
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

26 September 2001

So then first we can again meditate for a short while as usual.

We sit in a comfortable and correct posture.

Having assumed the correct physical posture one has to focus the mind inwards, bringing it back home, not letting it be distracted by the disturbing thoughts. If disturbing thoughts distract our mind then our mind won't be stable and clear. So we have to free our mind from the control of the disturbing thoughts in order to attain mental stability and clarity and to make the mind serviceable. That is our purpose for meditation and what we should do after having assumed the correct posture.

The meaning of meditation is to habituate the mind towards positive meditation objects that can counteract the various delusions. As an example; if after having analyzed one's own mind, we found that actually our greatest delusion is attachment, then at the time when attachment arises in the mind we have to focus our mind on an object that counteracts that attachment. And then through doing that again and again and habituating one's mind towards the virtuous object - then one can break the mental pattern of attachment. And then we can, as was explained before, while sitting in the correct posture, then meditate for a few minutes. *{pause for meditation}*.

The next verse deals with meditation on impermanence for the purpose of giving up the thought of this life.

When you hear that we have to meditate on impermanence in order to give up this life, you might immediately start to worry that you have to give up girlfriends, boyfriends, possessions and so forth. But this is not the meaning of giving up this life. What it is talking about is giving up the inner harmful state of attachment to life, and has nothing to do with throwing away one's possessions and so forth.

In order to give up the grasping for the happiness of this life, one has to meditate on impermanence. This is the main method. If we analyze our mind then we find that in our mind various types of grasping arise all the time; attachment, anger, jealousy, competitiveness and so forth. All those various disturbing states arise from, of course the root is self-grasping, but one of the main causes is grasping at permanence. So in order to oppose the grasping at permanence one has to meditate on impermanence.

First I am going to tell a short story: At the time when the Buddha was alive in India he would go every morning on the begging round into the village to beg for the lunch as it was a custom at that time for monks to do. And so then he reached this house of one family with the father, the mother, children and so forth, all made offerings to the Buddha. And then normally it is the custom to recite some dedication prayers after having received the food and so far as to repay the kindness. But this family requested the Buddha to give them a teaching. And then the Buddha told them about impermanence and they generated an understanding of impermanence from the teaching of the Buddha - maybe they were already Bodhisattvas, that's possible. Anyway so they generated an understanding of impermanence from the teaching of the Buddha but then went about their normal daily activities. While they were going about their normal daily activities they were constantly repeating to themselves the following words: The conclusion of being born is death, the conclusion of meeting is to separate, the conclusion of accomplishing something is to lose. And they would repeat those words over and over again while going about their daily activities.

So they all went about their daily activities while meditating on impermanence. The work of the son was to go to the forest to collect wood and the parents worked in at the market. In that area there lived a magician who decided that he was going to test the understanding of impermanence of that family. The son together with a whole group of young boys goes into the forest to collect wood. They spread out in the forest to do this and then come back together and go back together to the market. So the magician emanated an emanation of the son sitting against a tree in the aspect of having been bitten by a poisonous snake. When all the other boys came back then they saw that emanation there, they thought it was actually the actual boy. The actual boy hadn't come back; he was still wandering around in the forest somewhere looking for wood. So they all saw the emanation sitting there, and thought a poisonous snake has bitten him. They immediately went to the market to tell the parents about what happened, what they thought had happened to their son. But the parents they weren't particularly worried because they had an understanding of impermanence.

So then the magician went to see the father and asked him what the reason was that he wasn't grieving that his son had died by being bitten by a poisonous snake. And the father said; "Oh everything is impermanent so even though he was born in condition upon my body, it wasn't me who told him to come, and also it wasn't me who told him to go *{laughter}* and that's just how impermanence is, that's just the nature of impermanent phenomena.

And then the magician went to see the mother and asked the mother why she is not experiencing any suffering because of the death of her son *{laughter}* and she said that: "Oh everything is impermanent, just like all the birds in the evening, they all congregate in the tree, to spend the night there and then in the morning they can all fly away. That's just the nature of impermanent phenomena".

Then the magician went to see the daughter and asked her why she wasn't experiencing any suffering because of the death of her brother.

The daughter said; "I'm not experiencing any suffering because all compounded phenomena are impermanent. For example the market place in the morning will fill up slowly with all the traders and then they will be there all day but then towards the evening all the traders will go home and then in the night when the night falls the market place will be completely empty. So that is the nature of compounded phenomena".

The point is that everything that meets has to again separate and if you contemplate with those examples it can help you to generate a good understanding.

So then the fourth verse of the 37 Practices says:

Separating from long-time friends
What we've accumulated with so much effort is lost,
The body is the guesthouse and the consciousness is the
guest,
Abandoning this life is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

This verse we can relate to the death meditation which we know from the Lam Rim where it says that at the time of death neither our friends and relatives or our wealth and possessions and not even our body will be of any benefit. We will not be able to take with us at the time of our death our friends or relatives, we cannot take with us any kind of possession or wealth and even the body one has to leave behind. So regardless whether there are close friends which one has known for a long time, or just a short time acquaintances the rule will be always the same that what meets has to part. That finally one has to part from everybody and no matter how much effort one has spent in accumulating one's, one has spent in accumulating wealth during one's lifetime, at the time of death one will not be able to take even one penny with oneself.

And the body is actually like a guesthouse for the guest of the consciousness, which will remain within that guesthouse only for as long as the karma and lifespan allows it. And once the karma and lifespan have run out, then the guest consciousness has to leave the guesthouse and go on to next life.

What we call "life" is the basis for heat and consciousness. This combination of heat and consciousness exists on the basis of what we call "life". And once this function of what we call "life" stops, then we label that death. So once the function of life ceases, then that is what one labels death. And what makes something alive is when the coarse aggregates are combined with coarse consciousness". Once the coarse consciousness separates from the coarse aggregates then one doesn't call it "alive" anymore. Here there is a subtle point, why it is specified the coarse consciousness and coarse aggregates is because the subtle consciousness can never be separated from the subtle aggregates. So this is like a fine point. So the subtle consciousness can never be separated from the subtle aggregates. But the coarse consciousness can be separated from the coarse aggregates and as long as the coarse consciousness is combined with the coarse aggregates, then one would call those aggregates "alive." Then once they separate then that is called "death".

There are various stages in the death process. Towards the end of the subtler stages when the breathing has already stopped, when there is still life force in the body, one can observe that there is actually still heat in the heart region - even though the breathing has stopped.

One has to die sooner or later and it is up to one now to take care that one can die in comfortable state of mind. That is also the purpose why one practices meditation now in order to prepare oneself for the time of death. Here remembering during our life, during our day, that whatever meets has to separate, whatever is accomplished will be also be disintegrated and so forth. If we check up in our mind how much suffering we can experience even now when we separate from somebody to whom we are very attached, then what causes that suffering is the grasping within the mind. Our meditation practice one has to lessen that grasping in the mind. If one has less grasping in the mind, then if one is separated from friends and so forth it will not cause any suffering in the mind - even also now when we are separated from people to whom we are not attached, then it doesn't cause any problem in the mind. But if we are separate from people to whom we have attachment, then it causes suffering in the mind but the suffering is actually caused by the grasping. So the grasping one has to reduce through one's meditation practice and then also one's life will be happier and will experience less problems and so forth. And also one's meditation practice can be facilitated by making requests to one's deity, to one's refuge, so regardless whether that refuge is a Buddhist refuge or a non Buddhist refuge.

This meditation on impermanence is actually very beneficial for the mind, is a very powerful method for subduing and pacifying the mind. And if we are not doing it now then at the time of death one will experience lots of worry and suffering. People who practice the Dharma don't experience suffering at the time of death - they have a very happy death. But people who don't practice the Dharma, who are only concerned with friends, wealth and the body, then at the time of death they experience suffering because one knows that one will be separated from those three. And we can observe, even now when we are separated from our friends that it causes us suffering. And also the fact that one will lose one's body, that causes great suffering. So practicing the meditation on impermanence is very beneficial for the mind, it will lessen the grasping within the mind and that also will help us not only to have a death without worry but also during our lifetime we will experience a more happier and relaxed mind, a more happy and relaxed life.

And also I forgot to mention from before that we could remember the story that I told before which we can all relate to. If we practice the Dharma then we don't need to worry at the time of our death. In fact we can be very happy and look forward to our death because we know we've practiced Dharma and we are going to experience a higher rebirth. So we are going to the high realms and then in the high realms one {laughter...sorry} one can find like boyfriends and girlfriends! {Laughter} And anyway one can look forward to a very nice life in the higher realms; they have lots of enjoyments in the high realms to which one can look forward.

If we practice the Dharma and have fewer delusions then the friends whom we acquire will be very stable friends.

Meditation on impermanence is also explained in the Lam Rim by way of the three roots and nine reasons and the three decisions, which are made at the end. And it is also very good to remember the benefits of meditating on impermanence. Meditating on impermanence will increase whatever Dharma practice we do, we will increase the practice of the six perfections, remembering impermanence will increase our practice of generosity, it will help us to subdue our harmful behavior and the delusions which becomes the practice of morality, it will help us not to get angry when we encounter problems and so forth which is the practice of patience, it will help us to practice enthusiasm which then in turn will help us accomplish all the other perfections and also will help us to accomplish the perfection of concentration having a single-pointed mind and the perfection of wisdom, it will be beneficial for the development of wisdom and discriminative awareness - knowing what has to be practiced and what has to be abandoned. So it is beneficial for the whole of the Dharma practice.

When we meditate on impermanence we can do it with the methods which are explained in the Lam Rim, the three roots and the nine reasons - each root has three reasons - and so the three roots that one is definitely going to die, that the time of death is indefinite and that at the time of death only Dharma is beneficial. And this also has to be combined with the three decisions. So there is three, the three reasons which one can use, which one can meditate on to understand, the first root, that death is definite, is that first of all that the lord of death is definitely going to come. So there is no condition that can stop the lord of death - there is nothing that can stop the lord of death. There are no conditions that can stop death, no lifespan can be added and whatever lifespan one has is constantly running out. The first decision relates to the first root, that definitely one is going to die.

So actually the third reason relating to first root is that, I forgot to mention is that one will die before one will have accomplished any Dharma practice. So then one goes onto the second root that is that the time of death is actually indefinite. And here again there are three reasons. The first reason is that on our planet there is no, definite lifespan for humans. So the lifespan of humans is indefinite - there is no rule regarding to when one dies, no fixed rule. That is the first reason. Then the second reason is that there are more conditions for death than conditions supporting life and even conditions supporting life very often turn into conditions which support death, cause death. And the third reason is actually that our body is very fragile so it doesn't take very much to harm the body.

For example, many people they die just by having gone into a shower and then being all wet, they slip and when you fall a little bit unskillful and then you are dead.

The decision is that one has to practice the Dharma right now.

After having then made the decision that one has to practice the Dharma right now, then one moves onto the third root which is that at the time of death only the Dharma will be beneficial and nothing else. And here again there are three reasons to

consider. First of all that one's friends and relatives one will have to leave them behind. The second reason is that one will have to leave behind one's possessions and money and so forth and the third reason is that even one has to leave behind one's physical body - not even the physical body will be beneficial at the time of death. Then the decision one arrives at is that the only thing that is worthwhile doing during one's lifetime is Dharma practice.

So it is very beneficial for the mind to contemplate those points in a very relaxed manner. Remembering impermanence in such a way will reduce the grasping mind, and then in that way will benefit the mind during one's lifetime as well as at the time of death. We can see definitely a difference in the way Dharma practitioners die from the way people die that don't practice the Dharma and have lots of grasping.

Yes, so meditating on impermanence will have a great benefit on for our life and so then preparing for death we improve our mind, do the various meditations such as meditating on, of course, impermanence and love and compassion and so forth. It becomes very important to purify one's mind from the negativities, to purify the various negativities, negative karmas, to accumulate merits. So in short, as Lama Tsong Khapa said; "Increase the virtuous and positive minds and lessen the negative and harmful attitudes, so that's what it comes down to in the end.

And so then as was explained in the beginning, we can bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards and then focus single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

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**