
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

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So we will meditate for a little while as usual.

Through depending on the Dharma we become our own refuge.

Being our own refuge means that our happiness lies within our own hands. So we have to analyse what is beneficial or harmful for ourself, and then take responsibility for our own happiness. If we are responsible for our own happiness and suffering, we have to analyse what causes happiness and what causes suffering - what helps free ourself from suffering and what is conducive for happiness.

We have the ability to free ourself from suffering and attain happiness. In the same way we also have the ability to help free other sentient beings from their sufferings and problems and to help them to be happy. Actually everybody, every sentient being has that ability or power. So it is up to us to make use of that ability and we should never think: "Oh it is not possible for me to lessen my problems, it is not possible for me to have more happiness". We shouldn't think like that - we should never give up our courage and aspiration.

Our actions have a very great impact on others. If our actions are propelled by harmful intention then they can have a great, great negative impact. If they are propelled by a very positive motivation then they can be very positive. So we should be very aware of our own power and ability, and also of the impact of our actions, and then act accordingly.

Whatever action we do in life is always motivated by the thought of wanting to attain happiness - wanting to attain as much happiness as possible - and wanting to avoid suffering. In that way we go through our lives. But then if we analyse how much happiness we actually attain - if the actions in which we engage are separated from inner happiness and do not lead to inner happiness - we can all judge from our own experience how much happiness that brings.

So in our actions we want to attain as much happiness as possible. There are various kinds of happiness and various ways of attaining them. There is inner and outer happiness or mental and physical happiness. Similarly, there is physical and mental suffering. Generally, in our society we are great experts in treating physical pain and attaining physical happiness, outer happiness. Although we are experts in attaining that kind of happiness, as long as the mind is still under the control of delusions and disturbing thoughts, the mind does not attain inner peace and mental happiness. In order to attain inner happiness we have to become expert in the ways of how to achieve that. We have to free our mind from the conditions that cause mental suffering, and create the conducive conditions to achieve mental happiness. Only then can the mind experience mental happiness and peace. So as long as the mind is not subdued we will not experience inner happiness and peace. Subduing the mind is very important.

Either we do not try to control our mind or we are not able to control our mind. However this may be, as long as the mind remains under the control of the disturbing thoughts and delusions, we will not experience inner happiness and peace. Then since the mind is undisciplined it falls more and more under the control of the disturbing thoughts, and it becomes more and more difficult to attain inner peace. Then also our aspirations and strength of mind get less and less. So in order to avoid that process we have to meditate. Meditation frees the mind from the control of the delusions and the disturbing thoughts.

So please sit in a correct and relaxed physical posture and also try to relax mentally. Concentrate the mind within, bringing it back home and not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, which try to distract the mind to the outside. Then try to focus single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breathing. (*pause for meditation*)

So it is good to practise a little bit of meditation in order to bring some mind-control, and to utilise the mind's potential. It is important to utilise the mind's potential and not to lose courage and strength of mind. Otherwise the mind becomes more and more under the control of various delusions, such as attachment, which sort of pull the mind more and more down and we get more and more depressed. So in order to avoid this process, it is good to practise a little bit of meditation and to investigate what is beneficial or harmful for the mind.

Last time we looked at the verse that explains that we need to abandon non-virtuous friends who are obstacles for our Dharma practice. We have to rely on virtuous friends and teachers in order to support our Dharma practice.

It is very important that we keep good company in order to encourage and support our spiritual development, and the development of positive, virtuous actions. Just as was mentioned the other day - if we engage in meditation and Dharma practice, it would be harmful to abandon the spiritual friends and teachers who facilitate this spiritual development. So it is very important to distinguish carefully between virtuous friends and friends of desire - friends who increase our virtuous actions, and friends who increase desire.

Of course everybody is engaged in the pursuit of looking for friends of desire, but this is important to investigate. If you have the choice between a virtuous friend and a friend who increases your desire, it is very important to make a clear decision as to which friend to choose - which friend will be more beneficial for the mind. If you choose the friend of desire it would be a little bit unfortunate! It would indicate that in this life you have not given up the grasping, because this is the friend who will increase your grasping. So this is a very important point about which we should think very carefully.

If we choose the friend of desire it will be very difficult to attain real happiness. Asanga said that if we rely on somebody else for our happiness it will be very difficult because in that case our happiness depends on whether the other person is willing to give us any happiness. Since the other person can be very inconsistent it will be very difficult to attain true happiness in such a way. On the other hand, by relying on a virtuous friend we will increase our Dharma practice which will then enable us to achieve more inner happiness. Not making this choice of friends very carefully can lead to many mistakes in our Dharma practice.

We rely on the friend of desire to attain happiness - we have many experiences in that regard. This friend, however, is not necessarily always willing to give us the happiness we want. Sometimes such a friend will just leave us, even if we are unhappy or in need of some attention and love. Quite often our partner doesn't have much compassion and just leaves us, and doesn't give us what we want. We also have many experiences in that regard.

It is useful to have experiences - it is very important to confirm what is explained in the Dharma with our own experience - then we will gain very great conviction. For example, some years ago there was an ex-Abbot who gave teachings in Atisha Centre and I went there with one of my students. Afterwards she told me that she liked the teachings very much but that she couldn't really relate to all the things which the Abbot had explained about suffering. But then during the following year she experienced those various problems and sufferings which the ex-Abbot had explained and she told me: "Oh, actually it was very true what he explained at that time - I experienced all

of those sufferings in the meantime.” That is very important because if we witness other people experiencing the sufferings that we have experienced ourselves, we can generate very great empathy and compassion because we know from our own experience how they are suffering.

I don't have experience in the suffering of separation from a partner so I can't really talk too much about that kind of suffering (*laughter*). One monk I knew gave back his vows and started a lay life, and after experiencing the suffering of separation from his partner, said: “Oh now I really know what kind of suffering you have been going through.” But I don't have that kind of suffering so it becomes very difficult for me to generate empathy for people who experience that suffering. It is very important to relate other people's problems to our own experience so that we know what suffering they are experiencing. Then we will generate very strong compassion for them and it will be unbearable for us that they are experiencing that suffering.

So having experience is very important. For example, in the army there are certain generals or people in the higher ranks of the army who work their way up from a simple soldier, being promoted over many years until they attain their high rank. Then there are other generals who go straight from entering the army to becoming a general. So out of those two there is usually the perception that the one who came up through the ranks is the one who is better regarded, and is usually the one who has the more compassion and greater understanding for his soldiers because he knows how the ordinary soldiers feel. The person who is promoted instantly to a high rank without having experienced the life of an ordinary soldier cannot know how they feel. So this personal experience becomes very important.

So the next verse deals with the need for relying on a virtuous teacher.

When you rely on them, your faults come to an end
and your good qualities grow like the waxing moon.
Cherishing spiritual teachers even more than your own
body
is the practice of bodhisattvas.

As it says in the first line - ‘When you rely on them your faults come to an end.’ ‘Them’ refers to the spiritual teachers. If you rely on a spiritual teacher then such faults as attachment and anger will be reduced and finally eliminated. As long as our mind is under the control of attachment and anger, there is no happiness in the mind. How much happiness is in the mind depends on how much or how little desire and anger is in the mind. The more attachment and anger, the less happiness.

If we follow attachment then there is no end to attachment. For example, some people may marry once, then marry twice, thrice, four times, five times - maybe some people are even planning to marry a thousand times (*laughter*). So maybe some people marry six times but even after six times they still haven't found the right person and end up single, trying to attain happiness by following attachment. Actually as long as our actions don't produce inner happiness then our search for happiness will not be successful.

Then it says in the second line - ‘And your good qualities grow like the waxing moon.’ Here it refers to good qualities like the wisdom arising from hearing, contemplation and meditation. So we generate wisdom through listening, such as to the teacher's explanations of how to meditate. Then after having listened to those explanations we investigate and analyse their truth for ourselves. First we listen to the teachings and generate the wisdom of hearing. Then we investigate what we have heard for ourselves, which is contemplation, and thus generate wisdom arising from contemplation. Then through continuous contemplation there arises in our mind the wisdom of meditation. These three wisdoms are depending one upon the

other. So having strong wisdom arising from hearing will produce strong wisdom arising from contemplation and that in turn will produce strong wisdom arising from meditation. So through relying on our teacher, first of all those three wisdoms will be generated, and then also such qualities as love, compassion, bodhicitta and so forth. For that reason, bodhisattvas cherish their spiritual friends and virtuous friends.

Such qualities as love, compassion and bodhicitta are very important. First of all we generate love and compassion which are the root causes for bodhicitta and then we generate bodhicitta. Once we generate bodhicitta, then enlightenment is not so far off.

In our life we can appreciate the importance of love and compassion. We ourselves want happiness and do not want suffering. In the same way, also other people around us do not want suffering but want happiness - and they, like us, also have the right to happiness. We should not only value our own right to happiness but we should also respect the other person's right to happiness. If we have the attitude that our own happiness is more important than that of others, then that is a very harmful and negative attitude. Just thinking: “Oh I don't care whether the other person is happy or experiences suffering,” is a negative attitude. On the other hand, if we respect the other person's right to happiness and wish that they find happiness and are free from suffering and problems, then those virtuous attitudes will actually be the root cause for our own happiness - those attitudes will bring happiness in our own life.

So just wishing for happiness for oneself alone will not bring us happiness. There is no possibility to be happy only oneself because we cannot just stay by oneself, we cannot be happy just being by oneself. We have to interrelate with other people. So then in our interrelation with others it is very important and beneficial to respect their right to be happy and to be free from problems, and also to have concern for their happiness and to wish them less problems. In our interrelation with others if we can keep these attitudes in mind, it will make our life that much easier.

A Mahayana virtuous friend needs to have a certain minimum of qualities. There is a minimum of four qualities and a maximum of ten qualities. So a virtuous Mahayana teacher first of all needs to have more qualities than faults. If he has more faults than qualities then there is a great danger that those faults will be transmitted to us. So a virtuous Mahayana teacher, out of this life and the next life, should regard the next life, happiness of the next life, as more important. If the teacher doesn't regard the next life as more important then he will not be able to lead the disciples from the grasping of this life to the happiness of the next life. Also, out of self and others, a Mahayana teacher cannot regard self as more important than others - others have to be more important than self.

So out of oneself and others we should regard others as more important, and we should have love and affection for others. If we have this attitude of regarding others as more important than oneself then also we will generate strong love and affection for others.

So the virtuous qualified Mahayana teacher needs to have those qualities. Then a qualified student also needs to have certain qualities. There are five qualities which a student should have:

- 1 Not to be partial to his or her own view and reject other views, but have a mind of equanimity and an open mind.
- 2 Be able to distinguish between what is right and wrong.
- 3 Very strong aspiration - a very strong wish to learn.
- 4 Respect.
- 5 A stable mind in order to keep in mind what has been explained.

So if a teacher gets his hands on such a student then he can

mould him or her very well.

These five qualities will be explained in more detail next time.

So then as was explained in the beginning, bring your mind back home freeing it from the control of the disturbing thoughts, and then focus it single-pointedly on the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed from tape by Gaye Lewis-Radcliffe

Edited by Kathi Melnic

Checked by Mark Emerson

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