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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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First, we will meditate for a short while, as usual. To have a good meditation, one needs to sit in a relaxed posture. Sitting in a relaxed posture doesn't mean we should be slumped over or leaning to one side or leaning forward, but rather we should be sitting straight.

So, sitting in the correct, relaxed posture, we bring our mind home, focusing it inwards, and not letting it be distracted by wrong concepts. Then we will be able to experience some mental bliss and happiness.

The famous Indian saint, Atisha, said that where one needs to practise sutra and tantra is within one's own mind. Your own mind is where you have to practise dharma. The best friends you can have in doing this are awareness and introspection. And the best quality that you can have is the altruistic attitude or true concern for others. And the best kind of practice is the practice of subduing your own mind. Therefore, the best practice of sutra and tantra is to subdue the mind.

On top of sitting in a relaxed posture, it is important that we also try to control our mind. Ordinarily in our busy lives, our mind gets very distracted, continually going here and there. If we don't control our mind, and calm it down, and free it from the control of disturbing concepts, then even though we might be sitting in a relaxed posture, we will not experience peace of mind. So, it is very important to learn how to bind or control one's mind.

If our mind is under the control of the three delusions (anger, attachment, and ignorance) and is constantly distracted towards outside objects, then we won't experience peace of mind. If our mind acts in that way, the power of the mind will be lost, completely dispersed by distraction. So we have to bring the mind back home, concentrate it, and focus it inwards on one object of meditation. Once we have done that, all the power of the mind will be focused in one place.

It is very important to know the benefits of meditation. As long as our mind is under the control of the various delusions such as anger, jealousy, and so forth, we will not experience happiness. On the other hand, if we can free our mind from the control of those negative emotions, and place it in a virtuous and beneficial state, we will experience happiness.

When we look for happiness, we shouldn't look it on the outside. Happiness is experienced within the mind. Therefore, one has to generate happiness within the mind. This is a very important point to know, regardless of whether one has great knowledge, or any other kind of outer quality. What is important is that one has subdued one's own mind. Only then one can experience happiness.

In order to practise dharma, one does not have to give up all worldly possessions and remain as a beggar. That is not the meaning of dharma. We need to understand the *true* meaning of meditation – which is, as we explained, to free the mind from the control of the negative emotions such as anger and attachment. If the mind is not subdued, then when we encounter certain outside conditions, they will strongly disturb the mind and cause various delusions and negative emotions to arise. Once our mind is subdued through meditation, however, even though we encounter these outside conditions, they will not disturb our mind. The delusions will not be generated or increase, whether one has lots of possessions and is very rich, or not.

As usual, please sit in a relaxed meditation posture and try to

free the mind from disturbing thoughts. Bring it back home, and focus it 100% inwards. Then, for some time, try to let it remain like that in a sort of empty state. Once you find the mind again trying to escape to the outside, concentrate it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. We will meditate like this for some time. (*Pause for meditation.*)

The practice of meditating on the coming and going of the breath calms and clears the mind, bringing it to a neutral state. Once we have achieved that result, we can focus on other topics of meditation.

If we wish, we can combine the meditation on the coming and going of the breath with a simple visualisation technique, where we visualise that, with the out-breath in the form of black light from our nostrils, all our problems, unhappiness, sickness, negative karmas, obscurations, delusions nervousness, stress and so forth – all our obscurations and negative karmas – are expelled in the form of black light. Then, with the in-breath, we can visualise that we breathe in white light, which is actually the blessings of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Ten Directions. If we combine the meditation on the breathing with this visualisation, it becomes a special Buddhist technique of meditating on the coming and going of the breath.

Now we will go to the text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*. There is a two-fold division of the text into what is called the preparatory practices and then the actual practices. There are seven preparatory practices.

The first one is meditation on this precious human rebirth. It says here in the text:

Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune,  
Hear, think and meditate unwaveringly night and day  
In order to free yourself and others  
From the ocean of cyclic existence –  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

As it says in the first line, "Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune"...Here, the text refers to the eight freedoms and ten endowments. The eight freedoms relate to the freedom from eight types of situation that make it very difficult or impossible to engage in dharma practice. The ten endowments refer to the ten positive or conducive conditions that one needs for dharma practice.

Here, the text likens being in the situation of having the eight freedoms and ten endowments to having gained a "rare ship of freedom and fortune", a ship that will carry us from one shore of the ocean to the other. Having the eight freedoms and ten endowments puts us in a situation where we can practise dharma – a situation that is rare, difficult to find, and has great potential. These are the points to think about. Firstly, having the eight freedoms and ten endowments is like a ship, or the base which makes it possible for us to practise dharma, and having this opportunity has great potential and is very rare and difficult to find.

The text then says that, once one has this rare opportunity of the eight freedoms and ten fortunes or endowments then, in order to free oneself and others, without letting one's mind fall under the control of the delusions, one should try as much as possible, day and night, to engage in listening to teachings, thinking about and contemplating them, and then meditating on the dharma. In this way, one can free oneself and others from the ocean of cyclic existence, and doing this becomes a Bodhisattva practice.

We were saying that having the eight freedoms and ten endowments gives us great potential, from both a temporal and ultimate point of view. From a temporal point of view, on the base of this precious human rebirth, one can attain a high human rebirth or rebirth in the god realms. From an ultimate point of view, one can attain liberation and enlightenment.

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If we relate this to the practice of the six perfections, we can see that on the basis of our present human body, first of all, we can practise morality, which becomes the cause for rebirth in the human or god realms. We can also practise generosity. Practising generosity in this life becomes the cause to attain wealth and have material fortune in future lives, a condition required to practice the dharma. Further, we can practise patience, which becomes the cause to attain not only a human body, but also a handsome or a beautiful human body that generates joy and liking in the mind of other people, just by seeing it. The cause for that is the practice of patience.

We can also practise joyous effort or enthusiasm, which becomes the cause for the attainment of our temporal or ultimate aims. Finally, the last two perfections (concentration and wisdom) enable us to practise bodhicitta, and so forth.

We were saying that a precious human rebirth is difficult to find. This also has to do with the cause, because the cause for human rebirth is the practice of pure morality. Therefore, it becomes very important that we practise pure morality in this life. If we think about the difficulty of attaining a precious human rebirth, we have to relate it to ourselves and not look around at the situation of other people. If one practises pure morality, there won't be any lack of a precious human rebirth.

It's like with cars. If we go for a walk in the city, we will see many cars around. But, if we don't have the money, even though there are plenty of cars around, it won't benefit us. Geshe-la says that there was a Chinese person who heard about the teachings on the precious human rebirth and he thought: "That lama has obviously never been to China!" The point is that one has to relate this teaching to oneself – if one keeps pure morality, there will be no lack of a precious human rebirth.

We have to generate the wish, wanting to take the essence of this precious opportunity, which is very rare to find.

There are four points we have to get straight, in order to be able to take the essence of the precious human rebirth. First, it is important to practise the dharma. One needs to understand the need to practise the dharma – understanding that one is able to practise the dharma, that one needs to practise the dharma in this life, and that one needs to practise it right now.

The need to practise dharma becomes obvious when we analyse what gives us happiness and what gives us suffering. From our own experience, we can see clearly that if our mind falls under the control of negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, and so forth, this will cause our mind to be unhappy. But, on the other hand, if we practise patience, love and compassion, this will generate happiness in the mind. So, from our own experience, we can see clearly the need to practise dharma, because we ourselves want happiness and don't want suffering.

If you have two people, one who has great wealth but is under the control of anger, and the other who is materially not so well off, but has a mind free of anger then, if we analyse it, it's obvious which of these two will have the happier life. The person whose mind is not under the control of anger will always have a happier life than the person whose mind is controlled by anger. This is very important to know.

If we have two people in the same situation, and who are both married, with one of them being constantly worried and angry, while the other person is free from this, then who is the happier person?

After having recognised the need to practise dharma, the question might arise, is one able to practise the dharma or not? But having the inner condition of the precious human rebirth with its freedoms and endowments, and having the outer condition of having found a qualified Mahayana teacher, then definitely one is able to practise the dharma.

The third point that one has to practise the dharma in this life

arises out of the fact that there is no certainty that one will again and again attain a precious human body. This is not an opportunity that comes about all the time. Therefore, one has to start practising the dharma in this life. And not just this life, but right now. If the precious human body we have now would remain with us forever, then we could take it easy and procrastinate about our dharma practice. But, since the precious human body we have now will not remain forever but will, in fact, quickly disintegrate, one has to practise the dharma right now.

If we think in this way, the mind wanting to take the essence of this precious human life will arise. So, for those who want to practise the dharma correctly, it is good if they try to meditate in this way.

As it says here, "In order to free yourself and others from the ocean of cyclic existence"...so, not practising the dharma only for one's own benefit, but practising it in order to benefit others. With that motivation, one does not let one's life go by without meaning, but instead tries to fill one's time with the practices of hearing, contemplation, and meditation, day and night.

Maybe that is enough with regards to the precious human rebirth. Next time, we can talk about the benefits of practising the dharma. Do any of you have a question?

*(Question from student – inaudible)*

*Answer:* The four demons are the delusions, the contaminated aggregates, the Lord of Death, and the Son of the Gods.

So the son of the gods refers to a certain kind of god that causes your delusions to arise. Anyway, it refers to one particular god that has the name Kara-wang-chuk who shoots the five arrows of desire etc.

It may be that there are certain types of non-human interference that can disturb the mind, for example, in cases where the mind gets strongly depressed without any kind of outer contributing condition. Even though the outer conditions may be perfectly good, and the person could be perfectly happy, without any obvious outside cause, strong depression and disturbance of the mind occurs. This could occur through such a cause.

So it is good to be careful. If the mind is very disturbed, then the elements within the body also get disturbed, and this can accelerate to the point where the person becomes completely crazy. If the mind gets disturbed, then the body's inner elements also get disturbed. The subtle wind energies in the body get disturbed up to a point where even you hear different kinds of voices.

*(Another question from a student – again inaudible)*

*Answer:* An attractive and beautiful body is momentary. For example, you can see that as you age, the body's beauty deteriorates. If you have a picture of a girl when she is 15 years old, and then you look at a picture when she is 60, you cannot believe the difference! (Laughter) After she has become old, there's not much beauty left. When you look at the picture of her at 15 when she was so beautiful, you can't believe it is the same person.

If we have strong attachment to our body, we will experience suffering as we get older and our beauty is lost. If we are not attached our body, then it won't matter much to us whether we are beautiful or handsome or not.

*(Interjection by student – inaudible. Geshe-la laughs.)*

You don't need to have the motivation for your practice of patience that you are going to be beautiful and handsome in the future.

If you just practise patience, meditate on patience, you will become beautiful and handsome anyway, whether you want it or not. We meditate on patience for the purpose of wanting to become free from cyclic existence, or with other kinds of motivation, if you relate it to the motivation of the three kinds

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of beings.

If you practise patience with the motivation of a being of lower ability – wanting to attain happiness in the future life – then you practise patience in this life because you are concerned about the kind of appearance you will have in a future life. There are practitioners who are not particularly concerned with attainment of liberation and enlightenment, but are concerned with what happens to them in a future life. So, plan ahead. They want to become wealthy in a future life and have a beautiful or handsome human body. For that purpose, they practise patience.

As we were saying before, practising morality will be the cause to attain a human rebirth. If that is supplemented by the practice of generosity, you will attain a human rebirth with enough material comfort or be very well off. If generosity is supplemented with the practice of patience, you will attain a human body that is pleasant to look at, and is beautiful or handsome.

Then, the practice of joyous effort or enthusiasm becomes the cause to attain all one's temporal and ultimate aims.

Further, the practise of meditative concentration and wisdom will ensure that our mind doesn't fall under the control of the delusions. As we explained at the beginning, if our mind is well subdued through meditation, then even though we may encounter the outer causes and conditions for delusions to arise, our mind will not be affected, and will not fall under the control of the delusions. So, if we practise meditative concentration and wisdom in this life, this will be the cause in a future life – when we attain all the other results, like a human body, wealth and riches, a beautiful or handsome form – for our mind not to fall into a negative state and fall under the control of karma and delusions.

We can readily observe that in this life, if we practise patience and meditate on it, we will have more friends, while if we are always angry, our friends will drift away. In the same way, the practice of patience causes us in future lives to have good friends, and enjoy nice company.

Please, as explained before, try to focus the mind single-pointedly inwards, bringing it home, not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts. Then concentrate single-pointedly on the mantra.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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