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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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**3 October 2001**

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We will do a little bit of meditation as usual. Please relax and sit in the correct posture.

When we practise meditation, it is important that we first identify the object of meditation. The subject, the mind, needs to have proper concentration characterised by two qualities – clarity or intensity; and single-pointedness or stability. The main obstacle to the first quality (clarity or intensity) is called mental sinking; the main obstacle to stability is called mental excitement. To overcome these obstacles, we need mindfulness and introspection. They are the two friends we have to rely on to attain proper concentration.

After sitting in an appropriate and relaxed posture, we take non-conceptuality as the object of concentration. Try to place the mind in a non-conceptual state, not letting it fall under the influence of the disturbing thoughts, but bringing it home and focusing it 100% inside.

Through single-pointedness, we will be able to utilise the power of our mind. So, when we have the mind brought home and focused inwards single-pointedly, we have to keep it there. We do this through the force of mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness is the mental factor that is aware of the object of meditation and what the mind is doing. Introspection checks up whether there are harmful states within the mind, whether the mind is under the influence of the disturbing thoughts or not.

After having placed the mind in this non-conceptual state, we focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, and take the breathing as the object of meditation. So, we will meditate like that for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*)

Practising meditation is up to us – we have to take care of our own mind. If we find that our mind has fallen under the control of such disturbing thoughts as anger and attachment, we have to free it from the control of such disturbing thoughts and place it in a virtuous state, by meditating on a virtuous and positive object. Even though it is difficult to completely eradicate attachment and anger from the mind, through continuous familiarisation, one will be able to see some improvement. The mind will be less and less disturbed by attachment and anger.

Otherwise, if we let our mind just fall under the control of attachment and anger, we will not be able to even experience a happy worldly life. Even our normal activities will not succeed. On the other hand, if we free our mind from the control of attachment and anger, we will be able to experience some inner happiness, bliss and stability.

Through continuous meditation practice, we will experience fewer disturbing thoughts. Some people suffer from too much conceptualising and too much thinking. One thought leads to the next, which then leads to the next, and it just goes on and on and on. That person will generate different kinds of worries. Even though physically there is nothing wrong with that person, mentally the person becomes completely incapacitated, to the point where they can't work. They become like a person without arms, even though physically there is nothing wrong with them.

This affliction is very important to purify. Someone in such a state of mind – no matter how much wealth or friends they may have and how good their outer situation may be – as long as they have constant worry and fear in the mind, they will not experience happiness.

On the other hand, a person who doesn't worry is a happy person. Happiness is the absence of worry and fear in the mind. So, it becomes very important to purify those disturbing thoughts. They will also rob you of your sleep! We all know from our own and others' experience that if one's mind is disturbed, one cannot sleep.

The other day I [Geshe-la] went out for lunch. There was a boy about 16 or 17 years old in the restaurant with his parents – maybe they were the owners. He was just about to go to work. Anyway, he started to cry and tell his parents that because there has been so much talk of war, he was starting to worry about having to go and fight somewhere with the Australian army. He said that he couldn't do that because he could not kill anybody. Even though there was no real cause for that kind of worry, it was generated in his mind and made him very depressed.

The other day we finished with the topic of meditating on impermanence to give up this life. Now we will go on to the fifth verse [p.29 in the prescribed text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997] which deals with abandoning obstacles towards one's spiritual development, in this case, misleading and misguided friends.

At first, some doubt might come into one's mind: "If it says one has to abandon misleading and bad company, does that mean one has to harm them?". That is not what the text is referring to. The Buddha said that one has to practise affection and love towards all sentient beings, regardless of whether they are enemies or friends. So here, when the text talks about abandoning misleading friends, it means that what we have to abandon is bad behaviour, and not our affection for other people.

The verse reads:

When you keep their company your three poisons increase,  
Your activities of hearing, thinking and meditating decline,  
And they make you lose your love and compassion.  
Give up bad friends –  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

This is referring to those friends whose company would cause the three delusions of ignorance, anger and attachment, to increase in your mind, leading you to engage in negative actions, such as killing and so forth. It also refers to friends whose company will harm your practice of listening, contemplation and meditation, and will lessen your love and compassion. One should abandon this kind of company.

The company we keep is very important. Keeping good company can inspire one to practise meditation and the Dharma. Keeping bad company can inspire one to do the opposite – to give up one's meditation and Dharma practice. The company we keep has an influence on us.

But if we first analyse our own mind, we will find a great variety of delusions. Everything is there – ignorance, anger, desire, jealousy, pride, and so forth. If we can find all these delusions in our own mind, they will also be present in the minds of others. So, it will actually be very difficult to find friends who are completely free of delusions – who don't have any pride, anger, or attachment.

Regardless of whether our friends are good or bad company, what is important is knowing how to relate to these various people. It will be very difficult to find someone who will be 100% good, pure and positive. Everybody has a good and bad side. Everybody has certain harmful, negative behaviour, and certain positive qualities and good behaviour, just like us. So, in relation to other people, we should only concentrate on the good qualities, and not on the negative qualities. We should take the good qualities of others as an example and try to act accordingly. And we should try to avoid imitating the

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negative qualities and the negative actions of others.

If we act in such a discerning way, then we will benefit and our own qualities will increase. Even if you have lived with a person for some time and later separate, if you act in that way, you will have received much benefit and increased your good qualities. On the other side, if you only take up the negative actions of others as an example, then not only will you lose the qualities you already have, you will also develop more harmful states of the mind, and engage in more harmful actions.

It is important to be discerning and skilful in the way one relates to others because there is no limit to how far one can degenerate. Falling into bad habits is very easy, and there is no limit to where this can go. On the other hand, developing good qualities is very difficult, and takes lots of effort. Therefore, if we see certain faults in the people with whom we surround ourselves, we should definitely not adopt these faults, or take them as an example.

For example, attachment can easily be increased to such a level that people quite often kill out of very strong attachment. On the other hand, everyone wants friendship from others. Everyone likes it if we are friendly to them. It's very important to always be friendly and polite in one's physical actions – to always speak politely and show a smiling face. Even if we don't know a person very well, we can act as if we know them very well, and just cut them off. Even if we are feeling a little bit down, then rather than letting it show, we can still put on a smiling face on the outside. This is accepted as good behaviour. If we see people who don't behave like this, we shouldn't adopt their negative ways.

So the point is not to abandon one's relationships with others, but to be able to protect one's mind from falling under the negative influence of others. If our friend gets angry at us, we shouldn't get angry back just because our friend was angry. This is like pouring oil on a flame. It just keeps escalating. If our friend gets angry, then we should meditate on patience. In that way, we don't fall under the negative influence of that person. If our friend engages in any behaviour that increases attachment, it might be more difficult to prevent attachment arising from our side.

But it is possible to prevent anger arising. If the other person has anger in his or her mind, we can definitely meditate on patience. We can also remember that when one has anger in the mind, one experiences anguish and mental suffering. So, if the other person gets angry, it is good to remember that at that moment the other person is experiencing great pain and anguish in their mind, and therefore should be an object of our compassion. We can think, "That poor person is angry, she is suffering so much at that moment", and then meditate on patience.

From our own experience we know if we have an angry mind, at that moment we are not happy. In the same way, the other person is not happy at the moment of anger. Remembering this, we can meditate on patience and also on compassion, thinking, "May that person be free from his or her suffering, and may that person have happiness", and so forth.

It is a little more difficult to understand how the arising of attachment causes suffering within the mind, because there's a certain happiness associated with attachment. But we can easily understand how generating anger within the mind causes suffering.

If we can keep that understanding in the mind – that the angry person is suffering – then that person will not appear to us an enemy. If we lose that recognition, and let anger arise in our mind, we will perceive the other person as an enemy. When anger arises in our mind, it reduces our good qualities and increases our faults. The same occurs to the other person when anger arises in their mind. So, if we let anger arise from our

side, that will exaggerate and escalate the situation, making it worse.

We can observe from our own experience the influence other people can have. There's a story in Tibet about how two friends from Lhasa, one of whom was used to drinking alcohol and the other of whom didn't drink. The one who was used to drinking alcohol went to a village where he encountered a Lama, and was introduced to the Dharma and stopped drinking alcohol. The other person who didn't drink went to a village where there were many people who drank, so he picked up the habit of drinking alcohol.

After some time, when they met again, the situation was completely reversed. The person who hadn't drunk was now drinking, and the person who drank before had stopped drinking. This demonstrates how the company we keep influences us. For example, people who don't drink alcohol may start drinking alcohol when they start going to parties, because being non-alcoholic at parties is very difficult. If everybody else is drinking, it becomes difficult to stick to one's own habit of drinking non-alcoholic drinks.

I [Geshe-la] am somebody who doesn't drink alcohol and who doesn't smoke, and because I don't drink and smoke, many of my students who previously used to drink and smoke have stopped. If it were the other way around, and if I drank and smoke, then most likely many students who didn't drink and smoke before would have started by now!

This topic of friends is quite difficult. One piece of advice I give to people when they go to parties is that because everybody else is drinking, have a glass of fruit juice or something non-alcoholic and leave the glass full. Since it is full, nobody can pour or offer you an alcoholic drink. You just hold onto that full glass.

There's another piece of advice about misleading friends. One shouldn't rely on people who cause one's faith in the Dharma to degenerate, or who cause one's mind to degenerate and give rise to more negative qualities. This means people who often lie, who are greedy and angry, and who are very divisive. Some people always engage in what is called slander or divisive speech, splitting people up, always saying things that will generate dislike between friends. One shouldn't rely on people who have those kinds of attitudes.

One should avoid negative company because negative it will increase one's own negative actions. Negative company will cause us to generate negative actions, and whatever negative tendencies we already have will be increased. One will adopt the negative qualities and tendencies of those people. If you associate with thieves, there is a danger that you will become a thief. Even though you may not have those negative tendencies, if you associate with wrong company, there is great danger that you will acquire those negative tendencies.

It is as if we had an arrow that was not poisoned at the tip, but if there is poison in the quiver in which we normally keep the arrow, once we put the arrow in there, it will be poisoned. In the same way, even though one might not have particular negative tendencies, if we associate with the wrong company, we can acquire those negative tendencies, even though we didn't have them before. If we rely on misleading friends, they will bring us obstacles, obstructive conditions, and so forth.

Therefore, it is important to be discerning in selecting your friends and the company you keep. To stabilise and develop our positive qualities, it is important that we keep positive, virtuous company. If we can take care of our mind and be careful, then even though the company we keep might have certain faults, they will not rub off on us. Also, if we take care that we do not adopt those negative tendencies, we may even cause the other person to give up those bad habits.

For example, if one doesn't drink alcohol, this can have a good

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influence on others, causing them to give up drinking. Or if one doesn't smoke, it can also cause others to give up smoking. In certain relationships, one partner might make it very clear that if the other does not stop smoking, they will break off the relationship. Or they may say to the other person, "I do not want to share the bed with you after you have had a cigarette because it smells so bad". So, it is possible to have a positive influence on others and cause them to give up smoking.

As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focus it inwards, don't let it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, and then concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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