
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Because of the disaster in America, Lama Zopa Rinpoche has advised his students to make requests to Chenrezig, to pray to Chenrezig for those people who died in that terrorist attack, and to recite the Chenrezig mantra for that purpose.

Those who know how to meditate on Chenrezig can do the visualisation, with light coming and so forth. So Lama Zopa Rinpoche advised us to do the meditation where we visualise Chenrezig in the space in front of us, and at the heart of Chenrezig is the seed syllable HRIH, from which light rays emanate and hook the various consciousnesses of those who died in that disaster and transfer them to the pure land of Chenrezig. (Recitation of OH MANI PADME HUNG mantra.)

We can now do little bit of meditation as usual. Sit in a good physical posture and free the mind from the disturbing thoughts that distract it towards the outside. Bring the mind back home, focusing it 100% inside, and not letting it be distracted.

Within that single-pointed state, focus single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. Then, for several minutes, we will meditate single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath.

Last Wednesday, we were talking about the verse (in the prescribed text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*) that says abandoning attachment for one's homeland – which is the cause for the arousal of anger, attachment and ignorance – is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

The verse was saying that, as long as one doesn't abandon one's homeland, one will generate attachment towards friends and close companions, towards that which one likes and which appears pleasant.

This attachment will stir up one's mind like turbulent water. Then one will generate aversion towards one's enemies and what one doesn't like. That anger and aversion will burn in one's mind like fire, burning one's virtues like fire burns wood. Also, one will generate ignorance, which makes one forget one's Dharma practice. Ignorance makes one forget one's knowledge of what is to be practised and what is to be abandoned.

Today, we are going to talk about the next verse. It deals with the idea of remaining in isolation, which is the cause for developing all (good) qualities. The verse reads:

This means avoiding objects that cause the arousal of the three delusions (anger, attachment, and ignorance). Although this can refer to one's homeland, it does not relate only to this. It's actually related to any kind of object or situation that increases or generates disturbing emotions within one's mind.

We all know that there are various outer conditions which, when we meet with them, will cause disturbing emotions to arise in our mind. To prevent those disturbing emotions from arising within the mind, we have to abandon the outer condition of these situations. That's what the "bad objects" refers to – those situations and objects that generate those disturbing emotions.

So, the verse is saying that one has to remain in physical isolation or seclusion from those situations. But one also one has to remain in mental seclusion, secluding the mind from the disturbing thoughts. Mental seclusion means not letting the mind be distracted by the disturbing thoughts. If one practises both physical as well as mental seclusion, one's practice of meditation will come along very well.

The verse says that cultivating seclusion is the practice of a Bodhisattva. Why does it say that? Because there are various benefits to be gained from remaining in seclusion.

First of all, with physical seclusion, we are physically separated from the outer conditions that cause delusions to arise in our mind and mental seclusion secludes our mind from the mental conditions that cause the delusions to arise. As mentioned in the Abhidharma, for delusions to arise, various conditions are needed. If the person hasn't abandoned the delusions from their mindstream, is close to the object of the delusion, and has what are called misleading thoughts – if these three conditions come together, then whether the person wants it or not, delusions will arise within the mind.

To reduce the arousal of delusions within the mind, we have to reduce the conditions for that arousal to occur. Because we haven't yet abandoned delusions from the root, what we can do is reduce the conditions for the arousal of delusions. That means we can avoid being close to the object of the delusion, and we can try to avoid the misleading conception that also causes delusions to arise.

Avoiding being close to the object of the delusion refers to remaining in physical seclusion. But remaining in physical seclusion alone is not enough. If we were to go to an isolated place, but let our mind wander off to the market or to the city, there will not be much benefit. So, we have to also remain in mental seclusion, and not let our mind come under the influence of the disturbing thoughts.

If we can remain in such a state then, because we have reduced or eliminated the two conditions for delusions to arise, fewer delusions will arise in our mind. As our meditation and practice progresses, the delusions will become naturally fewer and fewer, until we reach a point where we will have abandoned completely all manifest delusions, a state in which no manifest delusion will arise within the mind.

What happens during that process is that the intrinsic clarity of one's awareness – the clear nature of the mind – will become more and more manifest. However many delusions may still be manifesting in our mind, the more strongly the clear nature of the mind manifest itself, and the more we experience the intrinsic clear nature of our mind, the more strongly we will increase our faith in Dharma practice, because through our own experience we will have experienced a truth of the Dharma teachings. We will have confirmed them through our own experience.

If the mind can remain undisturbed by the delusions – single-pointed and without distraction – then as it says here the virtuous activities will naturally increase. First of all, our practice of the higher training of ethics will naturally increase. The fewer negative thoughts and negative emotions we have in our mind, the more virtuous it will be, and our practice of the higher training of ethics will automatically increase and become more powerful. Also, the higher training of concentration and wisdom will automatically increase if our mind is less distracted and less controlled by the delusions. So, there are various benefits to be gained from remaining in seclusion. That is why it is a practice of a Bodhisattva.

The arising of delusions within the mindstream depends on closeness to the object, and on what is called misleading or mistaken conception. For a person who hasn't abandoned the delusions, if those other two conditions come together, delusions will arise within the (mental) continuum. Mistaken conception is one of the main conditions for the arising of delusions.

First of all, when we meet the object of like either anger or attachment, mistaken conception gives us a wrong impression it. In the case of an object of attachment, this mistaken conception greatly exaggerates the attractive aspects of the object. After exaggerating the attractive aspects of the object, we

generate very strong attachment towards it.

And the other way around – if we meet an object of anger, our misleading conception will greatly exaggerate the negative aspects of that object in our mind, and we will generate anger towards that object. If you think about it, why is it that sometimes we generate attachment to an object, and at other times we generate anger towards the same object? It comes about through the power of this misleading conception. On some occasions our misleading conception will impute all these attractive qualities on the object, and we will generate attachment. Then, at other times, the misleading conception will impute faults and negative aspects on the object, and we will generate aversion and anger.

But, if we can free ourselves from the control of this misleading conception, then neither attachment nor anger will arise with regards to that object. So, recognising this misleading conception and reducing it becomes very important.

It is very important for us to understand the psychological development of the delusions within the mind, and the role that mistaken conception or mistaken thinking plays in the development of the delusions. Throughout our lives, we swing from attachment to anger to attachment to anger.

If we perceive somebody as pleasant, because they give us happiness and are near and dear to us, then we will generate attachment towards that person. Then, when we will perceive that person as somebody who is harmful and unpleasant to us, we will generate aversion. Like this, we swing back and forth and back and forth, holding that person as near and dear to us, then generating aversion, then being close to them again, then being distant from them. So, it is very important for us to recognise the role that mistaken conception plays in the development of the delusions and of our mental state.

When we find that our mistaken conception starts to think about the faults of the object and starts to exaggerate those faults and concentrates only on those faults of the object, then we have to put a stop to that way of thinking. Through putting a stop to it, we also put a stop to anger. The same goes for attachment.

Otherwise, as we all know, the more we get mentally involved in this thought process and the more we exaggerate the faults and negative qualities of the other person in our mind, the more our anger will also increase. The same with attachment. The more our mistaken conception exaggerates the attractive, pleasant, and desirable aspects of the object, the more attachment we will generate for that object until, in the end, it appears to us as if we cannot live without that object. Our mind becomes completely overwhelmed by either attachment or anger on the basis of exaggerating the faults or attractive qualities of the object. This is very important to understand.

When we understand the role that mistaken conception plays in the development of our delusions, we will better understand the purpose and importance of meditation. The purpose of meditation is to not let the mind fall under the control of those disturbing thoughts. Remaining in physical seclusion is a method that gives one the space to be able to attain a mental state free from the disturbing thoughts.

Once one has attained mental seclusion – and has secluded or freed the mind from the control of the misleading, mistaken thoughts – one does not need to remain in physical seclusion. Once one has control of the mind, one can go wherever one wants and nothing will disturb one's mind. So, remaining in physical seclusion is really a means to an end.

If we are able to attain mental seclusion or mental isolation and free our mind from the mistaken and disturbing thoughts, then we will be able to place our mind in a clear and stable state. We will experience mental clarity, single-pointedness, and stability. By remaining within that state, we will generate

what is called mental 'pliancy'. Mental pliancy will then induce physical pliancy.

Pliancy refers to serviceability, meaning that both the mind and body become serviceable. When we attain physical pliancy, our body becomes serviceable. Through that, we will experience the bliss of physical pliancy. The bliss of physical pliancy will induce the bliss of mental pliancy – the mind will also become serviceable and from that the bliss of mental pliancy will arise. So, after the bliss of physical pliancy has induced the bliss of mental pliancy, one will attain what is called the special bliss of pliancy. At that moment, one will attain what is called calm abiding. This concentrated state called calm abiding is the meditative state that combines the attainment of special mental and physical pliancy.

Next week, we will talk a little more about remaining in isolation and seclusion. Does anyone have a question?

Question: How can we remain in seclusion when we live busy lives surrounded by family, parents, partners, and friends who cause us to give rise to so many delusions?

Geshe Doga: It is possible for lay people to remain in isolation. We just have to take the example of Shakyamuni Buddha, who was married, had children and had parents, but still was able to go into isolation. Whether one remains in isolation or not depends on you. If you bring up the argument that "I cannot go into isolation because I have parents" well then, nobody could go into isolation! We all the same.

Some time ago, one of my students came to me wanting to do a two-month retreat. He wanted to go to some isolated place and practise meditation for two months. But he had a problem, because his girlfriend didn't like that. In fact, she even said she wouldn't marry him if he were to go and she was quite upset.

Of course, it is very difficult to completely abandon our friends, girlfriends, and so forth. This is a final step in our practice, which we cannot take at the moment.

So, when this student came to ask me what he should do and explained the situation to me, I said to him half-jokingly, "Why don't you do the retreat in your flat where you are living with your girlfriend? You can take two months off work, and your girlfriend can go to work every day and cook for you and go shopping and so forth. Once she has gone to work in the morning, just lock the door to your room and do your retreat!" (*General laughter.*) That is what he ended up doing. His girlfriend liked that decision very much – it was more agreeable to her.

Because our present situation involves partners, parents, and so forth, we have to take them into consideration. It would not be appropriate to harm them for the purpose of our Dharma practice. Saying that we are not going to take care of our parents, or saying that we are not going to consider the happiness of our partners for the purpose of our Dharma practice is not appropriate in relation to our ability and situation at the present time. As a final step, we can aim one day to remain in complete physical seclusion. But, for the moment, the skilful thing to do is to try and find a halfway solution for our practice.

I also usually also say to students that, even if you cannot bring your mind home 100% and focus it inwards 100% – even if you can only do it 50%, then that's what you should do. We should try to practise according to our capacity.

Sometimes, it also happens that certain couples decide that the boy will become a monk and the girl will become a nun. This kind of situation has happened in the past. The boy decides, "I'm going to become ordained, I'm going to become a monk". And the girl says, "Yes, that's a very good idea. I'm going to become a nun". So they split up and each becomes ordained. Then, after a few years, the girl disrobes and is no longer a nun. She gets together with a new boyfriend. Then, the monk also

disrobes and stops being a monk, and finds some other girlfriend.

This did happen. The boyfriend gave up a very good relationship with a very nice girlfriend, became a monk, then later disrobed for another girl, who was actually not so nice! (*General laughter.*) Then he came to Geshe-la and said, "Oh, that was my karma!" (*More laughter.*)

Anyway, I am not saying people shouldn't become ordained. But if people do become ordained, they should stick to it 100%. Holy beings can keep their promises 100%, but if you are not able to do that, it shows a lack of sincerity in your Dharma practice, which will also have negative results in the future. It is much better to practise according what one can do at the present time.

To practise pure Dharma, it is not necessary to give up one's partners, boyfriends, or girlfriends. The Buddha said that it is possible to attain liberation while remaining a layperson. During Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime, a king asked the Buddha for instruction, but said it would not be possible for him to give up his throne and all the responsibilities he had to fulfill as a king. The Buddha replied that this was not a problem, that he could attain liberation while remaining a king.

If we practise cherishing others, this will lessen the delusions within our mind and increase positive and virtuous mental states. With an attitude of cherishing others, one's practice of generosity will develop very well.

As was explained before, bring the mind back home, not letting it be distracted by the disturbing thoughts. Then, focus single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OMMUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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