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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Lama Tsong Khapa said that white and black karma depends on one's positive and negative attitudes. The actions of our body, speech, and mind are determined by our mental state. If we have a positive mental state, then the actions of our body, speech, and mind will also be positive. If we have a negative mental state, then the actions of our body, speech, and mind will turn out negative.

So, it is important that one tries to generate positive mental attitudes, because our motivation determines the actions of body, speech, and mind. If our intentions are negative, our actions of body, speech, and mind will turn out negative. On the other hand, if we have a positive mental state – if our motivation and our intentions are positive – then the actions of our body, speech, and mind will turn out positive. This is something that we, and the people around us, can rejoice in. If one is in a positive mental state, one will stop treating oneself in unsuitable and harmful ways, and will also abandon unsuitable and harmful behaviour towards others. So, it becomes very important to develop a virtuous and positive attitude.

From understanding the importance of having a virtuous, positive mental attitude, one can recognise the importance of subduing one's mind. Everybody needs a positive mental attitude, and wants their actions of body, speech, and mind to be positive. And everybody wants happiness, but that won't happen if one doesn't subdue one's mind. Without subduing one's mind, one cannot develop a positive mental attitude. Consequently, one's actions of body, speech, and mind also will not be positive. If one doesn't subdue one's mind, one will not be able to experience happiness.

If we let the mind be controlled by disturbing thoughts or delusions, we will block the mind's ability to experience happiness. To experience happiness and to experience the mind's natural, clear state, we need to subdue the mind, or free it from the control of the disturbing, afflictive thoughts. This is the meaning of subduing the mind. Once we have freed the mind from the control of disturbing, afflictive thoughts, it will abide within its natural state, and we will be able to experience its clear nature.

When we meditate, we bring the mind back home, not letting it be distracted by the disturbing thoughts, which want to distract the mind outside, towards unsuitable objects. Instead, we focus the mind 100% inside. Then, for some time, we let the mind remain in a non-conceptual state, 100% focused within us.

When the mind is in that state, one can experience a certain inner happiness that arises from being in a state free from conceptualisation. Some people might think, "I could not get that kind of happiness from meditating". However, when you do this practice – in which you bring the mind home and not let it be distracted outside by the disturbing thoughts – you definitely will see some kind of change, at least how the mind is able to go in that direction. You will definitely be able to say, "When I apply this method, some change happens within my mind".

So, while sitting in a comfortable, relaxed posture, bring the mind back home and focus it 100% within. After remaining calmly in this state for some time, focus the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. (*Pause for meditation.*)

For wisdom to arise in our meditation, it is important that we

first practise contemplating the object of meditation, and eliminate all confusion regarding the object. This analytical meditation on contemplating the object of meditation has to be preceded by the practice of listening to the teachings. So, success in meditation comes about through the two preceding steps of listening and contemplation.

Last time, we were dealing with the verse (from the text) where it was explained that, on the basis of having attained this vessel with the eight freedoms and ten endowments, we can cross the ocean of cyclic existence by relying on the Mahayana teacher we have met in this life, and then practising, listening, contemplating, and meditating, day and night.

The practice of meditation has to be preceded by the practice of contemplation which, in turn, has to be preceded by the practice of listening. It is important to understand the benefits of listening. This verse says in the second line that through listening, one becomes an expert in what has to be abandoned and what has to be practised. By listening to dharma teachings, one can understand what one has to do to make progress, and what one has to abandon. By listening to the three baskets of the Mahayana teachings, one will become an expert in this.

The three baskets of the Mahayana teachings are the basket of the Vinaya teachings, the basket of the Abhidharma teachings and the basket of the Sutra teachings.

The Vinaya teachings explain the practices of morality. The Sutra basket explains the teachings on concentration, and the Abhidharma explains the teachings on wisdom. So by listening to the teachings of Vinaya, we are able to practise morality and abandon negative, harmful states of mind, harmful states of mind. By listening to the teachings of the Sutra basket, we are able to generate concentration, and by listening to the teachings of the Abhidharma basket, we are able to attain liberation from cyclic existence by generating wisdom.

It is important to understand the benefits of what knowing we are supposed to do in all aspects of life. Quite often I [Geshe Doga] ask small children – 5, 6, 7 year olds – what they want when they are 21 or 22. Would they like to have a good car? They say, "Yes". Then I ask them whether they want to have a nice house. They also say, "Yes". Then I ask them whether they would like to have many nice clothes, when they are older. Of course, they say, "Yes".

Then I explain to them how the cause for them to have all of these things when they grow up is studying well at school now. Once they understand the benefit of studying well at school, they want to do it. This can be a very skilled way of getting children to study – the parents don't just push the child to do something, but try to make the child understand the future benefits of doing that study now. Then, the mind will automatically generate the wish to study now! If you explain it like this to children, they become very keen to study.

Listening is the lamp that dispels the darkness of ignorance. Just as the light you switch on will dispel the darkness in a room, so listening is the lamp that dispels the inner darkness of ignorance. If we listen to a teaching and then understand a topic, this has already dispelled that ignorance.

The understanding we generate from listening dispels the darkness of ignorance. Because we don't know a subject, we have to make an effort to understand it. Some people say, "I don't know anything". The reason we have to practise listening to teachings is so that we can know something. If we just keep saying, "I don't know anything", that's how we will remain. We have to make the effort to listen to teachings. Then we will be able to understand something, to dispel ignorance. The understanding we generate through listening is something nobody can take from us – a thief cannot rob us of this understanding and wisdom.

The wisdom we generate through listening is our best

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companion and friend, our best support. Through the wisdom and discriminating awareness we generate through listening, wherever we go we will be able to distinguish beneficial and suitable actions from non-beneficial and unsuitable ones. By relying on our own wisdom, we are able to judge which course of action is the proper one.

The wisdom we generate from listening is our best friend, a friend that will never desert us. Outer friends, as we all know from experience, will be our friends for as long as the going is good. Once we experience difficulties, however – if we get sick and so forth – all those friends will disappear. But the inner friend of wisdom will never desert us.

There was a very famous Kadampa Geshe Langri Tangpa, who started out his practice living very poorly as a hermit. But one day, his situation became too difficult, and he found the need to go somewhere to look for food and provisions. He set out to see a relative, his sister, who was a nomad. He went to the nomad camp where she lived. The nomads in Tibet have many ferocious dogs, which they normally keep leashed up during the day. At night, they are let loose to protect the animals and the camp. When this Geshe's sister saw this poor-looking monk coming along, she felt great shame and didn't want anything to do with him, and set the dogs loose.

Later in his life, Kadampa Geshe Langri Tangpa became a very sincere practitioner, and had lots of success in his practice. He became a very famous dharma teacher. After he had become a famous dharma teacher, widely renowned for his wisdom and practice, his sister came to him and offered him a turquoise. But he said, "Please keep the turquoise, I don't need it. And do you remember the dog you let loose on me? Hold on tight to that dog!"

Actually there are many such stories. There was another practitioner called Yeshe Gawtso who was also very poor at the outset of his practice. He had an uncle who completely ignored him when he met him on the street. The uncle was a businessman who didn't want to have anything to do with him. If they met on the street, the uncle would completely ignore him and not acknowledge him.

But later on, Yeshe Gawtso became widely renowned for his realisation and understanding, and he even became one of the tutors of the Dalai Lama. This made him very famous. The uncle came to visit him after he had achieved this very high position. Of course, Yeshe Gawtso understood that the uncle didn't really like him – he was obviously coming in the hope of getting some money or some business. So he invited the uncle for lunch, completely understanding that the uncle didn't like him. Then he placed a little bit of money he had to one side and, when the uncle had sat down for lunch, he announced that: "The uncle who is not an uncle (because he really didn't want to be my uncle) has just come in the form of a uncle because he wanted some money. So here is the uncle who is not an uncle, and I prostrate to all the money that gave me the uncle!"

So, outer friends are not very reliable. But the inner friend of wisdom and understanding will never desert one. It will always help one in any kind of situation and nobody can take it away.

The wisdom we generate from listening to the teachings acts as the medicine against the three afflictions. In the same way that we can take outer medicine against various physical diseases and sicknesses, the wisdom generated from listening acts as the medicine against the inner sickness of the mental afflictions. That is another benefit. Also, the more wisdom and understanding one generates, the more one's renown and fame will increase.

The understanding generated by depending on the outer condition of somebody giving teachings is not a very stable understanding. What we have to do after having generated this understanding arising from listening is to investigate further

what has been said. Then, through contemplating and analysing the subject further, we will generate an understanding arising from contemplation. This understanding arising from contemplation is an understanding that comes about through our own effort. Because of this, it is more stable.

As said before, the understanding of meditation depends upon the understanding of contemplation, and the understanding of contemplation depends upon the understanding arising from listening. Each level of understanding supports the next level. If you want to generate a good understanding arising from meditation, look at its cause. The cause is understanding arising from contemplation, which in turn depends upon the cause of the understanding arising from listening.

Otherwise, when we go to a place of meditation, we will realise that we don't really know how to meditate and what to meditate upon. Some people set out to do a mantra retreat then, once they are about to start the mantra retreat, they realise they actually don't have the faintest idea of how to do it.

Therefore, it is very important to engage in listening and contemplation. This means investigating our doubts, and clarifying the doubt and confusion we have with regard to the objects of meditation, and so forth. Then, when we meditate, those doubts won't disturb our practice. It is also important that we put whatever we have understood through listening into practice. Because if you don't put into practice what you have understood, then the teachings won't benefit you. It would be like trying to cook vegetables in cold water – no matter how long you leave the vegetables in cold water, they won't get cooked!

If we act in that manner, even if we hear very profound dharma teachings, we will just think, "Oh yeah. That's such and such a teaching, and that's that teaching", and then we just leave it at that, and it won't benefit our mind.

Some people fancy themselves to be great scholars, but they don't put into practice what they have understood. Then they generate great pride with regard to people with lesser understanding and feel superior. They will feel competitive with those who have equal understanding, and will feel jealousy towards those who have a greater understanding and are superior to them. This comes about through not having put into practice what they have understood.

We will stop here. As explained before, bring the mind back home, not letting it be distracted outside by disturbing thoughts, concentrating it 100% within, and then concentrating single-pointedly on the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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