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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We will practise a little bit of meditation as usual. Please sit in a comfortable posture, if possible in the full lotus position, with the hands in the mudra of concentration.

After placing your hands in the position explained, it's important that you sit upright. There is a significance to sitting upright. More generally, there is a significance to sitting in this posture for meditation. Sitting in this posture for meditation creates the cause to attain what we call physical pliancy. So, having made oneself physically comfortable, it is also important to put the mind in the correct state, ensuring it is relaxed to attain a state of what is called 'mental pliancy'.

We need to investigate why – after sitting in the correct physical posture and making ourselves comfortable – the mind doesn't follow suit. Even though one is physically comfortable, the mind doesn't relax and cannot become as comfortable as the body. Why is this? Why is the mind not able to relax?

The answer is the disturbing thoughts. One is controlled by one's mind and, at the present time, one's mind is under the control of the delusions. That is why one cannot mentally relax. So, we need to regain control of the mind from the delusions. Once one has freed one's mind from the control of the delusions, the mind will stay relaxed and happy.

As long as the mind is under the control of the delusions, it has no freedom. Without any control from our side, the mind will engage into actions that harm ourselves and others. The uncontrolled mind harms itself as well as the minds of other people.

Quite often we find ourselves in a situation where we think, 'How did I get here? How did all these problems arise at once?' We don't know how we got into that situation. This is because the mind is under the control of the disturbing thoughts and delusions. So, we have to develop discriminating awareness, the wisdom to know what is beneficial for the mind and what is not. Using that knowledge, we can train the mind in beneficial ways of thinking and try to avoid those that are not.

Remembering the faults that arise from letting the mind fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, which continually try to distract the mind outside, we then free the mind from the control of those disturbing thoughts, not letting it be distracted outside. We bring the mind home, focusing it 100% within.

Having brought the mind home to a single-pointed state, we don't just let it remain in an empty, neutral state, but focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. The mind becomes one with the coming and going of the breath. It enters the breathing. When we meditate, we don't just let the mind fall into a thoughtless, empty state, but we make it useful. In this case, we focus it single-pointedly on the breathing, absorbing it into the breathing. [*Pause for meditation.*] Please arise from your deep meditation.

Last time, we completed the part of the commentary to the section in the text on the small capable being. We talked about meditations that help the practitioner to aspire to the happiness of future lives. The aim is to generate the motivation of the small capable being, which aspires to the happiness of future lives. To achieve that, one practises the ten virtuous actions.

When we talk about giving up this life, and aspiring to the happiness of future lives, we are not talking about giving up material things or changing our present situation. What we are talking about is developing a mind that stops grasping at the happiness of this life, a mind that aspires to the happiness of

future lives. This happiness is attained by the practice of the ten virtuous actions. If one engages in this practice, one will not have to be reborn in the lower realms.

After having completed that stage of practice – after having generated the aspiration for the happiness of future lives and having given up grasping for the happiness of this life – one has to proceed to the next stage, to higher meditations and practices. The same as in school – once we have finished a certain level of training, we don't just remain there, but we go onto further training.

The motivation of the small capable being is the aspiration for the happiness of future lives, of giving up grasping for the happiness of this life. The motivation of the medium capable being is the aspiration to attain freedom from cyclic existence, and to give up grasping at any kind of samsaric pleasure or perfection.

Even though the motivation of the small capable being is for the happiness of future lives, there is an immediate benefit for this life because, by giving up strong grasping for the happiness of this life, the mind will be happier. By having less grasping for the happiness of this life, the mind will automatically experience greater peace and happiness. This is the way we have to practise these meditations. We have to also look at the benefits they bring to us.

After having generated the aspiration for the happiness of future lives by practising the appropriate meditations, the practitioner will further contemplate that, even though in future lives he or she might be reborn as a human or in another happy realm with a good rebirth, there is no guarantee that this will last forever. There are no guarantees about where one will be reborn later on. It is very likely that after having had a good rebirth, one will later take rebirth in one of the lower realms. By thinking in this way, we will conclude that it is pointless to aim for a higher rebirth in future, and we will generate the motivation to attain freedom from birth and rebirth altogether.

Thus, we generate the motivation to attain liberation. But liberated from what? One gets liberated from the delusions and karma that bind us. Because one is under the control of the delusions and karma, the first Noble Truth of suffering is generated. When one aims for liberation, one aspires to be liberated from that which binds one, the 'rope' of the delusions and karma.

As explained here in the ninth verse of *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1997):

Like dew on the tip of a blade of grass,  
Pleasures of the three worlds  
Last only a while and then vanish.  
Aspire to the never-changing  
Supreme state of liberation –  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

It says here 'Like dew on the tip of a blade of grass, pleasures of the three worlds last only a while and then vanish'. This is very true. Any kind of samsaric happiness, any kind of happiness in the three worlds – the desire realm, form realm and formless realm – are all as impermanent and unstable as a dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass. You just have to barely touch the blade of grass and the drop of dew will fall.

We can observe from our own experience how worldly happiness lasts only a while and then vanishes. It is momentary. Even when two people meet, at the beginning they experience some kind of connection and happiness when they start talking. However, it doesn't take much for one of them to change their mind and to generate aversion to the other person – it might be something in the expression of the other person, or something the other person said. Samsaric happiness is unstable and momentary. By reflecting on this, one will reduce one's grasping for samsaric happiness, and generate the

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aspiration to attain liberation.

I [Geshe-la] have a story to tell, but I'm not going to tell it! *[Laughter.]* It's not like I'm somebody who never tells stories. I have already told this story before.

The story is that some years ago, when I travelled to India, I was supposed to fly to Delhi and, from Delhi, I was supposed to catch a flight at 7 o'clock in the morning to Bangalore, south India. But our flight got diverted. First of all, we didn't fly direct to Delhi, but we flew to Bombay. Then it took a long time to get from Bombay to Delhi. When we arrived in Delhi, we went to the Tushita Meditation Centre to stay. There, I met another Geshe who had also come from the West, and we spent lots of time talking. Then I slept a little.

I had asked two of the students to wake me up early. One of them, Robert, was supposed to travel with us, and he insisted that the flight left at 5 o'clock. I said, 'No, no, it's leaving at 7', but he insisted it was leaving at 5 o'clock. So I got up and got ready. Then he looked at the ticket and said 'It's true, the flight leaves at 7 o'clock'. But I said, 'Let's go to the airport now we are already up'.

When we arrived at the airport, we found out that the plane was not leaving on time because there was a lot of fog. But the airline was very kind and they gave us a nice breakfast. While I was sitting having my cup of tea, a Western couple was sitting opposite, also having their morning cup of tea and reading a newspaper. The woman spilled some tea on her lap, and her boyfriend found that funny and laughed. The moment the boyfriend laughed, the woman got angry. You could see the change in her face. It became completely black and she got up and left. The only thing the boyfriend could do was to trot after her. I don't know what happened to them!

That's how it is in cyclic existence – it doesn't take much. Those two were sitting opposite me having their breakfast, just like me, and then he laughed and she got angry. I don't know what their history was, but that's what happened. The boyfriend didn't have any negative motivation, he just wanted some fun. He had laughed, but she took it the wrong way and generated I don't know what kinds of concepts in her mind, then got angry and left. I think this is useful for your practice. Be careful when you laugh! There's no guarantee what will happen.

To finish the verse, it says 'Aspire to the never-changing supreme state of liberation ...'. Aspiring to the supreme state that is free from the two types of obscurations, the state of enlightenment that has never-changing happiness, is the practice of a Bodhisattva. To generate a strong and stable aspiration for liberation, we need to meditate on and contemplate the disadvantages and faults of cyclic existence.

We need to contemplate what are called the faults of cyclic existence. Cyclic existence mainly refers to oneself – for example, one's present human rebirth. While one has this type of rebirth, one will experience various types of problems or suffering, which are called the faults of cyclic existence.

There are six of these faults, and the first one is that there is no definiteness in cyclic existence. There is no definiteness with regard to friends, enemies, strangers, happiness and suffering. One can be happy when one gets up in the morning, but by the time evening arrives, one is unhappy and experiencing problems. People whom one regards now as friends become enemies, and enemies become friends. People who are strangers can become friend or enemy, or go through both. There is no definiteness with regards to friend, enemy or stranger. If we are 20 years old or older, we can think about how many times friends, enemies and strangers have changed.

Ordinarily, we grasp very strongly at certain situations. If we have certain people as friends, and certain people whom we dislike and categorise as enemies, as well as certain people we regard as strangers, then in our mind we grasp very strongly to the belief that this will always be the situation. We grasp

strongly to the belief that our present friends will always be our friends, that our enemies will always be our enemies, and that the people we neither like nor hate, whom we regard as strangers, will always remain strangers. The mind has strong grasping and attachment to the stability of this situation.

But the situation will not remain stable. People who are our friends will turn into people we start to dislike. People who we regard as our enemies, who we don't like, start to become our friends. This, of course, is useful. However, because of the strong grasping at our friends always being our friends, when this doesn't happen, it generates strong suffering within the mind. If we reflect on this aspect of indefiniteness, that these kind of situations are fluid, this will loosen our strong grasping, and relax the mind a bit.

Understanding the changeability in our relationships to other people is very useful. It is a method to make our life easier. First, we can understand that people who we now dislike can change from an enemy to a friend. Also, the people we now regard as strangers can change into friends. This gives us great power. It gives us a good method. We can also understand that people who are now our friends can also change. So we can loosen the grasping at that person.

I always say to people that suffering comes from strong grasping at another person as your friend, even though the other person might already be distancing themselves from you at great speed, maybe a speed with which you cannot keep up. If we try to run after a car, no matter how hard we try, we will not be able to keep up with the car. In the same way, it can be futile to try and keep up with people who are now our. Contemplating this factor of indefiniteness is beneficial because it loosens the mind and stops its grasping. Even though one might still regard some people as friends or enemies, within the mind one will not have this feeling of some people being distant and others being close.

We will leave it there for tonight and talk more about this next time. As was explained, bring the mind back home, not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts. Focus it 100% within, and concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

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