
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Hello to everybody, since it is the first class of the New Year.
Tashi delek!

The (Tibetan) phrase *tashi delek* basically has three parts: *tashi*, *de-* and *lek*. *Tashi* generally refers to the perfections, goodness, and auspiciousness. In particular, it refers to virtue. And *delek* refers to the happiness and bliss of higher rebirth and liberation.

First, we will practise a bit of meditation. As Vasubandhu said, the practice of Dharma should not be mixed with the delusions. So, it is important to have a good motivation for practising meditation. Whenever I [i.e. Geshe Doga] teach, I try from my side to have good motivation, so please could you also try to do the same from your side.

If somebody teaches or explains the Dharma with wrong intentions such as to increase his or her own fame out of pride, or to show that he or she is cleverer or brighter than others out of a competitive mind and so forth, then the practice of teaching the Dharma becomes contaminated with the delusions. So, it is important to have a good motivation.

In all our activities, we have this combination of intention and action. Whatever action we engage in is always preceded by a certain type of intention. If our intention is impure, with this intention in mind we may engage in certain harmful practices – for example, if somebody criticises us, because of an impure intention at the beginning, our mind will become sad or may hold thoughts of harm. This comes from not having a pure motivation. Generally, since the action always follows the intention, it is very important to have a pure intention. If you have a pure intention, then the action induced by this will also be pure.

So, please generate the motivation that you are going to meditate in order to give happiness and bliss to all sentient beings. At the very least, you should have the motivation that you are going to meditate in order to establish peace and mental happiness within your mind and to make your mind more stable and subtle. With this motivation, we can practise meditation for a short while.

First, sit in a comfortable physical posture. Then, regarding the meaning of meditation, I have already explained this many times before. Meditation means to establish good mental patterns within our mind. The Tibetan word *gom* when translated literally means to become habituated. What [the Tibetan word for meditation *gom*] means is to habituate our mind to positive states.

We say that the practice of meditation means to establish good mental patterns, to habituate the mind to good mental states. What type of good mental states are we talking about? The mental states we should try to habituate the mind to are the opposite of the mistaken mental states.

For example, if our mind falls under the control of a mistaken mental state such as anger, then we start to become an angry person. To overcome the mental habit or pattern of anger within the mind, one has to habituate the mind to mental states that are free from anger. This acts as an antidote. By establishing mental patterns that are free from anger, one can subdue the anger and also pacify the suffering that anger brings with it. By overcoming anger, one also overcomes the suffering brought on by anger, and so one experiences inner peace and happiness and therefore gains benefit from meditation.

So, now if your mind is distracted towards the outside by disturbing thoughts, try to free your mind from the control of those disturbing thoughts, and bring it home, focusing it 100% within.

After having placed the mind in this non-conceptual state, we focus it on the coming and going of the breath. On the one hand, breathing meditation is quite easy to do – it is not complicated. On the other hand, it has great benefits – it makes the mind more stable and balanced, and causes it to become more serviceable or pliant, which is one of the aims of meditation. From the very simple meditation on the coming and going of the breath to the more complicated tantric meditations, one of the aims is to attain mental and physical pliancy, through which one gains complete control over one's body and mind.

When we practise any single-pointed meditation in which we visualise an object in the space in front of us, we should visualise the object neither too high nor too low, but at the level of our eyebrows. The object should also be visualised as being a little heavy, but at the same time in the nature of light and radiance.

The reason is that the two main obstacles to attaining single-pointed meditation are mental excitement and mental sinking. Visualising the object as slightly heavy, having some weight, helps to overcome mental excitement. Visualising the object as being in the nature of light and radiance helps to overcome mental sinking. Actually, the object we focus on is not an actual outer object but rather a reflection of the object within our mind.

However, for the moment, we will practise single-pointed meditation on the breathing meditation. As mentioned before, while sitting in a comfortable physical posture, focus the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. We will meditate in this manner for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*)

As the great Bodhisattva Shantideva mentioned, if you don't practise controlling your mind, then what is the use of any other type of practice? The practice of controlling one's mind is very important. We say we want to abandon faults and that we want to generate good qualities, but how does this come about? Abandoning faults and generating goodness depend on the practice of controlling one's own mind. If you don't control your mind, then the practice of abandoning faults and generating goodness won't happen.

We practise controlling our mind with the help of mindfulness and introspection [or awareness]. First, we need to check up within the mind: How does the mind feel when a negative state arises? Next, we try to compare: How does the mind feel when a positive or good state arises? One will come to understand the different types of mental states and the disadvantages and benefits they bring with them. In this way, we generate the discriminating awareness that can ascertain, first of all, the difference between beneficial and the non-beneficial mental states.

When we have generated a beneficial or good mental state, then we have to hold on to it with mindfulness. Generating a good mental state is like possessing wealth or a treasure. The mindfulness with which we hold onto that good mental state is like the container in which we keep our wealth.

The function of introspection is to check up whether our mindfulness is holding onto the good and beneficial mental states. To return to the analogy of keeping our wealth in the container such as a chest, introspection is like a policeman who checks up from time to time to see whether the wealth is in danger of being stolen or not. Introspection checks up whether the mindfulness is effectively holding onto the treasure of the good mental state, or whether there is any danger of the good mental state being taken away from us.

This is how one controls the mind with the help of mindfulness and introspection, and how one tries to develop discriminating awareness – being able to distinguish between negative or harmful mental states, and beneficial or good mental states. One then tries to habituate one’s mind to the good mental states and keep them within the mind with the help of mindfulness and introspection.

So, we try to habituate our mind to good mental states and prevent them being taken from us by harmful mental states such as anger, attachment, jealousy, pride and competitiveness. We should check up what is happening in the mind at times when we are feeling happy. All at once, this happiness will disappear, just like that. One moment we are happy, the next moment our happiness is gone.

Using introspection, we can check up and find out why our happiness can just disappear within the space of a moment. We will find the cause to be one of the harmful mental states such as anger, which rob us of our good and beneficial mental states. We have to try to counteract this with the help of mindfulness and introspection. If we are able to place our mind in a good state, then we will experience inner happiness. The more one can habituate one’s mind to those good mental states and prevent them being displaced by any of the harmful mental states, the more mental happiness one will experience.

It’s not as if we have to generate ‘new’ happiness that must be protected with mindfulness and introspection. Everybody already has a certain measure of happiness. If the people in Australia don’t already have a certain measure of happiness, one could probably say there is no happiness anywhere in the world. From the point of view of outer conditions, if Australians can’t be happy, then nobody in the world can be happy! I [i.e. Geshe Doga] am saying this because it is true; I’m not just being partial to Australia!

So, everyone who has good outer conditions experiences a certain measure of happiness. But one cannot keep this happiness within the mind – it dissipates to the outside. Because one is constantly distracted towards the outside, one loses one’s happiness to the outside. The point here is that a certain happiness already exists inside us, which we can keep with the practice of mindfulness and introspection. We shouldn’t think that the happiness we are talking about is something we need to generate anew. In the same way, we have to hold onto the happiness we get from generating beneficial, virtuous, good mental states with the help of mindfulness and introspection.

One has to habituate one’s mind to good, virtuous states and subdue the mind in order to make it more serviceable or pliant, more peaceful and happier. If we have mental happiness and peace, we will also be able to give happiness and peace to those around us. If one person within a family is generally happy, calm, well balanced and peaceful, this will have a positive effect on all the other members of the family. From one peaceful and happy mind, we and others will receive benefit.

However, if on the other side, our mind is under the control of harmful mental states and we are not happy, this inner disturbance and disharmony will spread to those around us. It needs just one person with a negative mental state to pass this on to the rest of the family for the whole group to become unhappy and negative. So, the power of one’s mind affects not only us, but also those around us. If we are happy, peaceful and well balanced, we can also make the other people we meet or contact feel happy and peaceful.

If we investigate the mind and find that certain unsuitable mental states have arisen, we have to let those unsuitable mental states go, and again place the mind in a virtuous mental state. This is how we abandon negativities and generate positive qualities. When we generate virtuous and good mental

states, our mind is happier and more balanced.

If that mental happiness is combined also with physical happiness, then what more could one want? This is why I [i.e. Geshe Doga] always say, mental and physical happiness are very important. If one is happy, one can spread that happiness to those around us. What I say to you here I say with a sincere and pure motivation. So, please, from your side, try to practise it as much as possible.

As explained at the beginning, free the mind from the control of the disturbing thoughts – bring it home, focus it inwards, and then concentrate single-pointedly on the recitation of the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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