

Advice on the Buddhist practice of confession

By Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, teaching at KTD in July, 2002. Edited by Kathy Wesley.

Given as an answer to a person who worried that she or he had broken samaya by getting angry with a dharma brother or sister.

As we are worldly people, we should not expect ourselves to be instantaneously and completely free of mental afflictions, simply through starting to practice dharma. It is just the situation that sometimes we will do well, and our practice will benefit us strongly, and at other times, we will slow down our progress (or our practice) by giving in to mental afflictions.

First of all, your recognition of giving rise to mental afflictions and your sincerely regretting it—these things are excellent. This is because the power of regret itself helps very much to purify this.

If you wish to confess anything, you can visualize in the sky in front of you all buddhas and bodhisattvas. Further, you should think not that this is just a visualization, but that you have actually summoned them, with their omniscient wisdom, to witness your confession.

In that way, with your regret and with your summoning the buddhas and bodhisattvas as witnesses, you have brought together two of the four powers—the power of regret and the power of reliance (or support). *[That is, your visualization of the buddhas and bodhisattvas acts as a support for your practice.]*

Then, as words of confession, recite the hundred-syllable mantra. There is no better liturgy of confession than this. That is the power of restitution *[or, remedy]* which is to say, doing something virtuous in order to counteract the wrongdoing.

The fourth power that is necessary to engage is to promise never to do that negative action again. Now you should make this promise even if you know that you will continue to get angry (or whatever it is you are confessing) in the future, because by promising never to do it again, even if you do commit the action again, you will still be less likely to. In that way, these kinds of things can be repaired.

In the specific context of the bodhisattva vow—one of the things that makes the bodhisattva vow so extraordinary is that even though we may break it all the time by getting angry and so on, breaking the bodhisattva vow is more like denting it. This is quite unlike the pratimoksha vow. The bodhisattva vow is like a golden vessel or vase, whereas the pratimoksha vows are like vessels made of clay. If the pratimoksha vows are broken, then they are like a broken clay vessel—they are smashed. However, if the bodhisattva vow is broken, it is like a golden vase that has been somewhat dented. The gold is still there, and it is still gold. The vessel is not destroyed; it merely needs to be tapped back into its right shape. That is what confession does.

So if you confess whatever violations of the bodhisattva vow and so on you have committed, then by confessing these, all of the qualities of the path will be restored to you. If you practice ngöndro daily, then in the refuge and bodhicitta section of ngöndro, you are retaking the bodhisattva vow in its full form every day, anyway. That also will serve to reestablish it.

You have not broken samaya. To break samaya you have to turn away—turn your back on your teachers, or your dharma brothers and sisters, and you have not done that. Now, I cannot say that getting angry is not in a sense a branch violation of samaya, just as it is also a violation of the bodhisattva vow. However, it is not a complete break, and therefore it is easily repaired.

