
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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[*Geshe Doga begins with a short discussion about Tara.*]

Tara is female deity, who is the embodiment of the enlightened activities of all the Buddhas. In a previous incarnation, a princess called *Ye-shes-zla-ba* – which translated into English means 'transcendental wisdom moon' – generated bodhicitta, then engaged in the practice of the two accumulations, accumulating vast amounts of both merit and wisdom. She became enlightened and freed many sentient beings from their fears, problems, and suffering of the lower realms, and so forth. Thus she became known as Tara.

Tara means 'liberator'. Tara is an aspect or emanation of the virtuous activities of the Buddha. If we rely on Tara and if we do the Tara practice, then our wishes will be fulfilled. We will have success in our Dharma practice, and our aims will be accomplished. In order to gain the benefits we must do the practice.

Geshe-la says that Tara appears in various aspects in different countries – aspects that make the people living in a particular country very happy. But you know much more about that than I [i.e. Geshe-la] do! It seems that somewhere in Europe, there's a nice place, like a beautiful valley with flowers that is also called Tara – the same name, same spelling. We can find the name Tara all around the world with various meanings.

So, we will do the practice and make requests to Tara. If we are mainly concerned with our own happiness, we can meditate that our problems and the things we don't wish for have all been pacified and that we have achieved our aims. If we have a more extensive motivation, we can meditate that through this practice, everything that sentient beings wish for has been accomplished, and that the suffering of all sentient beings has been pacified. [*Everyone says Twenty-One Tara Praises together.*]

We will meditate for a short while as usual. Sit in a relaxed posture and free your mind from the disturbing thoughts that try to distract it outside. Focus the mind completely inwards. Having brought the mind 100% home, concentrate it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. [*Pause for meditation.*]

It is important to understand and recognise the benefit of meditation. What one needs most is a peaceful, serviceable and stable mind. It is important to recognise that we all need and want these qualities. To make the mind remain peaceful, we need to be able to control it. If we are not able to control the mind, then it will not be able to remain peaceful.

The best methods for controlling the mind are mindfulness and introspection. If one controls the mind by using mindfulness and introspection, one will be able to attain a peaceful, serviceable and stable mind, which will have a positive effect on one's physical health. If our mind is agitated and disturbed, this has a disturbing effect on the subtle (or nervous) energies within the body. It also affects the coarse physical body and one's physical health.

Maintaining a peaceful, stable and clear mind has the reverse, positive effect on one's subtle nervous system, and a positive effect on one's physical health. When we can control the mind, it will become peaceful and clear, and one's wisdom and discriminating awareness will increase. Through the combination of having a stable, peaceful and clear mind with the qualities of wisdom and discriminating awareness, the physical actions we engage in will turn out well.

I [i.e. Geshe Doga] always say that it is important to take good

care of one's mental health, and we do this using both mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness is being conscious of keeping our actions of body, speech and mind virtuous. Introspection is when a part of the mind checks up on what the three doors of body, speech and mind are doing. Are they still in a virtuous state? Or have they gone into a non-virtuous state?

We have both a body and a mind, and it is important to take good care of both. Normally, we are very conscious of taking good care of our physical health. In the same way, we have to take good care of our mental health. Mental health is very important.

What does it mean to take care of one's body? I always say that taking care of the body is not just about making ourselves pretty or handsome so that other people will find us attractive. Taking care of one's body also means taking care of one's long-term health.

For example, if we had to choose between eating something just because it is tasty, or eating something that is not so tasty but beneficial for our health, the second one is more important. If we eat something just because it is tasty, that pleasurable experience lasts only for a few moments while it is in our mouth [*Geshe-la interrupts and laughs*]...so it only goes from here to here [*Ven. Tenzin mimes action*]. Once it has reached your throat, you no longer experience any more taste – you cannot recover that taste!

Even if something does not taste so good or even tastes bad [but is good for our health], the taste will only last for a very short time. Once the food has passed beyond a certain point, the bad taste goes away, but the long-term effect is beneficial.

So, one has to consider the long-term effects of what one is doing. Many people don't take care of their physical health, but only concentrate on the immediate moment. If something is tasty and attractive [but bad for their health], later on they find they get all kinds of sickness. This happens to them again and again. Many journals and reviews publish information about what should be eaten and what should not be eaten, and how sicknesses are brought about [by what we eat]. However, some people from the very beginning only think about what is pleasurable and don't take the long-term view.

There are things we can eat which in the short term are very tasty and pleasurable, but in the long term have a bad effect on our health, and vice versa. So, it is important to always consider the long-term effect of what one is eating. If the long-term effect is beneficial, even if the food is not so tasty when you eat it, then maybe it is better to eat it. I always give this advice, particularly at Christmas time [*laughter*].

On Christmas day, one dresses up in one's best clothes and goes out to meet friends and so forth. Getting dressed up is one aspect of what we mean when we say 'taking care of one's body' – one makes one's physical appearance nice and presentable. In the same way that we pay special attention to our physical appearance at this time, it is also important that we pay good attention to the mind.

One must also take care of one's mind, that it doesn't fall under the control of disturbing thoughts. If our mind doesn't fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, we can remain peaceful and happy and not offend others. It is good to think of this time [Christmas] as a very special religious holiday that is celebrated all over the world. At such a time, one takes care that the mind is free from anger, attachment, pride, jealousy and competitiveness. If we go out on Christmas Day with such a mind, then whatever we say or in whatever way we engage others, it will be pleasant for those around us and we will make many friends. People will like us and they will also be friendly and kind to us in return.

Maintaining such a mind undisturbed by delusions is also the practice of patience. The practice of patience means that we don't allow the mind to get agitated, even if other people say

things contrary to our own views, or even offensive to us.

This fits in well with what we said before about controlling the mind with mindfulness and introspection during meditation. When we control the mind with mindfulness and introspection during meditation – trying to free it from the control of the disturbing thoughts – it shouldn't be something separate from our daily life.

Actually, whatever mind state we generate during meditation should be carried over into our daily activities. If we were prone to anger before we began our meditation, through our meditation we should show less anger. Or if we had been jealous, after our meditation we should have become less jealous. Or if we had been very competitive, after meditating, we should have become less competitive or less proud. Then, one can say that one's meditation has had an effect –through the power of meditation, the delusions have lessened.

If we meditate for an hour, we shouldn't just sit in the meditation posture and then, after the hour is finished, get up and completely forget about it. One should really make use of that hour. For example, one can think about the disadvantages of anger or the disadvantages of jealousy. There's nobody who has not experienced anger, and there's nobody who has not experienced jealousy. We all know how our mind gets when we are angry, or when we are jealous. At such a time, happiness is completely non-existent in the mind. So, we can reflect on the disadvantages of being angry or jealous and how they harm one's own happiness. Reducing one's anger and jealousy through meditation is a beneficial practice.

These are important points that you should contemplate well and keep in your mind. Each of us regards ourselves as the most important person in the universe, that our own happiness is the most important thing in the universe. Therefore, we should take good care of ourselves and of our happiness, and we shouldn't engage in anything that harms our happiness, since we regard that happiness as so important.

If we are faced with anything that could harm our happiness, then we can rely on mindfulness and introspection. Mindfulness and introspection comes in handy. We need them to do whatever activity we are engaging in – for example, while we are driving a car. When we are driving, it is very important to not lose one's mindfulness. Driving carefully is the aspect of mindfulness, and always checking what the other cars are doing is like introspection. If we lose our mindfulness when we are driving a car, for example when we are drunk, then accidents will happen. We all know the importance of not driving after drinking.

There's a story to illustrate the importance of mindfulness and introspection. There were two men engaged in a dispute. One of them chose to fight by using bow-and-arrows. The other defended himself with a sword. The archer began shooting one arrow after another, but the swordsman was able to deflect all the arrows with his sword. The archer could not hit the swordsman with any of the arrows, because the man had sharp awareness, and was very quick. He deflected all the arrows with his sword, until the archer had only one arrow left.

The archer thought to himself that if the final arrow missed its target, then he would lose. He had nothing else with which to defend himself against the swordsman. However, the archer's girlfriend told him to hold on for a moment, and that she would try to distract the swordsman. She appeared in a very seductive and beautiful aspect and approached the swordsman. She was successful in distracting the other warrior, and the archer shot his last arrow while the swordsman was distracted by the girlfriend, and hit him right in the chest, and he died. Just as he died, he said, "It wasn't the enemy that killed me. What killed me was my loss of mindfulness and introspection!"

You can see the importance of not letting your mindfulness and introspection weaken. The great Bodhisattva, Shantideva, says in his text *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* that those who wish to control their mind should practise mindfulness and introspection with great effort and enthusiasm, so with folded hands I request you to practise in exactly such a way.

Keeping one's mindfulness and introspection is important in all aspects of life. Therefore, please try to always maintain good mindfulness and introspection and take great care in your life.

If we don't lose our mindfulness and introspection, we can survive Christmas without any headaches or stomach aches! Many people, after the Christmas period, end up with strong headaches and stomach aches. Some people find that after the Christmas period their mind has become weak, wobbly and unclear, and that their body has also become very unserviceable and difficult to engage.

For some people, it is like this not only after the Christmas period, but every Monday. The other Monday I [i.e. Geshe Doga] met someone who told me: "Today my mind feels very tired and unclear and wobbly and weak, and I'm also physically not so well". The reason he gave was because it is Monday. He was just a normal young person, who probably likes to enjoy his life and so forth. I thought at the time that he had probably a bit of a wild weekend, so that's why he felt like that on the Monday! [Laughter]

If we look for excitement and the mind becomes agitated, once that kind of enjoyment has passed and the mind tries to calm down and relax, what people normally experience is mental and physical tiredness. It is as if one needs a rest after having had all that enjoyment. One feels a need to regenerate one's body and mind. This shows the importance of meditation. If, instead of greatly agitating one's mind, one practises meditation and keeps the mind calm and peaceful, then one won't end up feeling exhausted.

It is very good if we can live our lives according to a daily schedule or timetable. If we lose our daily rhythm, then that can also disturb the mind.

I always say, especially to younger students, that it is important to structure one's day and keep to that timetable. Some people like to sleep in until 11 or 12 o'clock in the morning. When then they get up to have breakfast instead of lunch, all the time they had spent sleeping has gone. Regardless of whether they normally engage in Dharma or normal worldly activities, that time has been completely wasted. Then they try to fit the work of a full day into the half day left to them. This can create agitation and problems and they become uptight.

If, instead, we structure our day, get up at the right time, go about our day and finish off what we have to do, that is much better. If we keep to our timetable, it becomes easy to accomplish the projects, work and so forth that we want to do. One also has enough for rest.

But if you don't structure your day, at the time when normally one should be resting, one has to work, and at the time when one should be working one is sleeping, and one's daily pattern becomes completely mixed up.

On behalf of Tara House, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I will pray that all of you will have a nice Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I also want to thank you very much for always coming to the classes. Whatever I say to you, I say with a pure intention. I don't say those things because I am trying to be patronising or clever, but I say them because I think that they will be beneficial for you. I want to thank you very much for coming, so that we have this good Dharma relationship. And I hope that we will meet again next year and have some more jokes and fun!

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