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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

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We will meditate for a little while as usual. Please sit in a correct and comfortable posture. The purpose of meditation is to regain control of the mind from the delusions – to subdue the mind and make it serviceable. It is good to keep in mind the purpose of meditation.

We will find it difficult to focus the mind inwards without any meditation object. The mind will need an object on which to focus. In order to bind the mind to the meditational object, one needs mindfulness. One also needs introspection, which investigates from time to time whether the mind is abiding on the object of meditation or not.

The great Indian yogi Bhavaviveka gave an analogy for subduing the mind. He likened the mind to a wild elephant. To subdue such an elephant, a person would traditionally use a metal hook, a rope and a pillar to which the elephant would be bound with the rope. In the analogy, the rope represents mindfulness, with which we bind the wild, unsubdued elephant-mind to the pillar, which is the object of meditation. The hook represents mental introspection, and the person taming the elephant represents oneself, the meditator.

Keeping this analogy in mind, we can meditate for a few minutes, bringing the mind back home, focusing it 100% inwards, not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, and then focusing it single-pointedly on the meditation object of the coming and going of the breath. (*Pause for meditation.*)

Please arise from your meditation.

Last time, we were talking about depending upon the conducive condition of a virtuous teacher. We mentioned the qualities required of a virtuous teacher, and the qualities required of a disciple. Now we talk very briefly about the relationship between disciple and teacher. There are two main points to consider: the way the disciple relies on the teacher in thought and in action.

Regarding the first point – relying on the teacher in thought – there are again two points to consider: developing faith and developing respect.

Faith develops when the disciple sees the qualities of the teacher. Seeing the qualities of the teacher creates clarity in the mind. This mental clarity that sees the qualities of the teacher is called clarifying faith, because it clarifies the impurities of faithlessness in the mind. Similarly, with regard to our friends, seeing their qualities has a clarifying, illuminating effect in the mind. When we talk about seeing the qualities of the teacher, we need to have an open mind to be able to do that. This is mentioned as one of the qualities of a disciple – that the disciple shouldn't have a closed mind or be attached only to his or her own opinion, but should have an open mind. An open mind enables one to see the teacher's qualities, which then induces clarifying faith.

In our daily life, seeing the qualities of our friends has a clarifying effect on the mind, and helps us to generate respect towards them. Normally, we see the qualities of our friends and the faults of our enemies, and generate respect towards our friends and dislike towards our enemies. This creates suffering in the mind. However, seeing the qualities of others clarifies the mind and generates respect for them.

We are talking here about meditating on pure view, training oneself in pure view, and seeing everything as positive. One

should practise as the great Indian saint, Atisha, said: the practitioner should hide one's own qualities and display his or her own faults, and play down other people's faults and try to show their qualities. So, from one's own side, one hides one's qualities and does not hide one's faults. With regards to others, one plays down other people's faults and highlights their qualities.

We can apply this way of thinking to all kinds of life situations. Looking at the positive side of people and their qualities is very important and generates a liking for others in the mind and is beneficial for us. On the other hand, if we go through life letting the things we see, hear, smell, taste or touch make us unhappy, it creates unhappiness in the mind. If we view everything that we experience with the five senses as negative, no happiness will be generated in the mind. So if we analyse – with regards to the various experiences of taste, sound, smell and so forth – what gives us happiness and what doesn't give us happiness, and then train our mind in pure appearance, this can be very beneficial for the mind.

The second point in regard to relying on the teacher in thought is developing respect. Respect for the teacher is developed by remembering the kindness of the teacher – by remembering all the things the teacher has done for one, such as showing the methods to attain higher rebirth, liberation and complete enlightenment. So, the way to develop respect for another person is to remember the kindness that person has shown towards you.

We can apply this to our parents. It is important that one has respect and regard for one's parents, which again comes about by remembering their kindness. I've asked my students in the past to calculate all the lunches their parents have ever given to them, and to write that figure down. If one of our friends offers us lunch or shouts us for lunch, we think, "That person is very kind and generous" because he or she has invited us for lunch once. But if we are honest with ourselves, how many times have our parents invited us for lunch? If we have an open, honest mind, it will be self-evident.

It is very important to have an open, honest mind. If we are honest with ourselves about the way things are, it will "straighten us out". And it is very important to have respect for our parents. Otherwise, if our parents say just one word or comment that we find displeasing, immediately our face will darken. Keeping a tab on every unpleasant thing our parents have done is not the appropriate thing to do.

The second way of relying on the virtuous teacher is in action. This refers to following the advice of the teacher. So when we talk about remembering the kindness of the parents, we should also follow their advice. Generally, we should try to follow the advice of the teacher. But that does not mean that if we place our trust in the teacher and the teacher then teaches us something harmful that we should do that harmful thing. If our teacher tells us to steal or to kill somebody, we definitely should not engage in those harmful actions because only harm can come from these actions.

At the time of the Buddha, there was a man who fell under the influence of a misleading teacher. This teacher told him that he could attain liberation if he made a garland out of 1000 thumbs. So, acting on this misleading advice, he set about killing 1000 people. After having killed 999, he was looking for one more person to kill. The only person he could think of was his mother. However, because of the intervention of the Buddha, this man did not kill his mother. The Buddha prevented him from killing his mother and said: "That's enough! You were just about to kill your own mother for this crazy idea!". This changed the man's mind and led him along a proper path.

There's a whole story about this episode. But the point is that when we rely on a virtuous teacher, that teacher should be

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somebody with certain qualities. That's why certain qualities are mentioned for a qualified Mahayana teacher. If the student relies on someone who has all the qualities of a proper teacher, he or she can get experiences on the path. But if the student follows a misleading teacher who doesn't have the qualities, then they will experience only suffering and negative results.

One of the qualities of a qualified student that we mentioned the other day is that he or she is supposed to have discriminating wisdom – the wisdom being able to discriminate between what is right or wrong. The Indian student we were just talking about who fell under the control of a misleading teacher was called Angulimala, which means 'thumb rosary'. Anyway, this student didn't have that kind of wisdom. He completely overcame by ignorance, not being able to distinguish between what is right or wrong.

The next verse in the text (p.34 *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1997) is about taking refuge in a valid refuge object.

Bound himself in the jail of cyclic existence,

What worldly god can give you protection?

Therefore when you seek refuge, take refuge in

The Three Jewels which will not betray you –

This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

Being bound in the jail of cyclic existence refers to the five contaminated aggregates, which we take on under the control of karma and delusion. Here also there is an analogy of a person being bound to a tree by a rope. The tree is an example of the five contaminated aggregates. The rope that binds the person to the tree is karma and delusion. As long as one is bound by karma and delusion to the five aggregates or cyclic existence, one is not a qualified refuge. Certain worldly gods or worldly beings who are themselves still under the control of karma and delusions and bound to cyclic existence – experiencing its various fears and sufferings – cannot liberate other people from these fears of cyclic existence.

We are talking here about attaining liberation from that which binds us. If one contemplates this, one will realise that one cannot free oneself from cyclic existence without help. One needs to rely upon an incontrovertible and non-deceptive valid refuge, something that can be relied upon and taken as a refuge – this is the Three Jewels, or the Buddha, dharma and sangha. One must rely upon this valid refuge to free oneself from cyclic existence. This is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

There are four reasons why the Buddha is a valid refuge:

The Buddha is someone who has freed himself from all fears.

The Buddha is an expert in freeing other sentient beings from their fears.

The Buddha has equal compassion, not holding some people distant and some close.

The Buddha benefits everybody equally, regardless of whether they have benefited him or not.

Because the Buddha is qualified as a valid refuge, so too is the dharma, which was taught by the Buddha, and the sangha, who practise the dharma, qualified as a valid refuge.

The first quality – that the Buddha is free of all fears – shows the characteristic qualities of abandonment and power. Freeing oneself from all fears refers to freeing oneself of all objects of abandonment. Because one has freed oneself of all objects of abandonment, one's power becomes fully developed.

Because the Buddha has freed himself of all fears, he has the ability or the power to free other sentient beings from their fears, which is the second quality. This comes about through the first quality, in the same way that when someone falls over, at that moment they are no position to help anyone else who has fallen over. First one has to stand up; only then can one help other people up. So, the second characteristic that qualifies the

Buddha as a valid refuge is that he is an expert in freeing other sentient beings from their fears. This is a necessary quality, because having already freed oneself of all fears is not enough. One needs also to be an expert in helping others to free themselves from their fears. If a child is in a burning house and the mother is outside and doesn't have any legs or arms, no matter how much compassion she has, no matter how much she wants to help the child, she will not be able to do so. Being an expert in helping others to free themselves from their fears shows the quality of wisdom of the Buddha.

The third quality – having equal compassion for all sentient beings, not holding some close and some distant – shows the quality of compassion of the Buddha. If one were only to have the first two qualities – having freed oneself from all fears, and being an expert in freeing other sentient beings from their fears – but did not have equal compassion for all sentient beings, we wouldn't help all sentient beings, even though we were capable of doing it. In the same way, even though we may have a full stomach and know another person is hungry, that knowledge alone and the capability to take away the other person's hunger will not cause us to help that other person. One needs to have compassion for the other person. For example, the people who have shown us the most compassion, who were like our main refuge, are our parents. Our parents have given us so much through the years, having built us up from small children to adults. How does that come about? Even now, if one asks one's parents for help, they will never say no. Why is that the case? Because of the great compassion that parents have for their children. The compassion that a mother has for her only child is the same compassion the Buddha has for all beings.

The fourth quality – helping all sentient beings equally, regardless of whether they have benefited him or not – shows the quality of the Buddha's virtuous activity. After having completely fulfilled his own purpose, the Buddha only works for others through his virtuous activities. This is shown by this fourth quality. These virtuous activities of the Buddha are continuous and completely selfless. Normally, we only want to work only for our own purpose once we have established ourselves very comfortably.

The Buddha is the person who teaches the dharma. The dharma that is taught by the Buddha is that which is to be practised, that which is to be generated within the mind. The sangha is taken as an example. So this is the way one relies on the three objects of refuge.

Even though we cannot receive the teachings directly from the Buddha, the virtuous spiritual teachers fulfil the role of the Buddha. Without our teachers, it would not be possible for us to receive the blessings of the Buddha. For example, the hot sun by itself will not be enough to set some dry leaves on fire, but if we hold a magnifying glass between the sun and the dry leaves and twigs, that will concentrate the power of the sun and the leaves will start to burn. In the same way, without the teacher, we will not be able to receive the blessings of the Buddha. We can find this principle in all the religions, because in all religions the founders have passed away, and there is always somebody in between a student and the founder or principle teachers of a religion.

We will talk about that a little more next time. These are important points, and whether you practise them or not is up to you.

As explained at the beginning, please bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards, not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, and then concentrate it single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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