

On the Four Exemplary Acts of a Bodhisattva

(Bodaisatta Shishōbō)

Translator’s Introduction: The four exemplary acts are also known as the four wisdoms: charity, tenderness, benevolence, and sympathy.

The first is offering alms.

The second is using kindly speech.

The third is showing benevolence.

The fourth is manifesting sympathy.

Offering alms means not being covetous. Not being covetous means not being greedy. Not being greedy, to put it in worldly terms, includes not currying favors by groveling or flattery. If we want to bestow the Teaching of the Genuine Way, even if it were upon someone who rules over the four continents, we must do it without wanting anything in return. Offering alms, for example, is like bestowing upon strangers wealth that we freely part with. Were we to offer to the Tathagata flowers from a far-off mountain or give to some sentient being a treasure coming from a previous life—be it Dharma or something material—in either case, the act would be endowed with the merit that accords with the offering of alms. There is the principle that even though such things are not something that we personally own, it does not hinder our offering them as alms.¹ And the humbleness of such offerings is not to be despised, for it is the sincerity of these meritorious deeds that counts.

When we leave the Way to the Way, we realize the Way. When we realize the Way, the Way will invariably continue to be left to the Way. When treasures are left to being treasures, such treasures will invariably end up as alms offerings. We bestow ‘self’ on ourselves, and we bestow ‘other’ on others. The influence of this offering of alms not only penetrates far into the realms of those in lofty positions and of those who are ordinary people, but also permeates the realms of the wise

1. This refers to the giving of something that does not have any owner, such as the Dharma, or the grains of sand on a beach which a child once offered. These types of offering are beyond the concept of ‘ownership’.

and the saintly. This is because when people have become capable of accepting an offering of alms, they have therefore already formed a link with the donor.

The Buddha once remarked, “When a donor comes into a monastic assembly, others admire that person right from the start. You should realize that they have tacitly understood the heart of that person.” As a consequence, should we offer only one sentence or one verse of the Dharma as alms, it will become a good seed in this life and in future lives. Should we offer the gift of even a single coin or a single blade of grass as alms, it will sprout good roots in this generation and in future generations. Dharma can be wealth and wealth can be Dharma—which it is depends on our wish and our pleasure.

Truly, bestowing one’s beard on another once put someone’s mind in order, and an offering of a few grains of sand once gained someone the rank of king.² These people did not covet some reward, but simply shared what they had. Providing a ferry or building a bridge as an alms offering creates a way to the Other Shore. When we have learned well what the offering of alms means, then we can see that accepting oneself and letting go of oneself are both offerings of alms. Earning a living and doing productive work have never been anything other than an offering of alms. Leaving flowers to float upon the wind and leaving birds to sing in their season will also be meritorious training in almsgiving. Upon his deathbed, the great King Ashoka offered half of a mango to several hundred monks as alms. As persons who are capable of accepting alms, we need to explore well the principle that this great alms gift points to. Not only should we make physical efforts to give alms, but we should also not overlook opportunities to do so. Truly, because we have inherited the merit from having given alms in past lives, we have obtained the human body that we now have. “Even if you give alms to yourselves, there can be merit, and how much more so were you to give alms to your parents, spouse, or children!” As a consequence of this statement, I have realized that even giving to oneself is a part of almsgiving, and giving to one’s parents, spouse, or children will be almsgiving as well. Should we let go of a single dust mote of defiling passion as an alms offering, even though it is done for our own sake, we will feel a quiet, heartfelt gratitude because we will have had one of the

2. During the T’ang dynasty, when an officer in the court of Emperor T’ai-tsung fell ill and needed the ashes from a beard for medicine, the emperor burnt his own beard and offered the ashes to the officer. Once when the Buddha was on an alms round, a child who was playing in the sand put a few grains in the Buddha’s alms bowl as an offering, and, due to this act, the child was later reborn as King Ashoka.

meritorious deeds of Buddhas genuinely Transmitted to us, and because, for the first time, we will be practicing one of the methods of bodhisattvas.*

What is truly hard to turn around is the heart and mind of sentient beings. By making one offering, we begin to turn their mental state around, after which we hope to keep turning it around until they realize the Way. From this beginning, we should by all means continue to assist them by making alms offerings. This is why the first of the Six Paramitas is the Almsgiving Paramita.³ The size of any mind is beyond measure: the size of any thing is also beyond measure. Be that as it may, there are times when the mind turns things around and there is also the practice of almsgiving, whereby things turn the mind around.



Kindly speech means that when we encounter sentient beings, we first of all give rise to feelings of genuine affection for them and offer them words that express our pleasure in knowing them. To put it more broadly, we do not use language that is harsh or rude. Even in secular society there are respectful customs for asking others how they are; in Buddhism there is the Master's phrase, "May you take good care of yourself," and there is the disciple's greeting, "I have been wondering how you've been doing." To speak with a feeling of genuine affection for sentient beings, as if they were still new-born babes, is what kindly speech is. We should praise those who have virtue and pity those who do not.

Through our having fondness for kindly speech, kindly speech gradually increases. Thus, even kindly speech that goes unrecognized or unnoticed will still manifest itself right before us. While our present life persists, we should become fond of speaking kindly, so that we do not regress or turn away from it for generation after generation and for life after life. Kindly speech is the foundation for overcoming those who are angry and hostile, as well as for promoting harmony among others. When we hear kindly speech that is spoken directly to us, it brightens our countenance and delights our heart. When we hear of kind speech having been spoken about us in our absence, this makes a deep impression on our heart and our spirit. Keep in mind that kindly speech arises from a loving heart, and a loving heart makes compassion its seed. You should explore the idea that

* See *Glossary*.

3. A paramita is a practice that Buddhas and bodhisattvas employ to help sentient beings reach the Other Shore. The six are almsgiving, observance of the Precepts, patient forbearance, diligence, being well-seated in one's meditation, and wise discernment.

kindly speech can have the power to turn the very heavens around, and it is not merely a matter of praising someone's abilities.



Showing benevolence means working out skillful methods by which to benefit sentient beings, be they of high or low station. One may do this, for instance, by looking at someone's future prospects, both immediate and far-ranging, and then practicing skillful means to help that person. Someone once took pity on a stricken turtle and another once tended to a sick sparrow.⁴ Neither of these people was seeking a reward; they simply acted from a feeling of benevolence.

Some people may foolishly think that if they were to put the welfare of others first, their own benefits would be reduced. This is not so. Benevolence is all-encompassing, universally benefiting both self and others. A person long ago bound up his hair three times during the course of his taking a single bath, and thrice spat out what he had in his mouth during the course of a single meal. And he did so solely from a heart that would benefit others. He was not reluctant to instruct his son to do so, if his son should encounter guests from a foreign land.⁵ So, we should act to benefit equally both those who are hostile and those who are friendly, and act for the benefit of both self and other alike. When we attain such an attitude of mind, our showing of benevolence will neither retreat nor turn away from anything, and this benevolence will be shown even towards grass and trees, wind and water. And, in all humility, we should engage ourselves in helping those who are given to foolishness.

4. There is a classic Chinese story in which a man rescued a trapped turtle. As the turtle swam off, it looked back over its shoulder to its benefactor, as if to acknowledge its indebtedness. Later, the man rose to a high official position, and, when the seal of his office was cast, it miraculously appeared in the form of a turtle looking over its back. No matter how many times the seal was recast to remove the form, it would nevertheless reappear on the seal. Finally, the man realized that somehow the turtle had played a part in his having received his appointment, so he kept the strange seal out of gratitude.

In another classic Chinese story, there was a boy who helped a sick sparrow recover and to whom the sparrow gave four silver rings as recompense, which ultimately led to the boy's being appointed to three high government positions.

5. A Chinese ruler once advised his son that if three guests were to come calling in succession while he was bathing, he should bind up his hair each time and go to greet them, and if three guests were to come calling in succession while he was dining, he should stop eating each time in order to greet them.



Manifesting sympathy means not making differences, not treating yourself as different and not treating others as different. For instance, the Tathagata was a human being just like other human beings. From His being the same as those in the human world, we know that He must have been the same as those in any other world. When we really understand what manifesting sympathy means, we will see that self and other are one and the same. Music, poetry, and wine have been companions for ordinary people, companions for those in lofty positions, and companions for the hosts of celestial beings. And there is the principle that ordinary people have been companions for music, poetry, and wine. And music, poetry, and wine have been companions for music, poetry, and wine. And ordinary people have been companions for ordinary people. And those in lofty positions have been companions for those in lofty positions. And celestial beings have been companions for celestial beings. This is what studying ‘manifesting sympathy’ means.

In particular, what the ‘manifesting’ in manifesting sympathy refers to is our ways of behaving, our everyday actions, and our attitudes of mind. In this manifesting, there will be the principle of letting people identify with us and of letting ourselves identify with others. Depending on the occasion, there are no boundaries between self and other.

It says in the *Kuan-tsu*,⁶ “A sea does not reject water, and therefore is able to bring about its vastness. A mountain does not reject soil, and therefore can bring about its height. An enlightened ruler does not despise ordinary people, and therefore can bring about a large populace.” You need to realize that a sea’s not rejecting water is its being in sympathy with water. Further, you need to realize that the water has the complete virtue of not refusing the sea. For that reason, it is possible for waters to come together and form a sea, and for earth to pile up and form a mountain. And you certainly know for yourself that because one sea does not reject another sea, it forms an ocean, which is something much bigger. And because one mountain does not reject another mountain, it forms a larger mountain, which is something much higher. And because an enlightened ruler does not despise ordinary people, he creates a large populace. A large populace means a nation. An enlightened ruler means an emperor. An emperor does not despise people. And even though he does not despise people, it does not mean that there are no rewards and punishments. And even though there are rewards and

6. A multi-volumed Chinese Taoist work.

punishments, they do not come about because he despises people. Long ago, when people were submissive, nations were without rewards or punishments—at least to the extent that rewards and punishments then were not the same as those of today. Even today, there may be people who seek the Way without expecting any reward, but this is beyond what foolish people concern themselves with. Because an enlightened ruler is clear-minded, he does not despise people. Although people invariably form nations and try to seek out an enlightened leader, nevertheless those who completely understand the principle of what makes an enlightened ruler ‘enlightened’ are rare. As a result, even though they are happy enough about not being despised by an enlightened ruler, they do not comprehend that they mutually should not despise their enlightened ruler. As a consequence, there is the principle of manifesting sympathy which is for both enlightened rulers and unenlightened people. This is why bodhisattvas vow to practice manifesting sympathy. And to do so, they need but face all things with a gentle demeanor.

Because each of these four exemplary acts completely encompasses all four exemplary acts, there will be, all told, sixteen exemplary acts.

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*Written by the mendicant monk Dōgen
who entered Sung China and received
the Transmission of the Dharma*