An example would be to suggest to others that if they practice according to your instructions they will *also* gain great powers and spiritual attainments. Or to say, 'If you practice the three principal paths diligently you will gain similar experiences of bliss to my own!'

The Buddha said that even when you have attained the paths of insight or liberation you should never openly say to others, 'I have this or that realization' or 'I have attained this or that path'. Publicly stating such things will only cause confusion and suspicion. Cynics will believe that you are lying to improve your status and reputation, and the gullible will follow you blindly rather than because of the quality of your teachings. Deceiving other people into thinking that you have realizations when you do not is particularly dangerous. Tibetans have a poor opinion of the person who boasts about his qualities and claims to have special clairvoyance or an ability to communicate with the Buddhas. On the other hand, we have the greatest respect for the truly humble practitioner who hides his attainments and leads a quiet and simple life practicing the Dharma diligently.

16. Receiving the property of the Three Jewels.

If you accept things that were originally offered to the Three Jewels, then stolen or misappropriated and given to you, you will break this root vow. It also refers to people such as kings or government ministers who use their position of power to unjustly acquire wealth and then pass some or all of it on to you. Accepting such gifts is a form of wrong livelihood.

17. The person practicing concentration giving his belongings to others.

Where a yogi, engaged in a concentration retreat, reluctantly accepts the offerings of a benefactor and then with some anger gives the offerings to others who are not seriously engaged in Dharma practice, he will incur this root downfall.

18. Giving up bodhicitta.

If you give up your aspiration to attain enlightenment, or your determination to benefit all living beings, or any single living being for that matter, you will incur this downfall. Having taken a vow to benefit all living beings, to give up this purpose is to abandon them and doing so cheats all living beings. You destroy the very basis of your Mahayana practice.

If you break the 9th vow, Holding Wrong View, or the 18th vow, Giving up Bodhicitta; you break completely your bodhicitta ordination, without requiring the four conditions below to be present.

However, in breaking any of the other sixteen root vows, four factors must be present for you to completely break your bodhicitta vows. The four conditions are not unique to the bodhicitta vows. No precept is totally broken, nor is any non-virtue complete unless the four factors are present. These four factors also contribute to the heaviness of a negative karma. Karma becomes increasingly heavy, as more of the factors are present, and is most heavy when all four are present.

The four factors are:

1. Not thinking of the action as faulty.
2. Not intending to abstain from the action in future, or retaining the continuous desire to break the precept.

3. Rejoicing in the action, or enjoying having broken the vow.
4. Not having any regret about the action.

Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and so on is not complete negative karmas if the four factors are not present. If you were to break any of the root vows other than the 9th and 18th and then had sincere regret, or otherwise reversed the four factors, your bodhichitta ordination would not be completely broken.

Having taken the bodhichitta vows, you should endeavor to keep them purely. If you transgress your vows then you should regret doing so and quickly practice purification. In that way your development of bodhichitta will progress constantly.

Besides the 18 root vows, there are 46 secondary vows. Together they form the method for developing bodhichitta and prevent it from degenerating. The vows are therefore the source of happiness and the way to avoid harming living beings.



The Forty-six Branch Bodhisattva Precepts



Thirty-four Contradictions to Embodying Virtue

The forty-six branch vows require that you abandon the following actions:

Perfection of Generosity

With regard to Material Things

1. Neglecting to pay homage to the Three Jewels each day.

Having taken the bodhichitta vows it is necessary to accumulate merit. You should therefore take refuge in the Three Jewels and make physical offerings and prostrations, verbal praise, requests and mental homage each day.

2. Following the mind of desire.

If you do not restrain yourself from acting out delusions, indulging in desire, and do not know contentment, you will constantly grasp at material comforts and the enjoyments of cyclic existence and break this branch vow.

With regard to Protection from Fear

3. Not respecting elders.

Elder Bodhisattvas, i.e. those who have taken the bodhichitta vows before you, are objects of respect and objects of offering. Not showing them respect will break this branch vow.

4. Not replying to questions.

When someone trusts you and sincerely asks a question of you, and if you become angry or, due to laziness do not give the appropriate answer, you will break this branch vow. Any time that you avoid skillfully and appropriately answering questions on the Dharma and other matters is an infraction of this branch vow. For example, if somebody asks you to explain how to meditate on impermanence and you respond with an explanation of bodhichitta, you will have broken this vow. For example, if you respond on the subject of impermanence, but in an inappropriate or unsatisfactory way, that is an infraction. This branch vow applies whether you have full ordination or lay vows, and also with respect to the practice of the ten virtues, about unconditioned phenomena, such as space or emptiness.

Those That Prevent the Generosity of Others

5. Not accepting invitations.

If you decline an invitation without a proper, valid reason, that is an infraction of this vow. The vow specifically refers to refusing an invitation because of anger, jealousy, and laziness and so on. It is acceptable to decline an invitation if you have a good reason for doing so. For example, you may be sick, too busy, doing a retreat, or if accepting the invitation could cause an obstacle to your Dharma practice or cause others to be unhappy or jealous. When people invite you to their home for dinner, they are extending their friendship. A refusal will cause them to feel rejected and make them unhappy. So, in general you should try to accept invitations but, before you do, check first to ensure that you will not be led into creating negative karma or breaking a vow. For example, if you have a vow not to drink alcohol and are invited to a function where old friends may put a lot of pressure on you to drink, then it may be best to refuse such an invitation politely and gently.

6. Not accepting gold and so on.

When a benefactor sincerely offers gold, silver or other precious things, to decline them through malice, anger or laziness breaks this branch vow.

Contradiction to Generosity with regard to Dharma

7. Not giving the Dharma to those who desire it.

Refusing to teach the Dharma to those who genuinely wish to learn and practice it because of delusions such as anger, jealousy or laziness is an infraction of this vow. There are valid reasons not to give teachings, such as being too busy, not familiar with the subject, believing that there is not a suitable time, or that the student lacks faith. In those cases it is acceptable not to teach, but to refuse to teach the dharma due to laziness and so on breaks this vow.

Perfection of Discipline

Contradictions Manly to Benefit Others

8. Forsaking those who have broken their moral discipline.

These people will need advice and help with relieving their guilt. They should not be treated with contempt or be ignored.

9. Not observing the (Hinayana) trainings in order to generate or sustain faith in others.

If, for example one breaks the monastic vows saying 'I need to help others', but with the motivation of gaining others' respect.

10. Doing little to benefit other sentient beings.

Bodhisattvas need not observe the Vinaya disciplines exactly in the same manner as the Hinayana. For instance, the minor rule for an ordained person not to keep new robes for more than ten days without blessing them is not a natural negativity but a negativity decree; that is, a decree of the Buddha for the ordained. However, to place too much importance on such minor rules compared to taking opportunities to benefit other living beings will incur this downfall. You must compare which course of action will serve the greater purpose and act to provide the greatest benefit to other living beings. When you are in a situation where you can help another living being, but doing so requires that you transgress one of the Vinaya rules and you pull back from helping by thinking, 'I should not break a vow', then you incur this downfall.

11. Not knowing the full purpose of compassion.

If it serves a special purpose for others, it is permissible for a Bodhisattva to commit the seven non-virtues of body and speech. If you refuse to commit a such a non-virtue, when by doing so you could help numberless sentient beings, you will incur this downfall. Generally, you have to avoid all non-virtues. But when the circumstances arise in which, through compassion, you can help numberless sentient beings by engaging in one of the seven non-virtues of body and speech, then you must do so. For instance, suppose you were living in the country and a hunter came by and asked you whether you had seen any deer. If you had seen some and decided not to lie, you would keep your Vinaya precepts and retain observance of the seven virtues, but the hunter would kill the deer. In this case you should rather tell a lie than follow the normal rule. This judgment obviously requires wisdom.

Contradictions Mainly to Benefit Oneself

12. Deliberately accepting things which are acquired by wrong livelihood.

If, with selfish motivation you deliberately acquire wealth, reputation and so on by any of the five wrong livelihoods you incur this downfall.

The five wrong livelihoods are:

- a) Hypocrisy: for example acting as though you are a great and holy lama full of love, compassion and limitless insight in order to win the devotion offerings of others.
- b) Flattery is praising others with the negative motivation of gaining something from them
- c) Hinting is gaining something by asking for it indirectly. An example would be saying to your benefactor, 'Last year you gave me a thousand dollars which was a wonderful help in supporting my retreat to benefit all living beings. This year I am going to do a special retreat again...?' Or, 'You are so incredibly successful and wealthy and have always been so kind and generous to me.'
- d) Artful acquisition is gaining things by sneaky methods or pressuring others. For example, if you insult them about their miserliness and lack of caring for the desperate plight of such deserving individuals as your good self.
- e) Seeking reward for favor is giving a small gift in the expectation that you will get something much greater in return

13. Indulging in frivolity with agitation, delusion and lack of mindfulness you make fun of others, laugh loudly, make loud noises and so on, you incur this downfall.

Being agitated in this way is an obstacle to concentration and the practice of Dharma because your attachment will be increased. If you are constantly joking, singing, dancing, drinking and carrying on, you will be unable to concentrate and will also distract other people. It is acceptable to sing, listen to music, laugh, joke and so on if you have a good purpose for doing so. If, with compassion and love, you want to relax or cause others to be relaxed and happy, then singing, joking and the like can be useful. The branch vow refers to doing these things through agitation and delusion.

14. Claiming Bodhisattvas should remain in cyclic existence.

Holding the view that Bodhisattvas should not be attracted to liberation, not be afraid of delusion and not to become separate from delusion, but rather that a Bodhisattva's job is to roam in cyclic existence for three countless eons while cultivating enlightenment, incurs this downfall. Such an attitude shows that you do not understand the nature of cyclic existence, delusion and the Bodhisattva path. Instead, a Bodhisattva is to achieve liberation and full enlightenment in order to be of greatest benefit to others.

Contradictions to Benefit Both Oneself and Others

15. Not avoiding a bad reputation.

A bodhisattva can often help others better when having a good reputation. Even joking too much can be tricky when people misunderstand one's real intentions. Also, when others criticize you and damage your reputation, you should endeavor to clear your name.

16. Not employing the methods to overcome others' negativities.

If it is possible to overcome others' negativities of body and speech through forceful methods, but you elect to use flattery and help them save face instead, you incur this downfall. You should make an effort and use all your skill and suitable methods to help those who create negative actions, break their vows, those that harm others and so on. Where possible, teach them ways to purify negative karma, such as the 4 opponent powers, and practice such methods yourself as an example.

Perfection of Patience

17. Not practicing the four noble disciplines.

The four Dharmas are to be patient and

1. not responding to anger with anger
2. not responding to physical harm with physical harm
3. not responding to criticism with criticism
4. not responding to verbal arguments with verbal arguments

These four noble disciplines are said to distinguish a real practitioner, as they refer to the causes of anger and lack of patience. If you retaliate in any of the four circumstances you break this branch vow.

18. Not caring about those who are angry.

Do not add fuel to the anger of others by neglecting or ignoring those who are angry with you. Instead of closing yourself off, try to communicate and dissipate their anger. If you cause a problem for others or you have suspicious projections that they are harming you, and then through pride, laziness, malice or other delusions you do not clear the air by apologizing when you have the opportunity you incur this downfall.

19. Not accepting others' apologies.

If others harm you and then apologize according to the Dharma, but through malice or resentment you do not accept their apology you will incur this downfall. This vow is the same as the third root vow except that the four conditions are not required here to break it.

20. Not checking the angry mind or acting out thoughts of anger.

When you become angry with someone and make no effort to try to control anger but let it continue unchecked instead, you incur this downfall. .

Perfection of Effort

21. Gathering a circle of followers for wealth and fame.

If you gather a circle of followers and or other people for the selfish purpose of gaining respect, fame, profit, praise or security, you will incur this downfall.

22. Not eliminating the three types of laziness.

The three types are: sloth, attraction to negative actions and self-pity or discouragement. If due to laziness, you sleep excessively during the day or late in the morning but you do not make an effort to eliminate laziness you break this branch vow. Note that laziness is not just being non-active, one can very well be hyper-active in useless or negative activities and because of that be spiritually lazy.

23. Engaging in senseless talk through attachment.

If you waste your time gossiping with attachment about royal families, politics, wars, relationships, divorce, crimes and so on, you incur this downfall.

Perfection of Concentration

24. Not seeking the meaning of concentration.

Although you need to develop concentration, if through malice or laziness you refuse to seek out instruction and advice on the means for its development, or refuse to practice after having received the instructions, you will incur this downfall. You should make an effort to listen, study and meditate on the development of concentration

25. Not removing obstacles to concentration.

There are five obstacles to concentration: (1) agitation and regret (2) malicious thoughts, (3) sleep and sloth, (4) longing desire, and (5) doubt. Not making an effort to overcome these obstacles when they arise causes you to break this branch vow.

26. Viewing the taste of concentration as being its main quality.

The 'taste of concentration' refers to the bliss and pliancy that arise from this practice. The main quality, or real purpose, of concentration is to prepare the mind to be able to engage the very subtle object that is the true nature of phenomena, its emptiness of inherent existence and the development of compassion. If you become attached to the taste of bliss and pliancy while viewing it as being the main quality, or real purpose, of concentration, you will incur this downfall. Although it may be acceptable for Hearers and Solitary Realisers to enjoy the complete relaxation, peace and bliss of concentration for long periods; because the Bodhisattva is bound to help other living beings, he should not waste time like this, but move on to realizing emptiness and developing compassion.

Perfection of Wisdom

Faults Related to Lesser Things

27. Abandoning the Hinayana.

To assert that listening to the Hinayana, memorizing its texts and engaging in its practices, though necessary for the Hinayana, is not required by Bodhisattvas, or to proclaim this to others, will incur this downfall, A Bodhisattva must tread the small and medium scope paths in common with the Hinayana Hearers and Solitary Realisers to gain the proper foundation for the explicitly Mahayana practices of the great scope. A Bodhisattva must also be able to communicate the Dharma to all living beings, many of whom will have the Hinayana

potential, so it is important to know the Hinayana path. This vow looks similar to the root vow 13, but that vow refers mostly to vows of individual liberation, and this secondary vow one relates mainly to the Hinayana explanation of selflessness.

28. Applying great effort to the Hinayana while currently engaged in the Mahayana.

When you have become fully involved in the Bodhisattva practices and you set them aside and engage in the Hinayana practices instead, you will incur this downfall. To be able to benefit all living beings requires that you make use of the precious opportunity to practice the Mahayana. The keyword here is balance; study the Hinayana, but do not forget to put effort on the Mahayana practices.

29. Applying effort to non-Buddhist teachings while currently engaged in the Buddhadharma.

When involved in the Buddha Dharma, if you set this practice aside in preference for the study of non-Buddhist systems, you will incur this downfall. Generally, studying these systems will strengthen the wrong view holding an inherently existent self. If however you have a good reason, such as wishing to be able to communicate with people from other religious backgrounds, then it is acceptable to study their systems.

30. Excessive involvement in non-Buddhist subjects.

With a specific purpose in mind, you will sometimes have to study non-Buddhist texts but if you allow yourself to become attached to them, completely involved and take great pleasure in them you will break this branch vow.

Faults Related to Excellent Things

31. Abandoning the Mahayana.

Denigrating any Mahayana teaching or teacher, and suggesting that they are of no benefit and will not help others, will incur this downfall. Although it looks similar to the root vow 4, this vow specifically relates to the teachings and practice of wisdom of emptiness.

32. Praising oneself and denigrating others.

When, motivated by pride or anger, you praise yourself and denigrate others you incur this downfall, this is the same as the first root vow except that the four conditions are not required to break it.

33. Making no effort to study Dharma.

If through pride or laziness you do not go to teachings, Dharma discussions and so on you will break this branch vow. It relates mainly to the realization of wisdom, for which one needs to study.

34. Deriding guru and word rather than relying on the meaning.

If instead of viewing your guru as a Buddha and making offerings, you knowingly deride him or make fun of him. And, if instead of relying on the meaning of the teachings, you rely on the words instead of their meaning or you chase after pleasant sounding words instead of the teachings, you will incur this downfall.

Twelve Contradictions to Benefit Sentient Beings

General application

35. Neglect to help whoever needs assistance.

Not providing counseling, teaching, protection, shelter, guidance and so on when you have the opportunity and capability to do so, but through anger, laziness or other delusions you decline to help, you will break this branch vow. This relates especially to situations where you promised to help.

36. Avoiding taking care of those who are sick.

When you have the opportunity to look after a sick person or animal and you do not do so due to anger, laziness or other delusions, you will incur this branch downfall

37. Not dispelling sufferings of others.

If you do not help to dispel the suffering of the blind, deaf, handicapped, those who are exhausted, afflicted by the five obstacles, under the influence of malicious thoughts and superstition, and those derided by others, you will incur this downfall

38. Not guiding the reckless.

If through anger or laziness you do not skillfully guide those who are wrongly involved in the purposes of the present and future you will incur this branch downfall. Recklessness relates to a lack of consideration for others.

Specific application

Faults of Not Being Helpful

39. Not returning kindness.

If through malicious thoughts or laziness, you fail to repay the kindness of others who have helped you or been generous you will break this branch vow.

40. Not relieving the grief of others.

If, due to malice or laziness, you do not dispel the grief of relatives, friends and others who are stricken with misfortune, poverty, depression and so on, you will break this branch vow.

41. Refusing charity to the needy.

If someone asks for charity and due to malice or laziness you refuse him or her, you will incur this downfall. If, however, there are good reason not to give them something, like when it would cause them harm then it is suitable not to give.

42. Not taking care of friends, disciples, servants etc.

If you do not give teachings and look after the welfare of people who trust in you, you will incur this downfall.

43. Not being considerate of the wishes of others.

If you do not act agreeably toward others due to laziness or malice, you will break this branch vow. You should avoid arguing with, or harming friends, relatives and those with whom you associate. Rather, be considering and endeavor to respond to their needs and aspirations, as long as it does not bring harm to oneself or others.

44. Not praising others' good qualities.

If, due to malice or laziness, you do not praise the knowledge, virtuous qualities of others,

you will incur this downfall. One should encourage others' good qualities and show interest in them instead.

Faults of Not Overpowering

45. Not using force when necessary.

If, due to laziness malice, you do not expel, punish or deflate the pride of those who need it, you will incur this branch down-fall. Some situations may require forceful action to stop harm.

46. Not using miracle powers, threatening activities and so on.

You should use whatever wrathful or miracle powers you may possess if doing so will benefit other living beings. If you do not use them when appropriate, you will incur this branch downfall. You should be very careful, however, not to make a display if it is not really of great benefit; bodhisattvas should not show their miraculous powers without a good reason.



The purpose of keeping these 18 root and 46 branch vows is to prevent your bodhichitta degenerating and to make it develop continuously. A person who has taken the bodhichitta vows should endeavor to keep them purely. The bodhichitta vows are the means to help other living beings, the means to avoid harming them and the way to accumulate merit. All positive thoughts and deeds are encompassed by the root and branch bodhichitta vows. You take the bodhichitta vows with the intention to attain enlightenment in order to benefit all living beings. It may take many lifetimes to attain enlightenment. So it is important to ensure not only that your bodhichitta vows do not degenerate during this life, but also that circumstances do not arise that will prevent you from maintaining the practice of the vows in future lives.