

---

# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

### Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

1 August 2001

---

We will meditate for a little while, as usual.

What kind of body posture do we need for meditation? They say one should sit in the Vairocana posture, which has seven features. One of the seven features is that one is supposed to sit very straight, neither leaning forward, backward, left nor right, but sitting upright so that one's vertebrae are like a stack of coins, one on top of the other.

The legs can be in what is called the half-vajra position, or you can sit in full vajra position. The hands are held in one's lap in what is called the mudra of meditative equipoise, where the right hand is placed into the left with the two thumbs touching. The head is supposed to be held upright, leaning forward a little, but not too much. One's eyes are supposed to be open, neither focused too far away nor too close, but gazing towards the tip of one's nose.

One's elbows should not be held tight against one's body, but held away from the body a little. The mouth is closed, with the teeth in a natural position, not too far apart, nor clenched together. The tongue is placed against the upper palate, behind the front teeth.

There are many reasons why it is beneficial to sit in the vajra position. First, it is said that the bliss of mental and physical pliancy arises more easily if one meditates sitting in the vajra position. Also, if one is meditating for long periods of time, one will not tire as easily, and be able to sit for longer periods of time. Further, if other people see us meditating in the vajra position, our body will look beautiful and settled, leaving a very good impression in their minds. Another reason is that all the arhats and buddhas sit in the full vajra position when they meditate.

The purpose of keeping one's body straight is to avoid drowsiness and sleep. If one keeps one's body upright, one will not fall asleep as easily and will more easily avoid unclear and drowsy states of mind.

The significance of placing one's right hand into the left with the thumbs touching is that it becomes important when one practices the completion state of Highest Yoga Tantra. The symbolism of this is that it forms a triangle, which symbolises the three doors to liberation, with the space in between symbolising the wisdom or truth body of the Buddha.

We keep our head bent slightly forward because it has an influence on the subtle energies in our body, and will help prevent mental excitement and distraction. Keeping one's teeth in a natural position, neither too clenched nor too relaxed, has a positive effect on one's breathing, making it easier for the breath to flow naturally. Placing the tongue behind the upper front teeth on the upper palate helps to prevent saliva dripping from the mouth when we meditate for long periods of time.

There are two purposes for sitting in the Vairocana position. The common purpose is that this particular position facilitates attainment of single-pointed concentration. The uncommon purpose is related to tantra. Vairocana is the embodiment of the form body of the Buddha. Sitting in the Vairocana posture now during what is called the time of the base places imprints on one's mental continuum to attain the pure form body of a Buddha in the future.

However, since it is very important for one's meditation that one is seated in a comfortable posture, it is not necessary to sit strictly in the seven-point Vairocana posture.

So, sitting in a comfortable posture, we bring the mind back

home, not letting it get distracted outside, but instead focusing it within in a con-conceptual state. (*Pause for meditation.*)

Today, we will start this teaching called *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, which was composed by the Tibetan yogi, Togmay Sangpo. Geshe-la received this teaching from his Holiness the Dalai Lama.

At the beginning, the text pays homage to Avalokiteshva or Chenrezig, emperor of all the realms of the worlds.

The reason for this is that the Bodhisattva Togmay Sangpo relied mainly on Chenrezig as his main deity. It also indicates that this text mainly deals with the practice of compassion. If it would deal mainly with the meditation on emptiness, the homage would be mainly to Manjushri.

There are two purposes for paying homage at the beginning of the text – an ultimate purpose and a temporal purpose. The temporal purpose of paying homage is to accumulate merit, because a person with a lot of merit will be successful in his or her activities. Of two people using the same methods and doing the same kinds of activities, it is the person with the greater merit who will be the more successful. That is something we can observe. So here, in order for the author to be successful and to have fewer obstacles in composing the text, he pays homage to Chenrezig. The ultimate purpose (of paying homage) is to attain nirvana.

Within the Tibetan word for prostration, *phyag'tshal*, the meaning of paying homage or respect with one's body, speech and mind is contained. The word *phyag'tshal* has two syllables *phyag* and *tshal*. The first syllable refers to the purification of one's body, speech, and mind – clearing out the negativities of body, speech, and mind. The second syllable refers to receiving the blessings of the body, speech and mind of the buddhas.

When we do prostrations, it is customary to touch with folded hands one's forehead, throat and heart. The significance of this is that, when one touches the forehead, one remembers the marks and signs of the physical form of the Buddha – the qualities of the Buddha's physical form. When one touches the throat, one remembers the qualities of the Buddha's speech. And one remembers the qualities of the Buddha's mind when one touches the heart.

So, when one does prostrations, first one purifies the negativities of body, speech, and mind (as contained in the syllable *phyag*). Then one receives the blessings of each of the buddhas' body, speech and mind within one's own body speech and mind (which is the second syllable *tshal*).

In the first verse, the author pays homage and prostrates to Chenrezig, who is indivisible from his root guru.

I pay constant homage through my three doors,  
To my supreme teacher and protector Chenrezig,  
Who while seeing all phenomena lack coming and going,  
Makes single-minded effort for the good of living beings.

The line: "Who while seeing all phenomena lack coming and going," is saying that his teacher sees the final nature of all phenomena – suchness – exactly as it is. This refers to the quality of wisdom. But even though one has understood suchness just as it is, one does not abide in non-dual meditation on emptiness, but makes a single-minded effort to work for the good of living beings. This expresses the quality of compassion.

The quality of wisdom is the understanding that all phenomena are empty of inherent existence, or knowing the final nature of phenomena just as it is. The quality of compassion is seeing all sentient beings as having once been one's mother, and so, having compassion for them equally, like a mother for her only, sick child, wanting to attain enlightenment for their benefit.

Then we come to "my supreme teacher and protector Chenrezig". Here the author doesn't see any difference between

---

---

his meditational deity, Chenrezig, and his teacher. Rather, he sees them as non-dual, and sees that his teacher has those qualities of wisdom and compassion. So he says that he pays homage with his three doors of body, speech and mind.

It is good to know that when we ourselves meditate on Chenrezig, we have to think that our mind becomes completely mixed, indivisible from the mind of Chenrezig. It becomes one with the mind of Chenrezig. If our mind is disturbed or unhappy, then we can practice this meditation of visualising ourselves as Chenrezig, and thinking our mind has become completely one with the mind of Chenrezig. That is said to be very beneficial and effective, having a very positive, transforming effect on our mind.

As to the qualities of a Mahayana guru or teacher, many qualities have been listed. But if we bring them down to three main points, they are: a Mahayana teacher should first of all have more qualities than faults; out of this life and the next life, he or she should regard the next life as more important than this life; and out of self and others, he or she should regard others as being more important than self.

If we view our teachers as having more faults than qualities, then what happens is that we will actually receive those faults within our own mind. So a qualified Mahayana guru at least should have more qualities than the student.

This not only applies to the Mahayana tradition. Any teacher should always have more good qualities than his or her students. If, for example, a teacher is attached to drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, it is quite likely that the students will also start to drink and to smoke! If the teacher likes to sleep a lot, then the students will also fall into the habit of sleeping all the time!

But more seriously, if the teacher has the discriminating attitude of being attached to his or her own point of view and shows an aversion towards others – basically having an attitude of regarding the self as being more important than others, – the students will also turn out to be very selfish and discriminating.

The other main point was that a qualified Mahayana guru should regard the future life as more important than this life. If he or she has great attachment to the happiness of this life, of just having a good time in this life, then the mind that is concerned with the happiness of future lives will not arise.

Finally, out of self and others, the qualified Mahayana guru should regard others as more important. If he or she doesn't, then even though he or she might sit there and teach Mahayana dharma, whatever he or she does will not actually be Mahayana practice, because to become Mahayana practice, the practitioner has to regard the happiness of others as more important than one's own happiness.

It is said that the most basic spiritual practice is the practice of non-harmfulness. If we are very attached to the happiness of this life, concerned only with the various worldly accumulations, it will be very difficult for us to practise this very basic teaching of non-harmfulness.

So today we have finished the homage.

As explained before, please bring the mind home, focusing it inwards and concentrating single-pointedly on the mantra while we recite it.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

*Transcribed from tapes by Gaye Lewis-Radcliffe*

*Edit 1: Mary-Lou Considine*

*Edit 2 & Check: Ven. Tenzin Dongak*

*Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**