
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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24 October 2001

First, we will practise meditation as usual. Please sit in a good and comfortable posture.

What are the benefits and purpose of practising meditation? We practise meditation in order to make the mind clearer and more stable, and also to have less worry. If we meditate well, we will enjoy these benefits.

When we practise meditation, we protect our mind from falling under the control of inappropriate, unsuitable, disturbing thoughts, and instead place it in a state that is beneficial and suitable. This will make our mind clearer and more stable, and we will experience inner peace and happiness through having less worry and mental suffering.

We know from our own experience if our mind focuses on a certain object of desire, this can start a chain reaction of thoughts and worries. Some people become completely mentally fixated and obsessed with such an object. Their minds are filled with many different kinds of thoughts and worries about that object. These thoughts are uncontrolled, constantly going round in the mind. We can see from our own experience how much mental suffering that causes.

One also generates lots of worry and mental unhappiness by worrying about what will happen in the future and constructing all kinds of ideas: "This is going to happen in the future, or this is going to happen...", creating unnecessary suffering for oneself.

All of this comes about because the mind is under the control of the disturbing thoughts. The purpose of meditation is to free the mind from the control of these disturbing thoughts and place it in a healthier, more suitable, and more conducive state. One shouldn't think that one is not able to do so. If one practises meditation properly, there is no doubt that one will be able to change one's mind. From our own experience, we can see which states of the mind are beneficial or not, and which mental objects are beneficial for inner happiness or not.

We know from our own experience that remembering certain objects will place the mind in a positive state, generating inner happiness and peace. Remembering certain other objects of the mind, on the other hand, will cause much worry and inner suffering. So, we can see which objects are suitable to hold in the mind and which are not. One should leave aside those objects that cause lots of worry, and not hold them in the mind to generate more useless worry. Of course, everyone always has some objects of worry, but one shouldn't increase them unnecessarily.

Meditation is about placing the mind in a good, positive and conducive state and then accustoming the mind to that state.

Now, we can meditate for a few minutes, freeing the mind from the control of the disturbing thoughts and placing it 100% on the inside, focussing it there, and then concentrating it on the coming and going of the breath. One should not do this half-heartedly, but concentrating the mind 100% on the coming and going of the breath. (*Pause for meditation.*)

You can arise from your meditative equipoise. Geshe-la just said that maybe some people are so deep in meditative equipoise, they don't want to come out of it and listen to the teaching!

The purpose of meditation is to accustom the mind to a positive state. This is possible because the mental obscurations are not of one nature with the mind. We say that the nature of the mind is basically unstained. Consequently, through continuous

meditation practice, it is possible to change the mind to a more positive state.

In meditation, we try to accustom the mind to what we call non-attachment, non-anger and non-ignorance. We try to develop these three kinds of positive states. These three kinds of positive states are the antidotes to attachment, anger and ignorance.

For example, if we have love, compassion or some form of non-anger in our mind, then anger will not arise with respect to another person. When we meet another person, we can see in our mind that, as long as we have love and compassion for that person, anger will not arise in our mind. So we accustom the mind to a positive state.

It is possible, through continuous practice, to change the mind. However, one has to be satisfied with slow progress. It is not beneficial to try and to be too greedy. One has to be satisfied with modest progress. It is also important to again and again think about the benefits of meditation, and familiarise yourself with them.

You can also think about the disadvantages of the various delusions, and that the mental suffering you receive from anger and attachment are problems you can do without. Actually, one of the antidotes to anger is to understand very clearly the disadvantages of anger. If you develop the discriminating wisdom that clearly recognises the disadvantages of anger and the benefits of not becoming angry, even just generating this kind of insight will pacify the mind.

We can understand from our own experience how the mind works, and the benefits of directing the mind from the object of anger to an object of love and compassion. For example, if a wife is angry with her husband and grasps at the object of anger – the husband – then her anger will not calm down. However if, instead of staying focused on the husband, she directs her attention to an object of love and compassion – such as her son or daughter – her mind will change from anger to love and compassion.

This is something we can confirm through our own experience, that if we change the object of our mind from an object of anger to an object of love and compassion, it pacifies the anger and mental unhappiness that accompanies anger.

That is a very simple but effective technique, which is why I have mentioned it many times. If you get angry with someone on one side of the room, you can just look over to the other side of the room at somebody you like, and your anger will subside!

These are important points to know about how our mind works. If you don't understand those points, it will be very difficult for you to be happy. If we do understand those points, we can attain happiness.

Last time, we talked about refuge and the various objects of refuge. It is important to know the various objects of refuge. Just understanding that one has suffering and problems is not enough. We need to also understand that there is somebody who can help us with our problems, and that there are methods we can use to overcome these problems.

For example, the suffering given to us by our anger can be overcome by relying on love and compassion. So love and compassion is one's refuge in overcoming anger. This is how one has to view reliance on refuge objects or generating refuge.

We also talked about the three objects of refuge – the Buddha, who has the function of the teacher; the Dharma, which is the actual refuge; and the Sangha, who have actualised the Dharma in their mind and who act as examples.

The way to think about going for refuge to the Buddha is if we have a sickness and go to the doctor. We place our trust in the doctor and say, "Whether I get cured from this sickness or not is completely up to you". In the same way, our mental

afflictions are like a sickness, so we place our whole trust in the doctor – the Buddha – saying to him that, “Whether I get cured or not so is completely up to you, so I will completely follow your advice”.

After the doctor diagnoses our sickness he or she will prescribe certain medicines, advice on how to take them, and advice about what to do, what not to do, what to eat, what not to eat and so forth. He or she would say, “If you follow my advice exactly, you definitely will be cured of your disease”. In the same way, if we go for refuge to the Buddha because of our disease of the mental afflictions, the Buddha will prescribe certain things that one has to practise, certain things one has to abandon, and certain practices that he has said will lead you to freedom from the mental afflictions if you follow his advice exactly on what to do and what not to do.

If we look further at this example, we can see that the Dharma is our actual refuge or medicine prescribed by the doctor which actually cures the disease. The doctor doesn't cure the disease. What cures the disease is the medicine and taking the medicine according to the doctor's prescription. If we don't follow the doctor's advice and don't take the medicine in the way he has explained, then the disease will not be cured.

In the same way, if one practises what the Buddha said was to be practised and abandons what the Buddha said was to be abandoned, then one will attain liberation. What actually leads one to liberation is the Dharma. So, the Dharma becomes the actual refuge and has to be practised exactly in accordance with the way the Buddha prescribed it.

So, we have covered the way of going for refuge to the first two objects of refuge. Now, the way we go for refuge to the Sangha is by taking the Sangha as our example. If people who have the same sickness as us go to the same doctor, and the doctor prescribes them the same medicine as we have and all those people are cured by taking that medicine in accordance with the doctor's advice, then this will give us great conviction in the doctor and the medicine he or she prescribes.

There are many examples of practitioners from each of the three 'vehicles' who have attained liberation from the afflictions and suffering by practising according to the Buddha's advice. Seeing these practitioners gives us faith and conviction, because when they started out they were like us –experiencing the same kind of problems, suffering, and mental states. We have exactly the same teacher, Dharma medicine, and advice as they have. So, seeing that they have cured themselves from their problems by practising accordingly will generate great belief in our mind. The way we go for refuge to the Sangha is by drawing inspiration from them and taking them as an example.

First, one has to realise that one has problems. Then, one has to understand that these problems have a certain cause. By eliminating the cause from our mind – by stopping negative karma – we come to the third noble truth of cessation, that one can stop being reborn in the lower realms. This goes together with practising the (fourth noble) truth of the path of practising meditation.

At our level, it would be difficult to say that we have generated the actual Dharma refuge in our mind because the actual Dharma refuge refers to the truth of cessation and the truth of the path. However, by practising abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions, or watching our karma, we abandon rebirth in the lower realms. Even though it is not the actual truth of cessation, it is a part of the truth of cessation. This would be the first stage in realising the truth of cessation, which one would eventually achieve. Then, very slowly, through continuing and increasing one's practice, all the high realisations will be generated in one's mind. In Buddhism, realisations are generated in the mind starting from the bottom and moving up. When one generates realisations in the mind, one attains one's

own resultant refuge, one's own future Buddhahood, one's own Dharma, and one's own realisation of becoming the Sangha. This is referred to as the resultant refuge object, which we will become in the future. It is generated from the bottom up, very slowly. In Buddhism, we cannot achieve such a realisation by being given it by some outside force – from the top down – but we have to generate it from the start ourselves. By relying on the three objects of refuge, all the realisations will be developed in the mind.

This finishes refuge. We will now go on to the next chapter. We go on to what is called the path common to the three kinds of beings. We talk of the path common to the 'small' capable being, the path common to the 'medium' capable being, and the path of the practitioner of greatest capacity.

The teachings on the path common to the three kinds of beings explain the spiritual development of somebody practising the spiritual path. First, one would generate the motivation to let go of attachment to this life and generate concern for the happiness of one's future life – this would be the motivation of the small capable being.

Next, one would even generate aversion towards the happiness of future lives, and would generate the wish to attain liberation from suffering altogether – this would be the motivation of the medium-scope practitioner. Then, if one further develops one's spiritual practice, one realises that not only oneself but all sentient beings are experiencing suffering, and would overcome one's own self cherishing and develop the wish to work for the benefit of all sentient beings – this would be the motivation of the great capable being.

This kind of teaching, which is called the Graduated Path teaching, is said to be very easy to relate to and easy to practise. It is taught with the idea of making it the spiritual path easy to practise, because it is taught exactly according to a practitioner's state of mind.

Each of these three kinds of practitioners has a certain aim or purpose. The aim of the small capable being is happiness in a future life. The aim of the medium practitioner is liberation from cyclic existence. The aim of the practitioner of greatest capacity is complete enlightenment.

The terms here translate literally as the being of “small capacity”, “medium capacity” and “great capacity”. The word “being” in general is synonymous with a person, but here we can assume a special meaning from the original Sanskrit word of a “being endowed with potential”. It is important to keep in mind that one is endowed with the potential to attain happiness in one's future life, the potential to attain liberation from suffering altogether, and the potential to attain complete enlightenment.

Each of these three kinds of capable beings practises a respective path or practices appropriate to that kind of being. Actually, the graduated path to enlightenment (or Lam Rim) teachings do not talk about the path of the small capable being and the path of the medium capable being, but of the path common to the being with small potential and path common to the being with medium potential.

The reason for that is that the Lam Rim teachings were given for a person who already belongs to the third category, the being with a greatest potential aiming for complete enlightenment. This person aiming for complete enlightenment is really training in a path common to the small capable being and a path common to the medium capable being for the development of their mind. This being with greatest potential is not aiming to become a small capable being or a medium capable being, but is aiming for complete enlightenment.

In order to achieve complete enlightenment, they have to develop their mind and engage in the practices of the small and medium capable beings. This doesn't mean that their aim for

liberation is for their own purpose alone, as would be the aim of a medium capacity practitioner. In the same way, they have to engage into the practices of the small capable being, but only to develop their mind. They are not actually becoming small capable beings aiming only for the happiness of their future life; they are still aiming for complete enlightenment.

If somebody practises only to attain happiness in a future life, that person would be truly a practitioner of smallest potential. If somebody practises with the aim of only attaining liberation from suffering for themselves alone, that person would be truly a practitioner of medium potential. But here we talking about a practitioner who practises paths common to the small capable being and medium capable being, because this practitioner already belongs to the third category and aims for complete enlightenment, so their practices are already contained within the bodhicitta (motivation).

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

TAYATHA OMMUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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