
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We can practise a little bit of meditation as usual. Please sit in a correct and comfortable meditation posture. Then, focus the mind inwardly, not letting it be distracted by the disturbing thoughts from outside.

After having focused the mind inwardly, please remain in a relaxed state, and concentrate on the coming and going of the breath. The breathing shouldn't be forced, but should flow naturally. The mind should be relaxed and should become one with the breathing – not like a subject looking at an object, but actually entering into the coming and going of the breath. *(Pause for meditation.)*

While meditating on single-pointed concentration, it is important that one avoids the faults of either mental dullness or sinking, or mental excitement. Letting the mind be distracted by mental excitement towards outside objects will actually cause pain and disturbance within it, as if one were being bitten by vicious dogs. Mental sinking and mental excitement are obstacles to the attainment of single-pointed concentration, and have to be abandoned.

As was explained last Wednesday, if we can remain in physical isolation – avoiding distracting physical activities – and also remain in mental isolation – not letting our mind fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts – then our mind will remain calmly and clearly focused within us.

So, there are two methods – remaining in both physical and mental isolation. Otherwise, we will encounter various outside objects that cause disturbing thoughts and emotions to arise. And, if we let our mind be distracted by the disturbing thoughts, it will harm our concentration.

The reason for attaining single-pointed concentration is that everybody wants happiness within the mind. We have to analyse what is conducive to attaining happiness, and what harms that happiness. At the moment, because we let our mind be distracted by the disturbing thoughts – letting it wander all over the place, without any kind of control – this causes great problems and sufferings within the mind.

Also, because we are not abiding in physical isolation – separated from the objects that cause the delusions to arise – this also harms the attainment of single-pointed concentration. So, we have to analyse the benefit of remaining in physical and mental isolation, which is that one can avoid the objects that cause delusions to arise, and one can avoid letting one's mind fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts. Then, the mind will remain calm and clear, and will become serviceable. The physical body will also become serviceable, so one will experience pliancy of both mind and body.

One shouldn't think that it is impossible to attain such a state of clarity and concentration. One should be aware that it is possible to attain such a state if one habituates one's mind slowly, slowly – step-by-step one can reach that state. One benefit of having a happier mind is that automatically there will be a beneficial effect on one's health. A happy and healthy mind has a good effect on one's body. One's physical health will be more stable and will improve.

Whether you attain such a state or not is up to you – you shouldn't decide from the very beginning that it is impossible to attain such a state. That is a mistake. One should generate the conviction and the confidence that definitely the mind can be changed, and can be accustomed and habituated to those positive states that cause inner mental happiness.

As the Bodhisattva Shantideva explained in his book *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, there is nothing that the mind cannot be accustomed to or trained in.

For example, if we generate a strong dislike for someone when we meet him or her for the first time, our relationship with that person can slowly, slowly change. Our mind can learn to view that person in a completely different way so that, in the end, the relationship becomes completely the opposite – we find it unbearable to be separated from that person for an instant. Being separated from that person, even for an instant, causes great pain; yet, at the beginning, just meeting that person caused pain.

This shows how the mind can change, how one can train one's mind. It is important not to lose one's courage and self-confidence. Why I [Geshe Doga] am saying this again and again is that, if we decide from the start that we are unable to do this, then we will not achieve anything, nor get anywhere. Even with regard to worldly activities, if we decide from the start that we are unable to do such and such an action, then we will not be successful, and it will not turn out well. So, it is important to have confidence.

We should begin our meditation according to our capacity. At the start, one might be able to remain for just one minute in a clear, relaxed state of single-pointed concentration on the object. So, one should meditate for one minute. By doing this – by meditating again and again, slowly, slowly – this period of time will become more and more extended, until eventually one will be able to remain in single-pointed concentration for however long one likes. Again, this is because of this quality of the mind, that the mind can be accustomed to a different state. You can train your mind in whatever you want to train it in.

Last time, we covered verse 3 (p.22 *The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, NY 1997), where we talked about avoiding bad objects and so forth. We will continue to discuss this verse, and talk about the five qualities that we should look for in a place of physical isolation.

The **first** quality is that one should be able to find provisions easily. The things you need to sustain yourself should be readily findable in such a place; otherwise, it might become difficult for you. For example, if you can stay somewhere close to a relative who will supply you with food and drink, then that's very good. So the first quality relates to findability of sustenance.

The **second** quality is that it is a pure place, free from thieves, robbers and so forth. The **third** quality again refers to pure place, but here the purity refers to the elements at that place – the water, etc. shouldn't be harmful to the body. There are places where the water is unhealthy. And certain people get sick when they go to certain places, so those places should be avoided.

The **fourth** quality refers to pure friends. This means that if one decides to go into retreat, one should do the retreat at a place where one has access to spiritual friends that one can ask for advice when doubts arise during the retreat relating to one's practice. This is an important point. I always tell people that if they do retreat, they should go somewhere where there is a Lama is available of whom they can ask questions when doubts arise during the retreat.

The **fifth** quality refers to the fact that the place should be a quiet place. There shouldn't be any kind of unnatural disturbance, like lots of sound, for example, noise coming from water nearby and such things.

It is recommended in the Mahayana Sutra Ornament by Maitreya that if one goes into retreat at an isolated place, then that place preferably should have these five qualities.

As we mentioned last time, it is not imperative that one remains in an isolated place all one's life. Going to an isolated

place is a means to an end. Once one has gained control over one's mind and is able to prevent one's mind from falling under the control of the disturbing emotions and the disturbing thoughts, then one can go wherever one wants. Even if you meet disturbing outside conditions, they will not harm your mind.

Unfortunately, our mind is easily disturbed. Delusions such as attachment, anger, pride and so forth, arise very easily, and have the power to disturb the mind greatly. So, first we have to identify whichever delusion is the strongest, then take particular care with regard to that delusion. As was explained last time, we need to practise what we call mental isolation, isolating our mind from that delusion and from delusions in general. Isolating the mind from the delusions means not letting the mind fall under their control. If we are able to keep our mind in that state, then even if we meet with harmful outer conditions, they will not disturb our mind.

We can observe from our own experience how various thoughts disturb our mind when they arise, but once they have been pacified, one regains one's inner happiness. So, we can clearly see the relationship between happiness and not being under the control of the delusions. One should actually generate some kind of fear of those delusions, definitely making the decision that they are to be avoided. One should think, "I definitely have to free my mind from the control of these delusions". If one is able to do so, one can sustain one's inner happiness.

Now we have a choice – either some of you can ask some questions, or we go on to verse 4. Do you have some questions?

Question: I've found that some delusions are very tenacious – of all the delusions, but some are more stubborn than others, and when they're challenged, they keep coming back, and won't go away.

Answer: Yes, that's correct. You try to oppose a delusion, and the delusion will try to oppose you back and it will not go very easily. However, if you oppose them continuously, then slowly, slowly they will become weaker. As the Bodhisattva Shantideva mentioned, if we oppose the delusions, we will definitely be able to overcome them. But if we don't oppose our delusions and just let them do whatever they want, then they become stronger and stronger, and our mind becomes worse and worse.

So we have the inner enemy of these delusions. Sometimes, we also we have an outer enemy, another person. We have to treat these two enemies differently. We try to deal with the outer enemy through love and compassion, by being good to that person, trying to make that person happy, being affectionate to that person, and so forth. Through this, the other person will be pacified, and will also start being friendly and nice to us. That is the way we should treat the outer enemy.

We should treat the inner enemy of the delusions in a completely different way. If we try to act in accord with the delusions, if we try to be friends with them, then the only thing that will happen is that they will get worse and worse. So, one has to oppose the inner enemy of the delusions and try to overcome them.

So, we have to let go with regard to the outer enemy – to let go of one's anger and of one's concrete, negative views about that other person. We let go of our negative attitude towards the other person, and try to be friendly to them by giving them food and drink, offering them a place to stay, and so forth. Then, slowly, slowly the attitude of the other person will also transform, and that person will become our friend.

Anyway, how does it come about that from our side, sometimes someone is a friend and at other times he or she is an enemy? It comes about through imputation. One of the main causes for delusion to arise is what is called wrong conception or wrong thinking – imputing all these faults, projecting all these faults and negative qualities onto the other person. The

more one projects onto that person, the more anger and aversion one generates towards he or she. But, if one starts to reduce one's negative projections on the other person, the anger also reduces. Then, once one projects good qualities onto that person, one starts to like them. So it all completely depends on one's own point of view.

It is very important for us to let go of our negative attitude to and hatred for others. We keep our various dislikes and hatreds within our mind, holding onto them and making them concrete – we have to stop this. For example, we just have to think about how we feel when somebody gives us a present of a flower and says that they are sorry, about the happiness it gives in our mind. However, we are not able to do this while we are tenaciously holding onto our hatreds and dislikes.

I am always advising people to do this kind of thing. For example, if somebody is sick or is in a hospital, then even you do not like that person very much, take them a present such as a flower, and wish them good health and that everything may be well for them, and so forth. Then, once they are cured from their sickness, they will have a good memory of us, and will regard us favourably, thinking of us as their friend. The relationship will be very good. Through that simple action, we have started a good relationship with that other person. That other person can be also family. Sometimes, it happens that we have a disagreement with our parents or other family members. But it's very important not to hold onto those hatreds and dislikes within one's own mind, and to have a good relationship with one's parents and family, otherwise one will also make one's own mind unhappy.

The essence of what we have talked about today is that one wants happiness and doesn't want suffering, and that negative attitudes cause suffering, and positive attitudes generate happiness, when those positive attitudes are generated through meditation. So, the purpose of meditation is to generate positive mental attitudes, which then cause inner happiness within the mind.

Is there another question? Well, if there is no question, we can again bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards, not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, and then concentrating on the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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