
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. You all have to be meditators!

To meditate effectively, it is important to sit with an upright body posture because, if we do this, the body's psychic channels will be straight. Then, the energies within these channels can flow more freely and become more stable. When these energies stabilise, the mind also stabilises. Thus it is very beneficial for one's meditation to sit with an upright body posture.

It is important to keep body's subtle energies flowing, because if they cannot flow within the psychic channels, this creates blockages, because the subtle energies are related to the mind. Thus, even if mentally we want to engage in a certain action, because our energies are blocked, we cannot engage in that action. This creates more mental blockages.

If one's energies can flow freely, one can complete the actions one sets out to do. Meditation on the coming and going of the breath can help make it possible for the energies to flow more freely.

Now, we will engage in the practice of meditation. What we are doing at present is trying to generate single-pointed concentration. Single-pointed concentration is characterised by two qualities – one is called clarity and intensity (or intense clarity), and the other is single-pointedness.

There are two inner obstacles that prevent us attaining the two qualities of single-pointed concentration. The obstacle that prevents us from attaining intense clarity is mental sinking or dullness; the obstacle that prevents us from attaining single-pointedness is mental excitement. One needs to overcome these two obstacles before attaining fully qualified single-pointed concentration, so it is important that we know about them.

The two conducive conditions that help us overcome the obstacles of mental dullness and excitement are mindfulness and mental introspection. Once we have achieved these two conducive conditions and have overcome the adverse conditions, we will attain the single-pointed state of mind we call 'calm abiding'. Calm abiding means that the mind is freed from the control of the disturbing thoughts, and therefore can abide peacefully or calmly within that undisturbed state.

When we practise meditation on the coming and going of the breath, first we bring the mind 100% percent back home, freeing it from the control of the disturbing thoughts that try to distract the mind towards the outside, and focusing it 100% inwardly. After having remained in that state for a short while, one focuses the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath.

You may have various ways of focusing on the breathing. If, for example, you focus on the air coming in and out of the nostrils, your mind will already have gone to an outside object. However, we want to have the mind 100% focused within us, so when we count the breath we should just let the mind remain on counting the breath, focused inside us 100%. When we focus our mind on the breath, it shouldn't be like subject/object; rather, the mind has to be absorbed into the breath. It has to become one with the breathing.

We will meditate in this manner for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*) Please arise from your meditation!

Practising meditation again and again is very important. When we first hear about meditation, it generates a certain enthusiasm within our mind. But if we don't practise what we have heard, and keep procrastinating and accumulating intellectual knowledge about what meditation is, it will not be very beneficial to our mind. What we have to do is unify what we hear in the teachings with our own mind. We have to use what we hear in the teachings in our meditation, and practise these meditations again and again. In this way, one will receive the benefits of meditation.

When one practises true meditation, one's mind will grow in purity and goodness. A person with a pure and good mind is a happy person. They are happier in the way they go about their life. If one goes about one's life happily, one's projects and aims will be more easily accomplished. On the other hand, if one is continually unhappy, even though one might have various aims and projects to accomplish, they become a burden and take a long time to complete and are not very successful. So, it is very important to practise meditation and generate a positive, virtuous state of mind.

The text we have been going through is called *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*. It is basically divided into the preparatory practices and the main meditations. The section on the main meditations in turn has three chapters. One chapter is devoted to the 'small capable' being; one is devoted to what we call the 'middle capable' being; and the last one is devoted to what is called the 'great capable' being.

We have finished discussing the first two. Now we have reached the chapter about the great capable being. So we have already become great capable persons! (*Laughter.*)

What is the meaning of the Great Vehicle or the Mahayana? In general, the meaning of 'vehicle' is something that can carry a burden or a load from one point to another. Here, the term Great Vehicle refers to something that can carry the burden of [achieving] the purpose of others.

Within Buddhism, there are two main vehicles – the Small Vehicle and the Great Vehicle. And, within the Small Vehicle, there are two different types of practitioners – those who practise the Hearer Vehicle, and those who practise the Vehicle of the Self-Liberator. Then we have the Mahayana or the Great Vehicle.

Why would it be called a Small Vehicle? Because the person who practises such a vehicle aims to attain liberation only for their own purpose or gain, which may also include aiming for liberation from cyclic existence. Practitioners who, for their own purpose, aim for the attainment of mere freedom from cyclic existence for themselves alone would be called practitioners of the Lesser Vehicle, because the attainment they aim for is a lesser attainment, and the motivation is also a lesser motivation.

The Mahayana or Great Vehicle is so called because both the purpose and the attainment have a great scope. To begin with, the reason one practises is for the purpose of all sentient being – versus practising just for one sentient being, oneself [in the Small Vehicle]. So the purpose becomes a great purpose. Also one aims for a great attainment – freedom from both the obscurations to liberation and the obscurations to knowledge. This attainment is vastly greater than the normal liberation. Therefore, both from the point of view of the attainment as well as the purpose, this vehicle can be called the Great Vehicle.

To generate the motivation of the great capable being, one has to first practise the meditations common to the small capable being and, after that, the meditations common to the middle capable being. When we practise the meditations common to the small capable being, we generate the motivation wishing for a happy rebirth in our future life. To achieve that aim, we

engage in the practice of keeping the morality of abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions and practising the ten virtuous actions.

Next, the practitioner continues to practise the meditations common to the medium capable being. Here, the practitioner realises that, even if he or she were to attain a higher rebirth in the next life, it would still be within cyclic existence and thus fraught with all kinds of problems and suffering. Thus, by practising the meditations common to the medium capable being, the practitioner generates renunciation – wanting to attain freedom from cyclic existence.

Then, by investigating the causes that bind him or her to cyclic existence, the practitioner comes to understand that the root cause of any type of problem is the ignorance grasping at the self, or self-grasping. By understanding the ignorance of self-grasping, the practitioner comes to understand that to overcome this self-grasping, he or she needs to generate the wisdom realising selflessness.

But the wisdom realising selflessness by itself is not effective, so the practitioner comes to understand that the union of calm abiding and special insight needs to be generated. But generating the union of calm abiding and special insight depends on the practice of the higher training of wisdom. And the higher training of wisdom, in turn, depends on the higher training of concentration. So, the practitioner comes to understand that he or she needs to generate concentration, which in turn is founded upon engaging in the higher training of morality.

So, at this stage, the practitioner understands that the basis of all attainments is engaging in the three higher trainings [morality, concentration and wisdom]. By doing this, the practitioner will reach a stage where he or she generates the self-confidence and thinks: "I can definitely become free of cyclic existence". But then the practitioner remembers that: "If I free only myself from cyclic existence and enter nirvana, there will not be the slightest benefit to other sentient beings. Also, by having attained the state of Arhatship, being free from cyclic existence, I will not have fully developed my qualities and I will not have fully purified my obscurations. Therefore, I cannot fully benefit other sentient beings in the most extensive, perfect way".

At this point, when the practitioner remembers the plight of other sentient beings through his or her compassion, he or she decides to direct his or her practice towards the attainment of complete enlightenment. That's where we are now [in the text].

Now, either you can ask some questions, or I will continue with the text.

[Question from student.]

There's a difference between a person practising a path common to the small and medium capable beings as preparatory practices for the Mahayana meditations of the great capable being.

But you also have practitioners that actually belong to these categories – they are actually what you would call a person of the small or medium potential. They might decide: "It's good enough for me if in my future life I have a nice human rebirth, look handsome or beautiful, have enough riches and fame, etc.". Then, they will try to create the causes for that in this life. There are such practitioners of the small scope.

Similarly, there are practitioners belonging to the medium scope who say: "For me, it's enough to attain liberation from cyclic existence for myself alone".

From the point of view of a practitioner belonging to the Lam Rim tradition, the actual path would be the meditation on

bodhicitta. The meditation on at least 'effortful' [or contrived] bodhicitta would be the actual path, and the previous meditations common to the medium and small capable being would be like preliminary practices, for at least generating bodhicitta with effort. The practices of the ten perfections they are for the purpose of increasing one's bodhicitta. So from the point of view of a practitioner of the Lam Rim tradition, the actual path is bodhicitta meditation.

Some practitioners may worry: "If my main practice is for others, what will happen to me? What's the benefit for myself? If I work only for the purpose of others, my own purpose, my own aims, will be completely forgotten".

Here, it is good to keep in mind that even though the main practice is bodhicitta, through the practice of working for others, one's own purpose is accomplished automatically. It's like when a horse is racing, it doesn't have any intention of kicking up a lot of dust, but that's just what happens when it runs.

[Another question from a student.]

The ten virtuous actions are abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions. For example, the first of the ten non-virtuous actions is killing, so the abandoning of killing is the first of the ten virtuous actions. The second non-virtuous action is stealing, so the abandoning of stealing would be the second virtuous action, and so forth.

The first three of the ten physical non-virtuous actions are killing, stealing and sexual misconduct – abandoning these three are the virtuous actions of the body. Then we have the four non-virtuous actions of speech, which are lying, divisive speech or slander, harsh speech, and idle gossip.

Lying is when we say something with the intention of confusing the other person, of making them believe something else. *[Geshe-la interrupts]* Lying comes from a motivation of wanting to deceive the other person – for example wanting to make the other person believe we know something even though we don't, and so forth.

Divisive speech or slander means saying certain things with the intention of driving two people apart. The worst situation is if we try to separate or break up two people who are friends and who have a very good understanding. If we say certain things, regardless of whether they are true or not, with the intention of wanting to break up these two people, that is divisive speech.

Harsh speech occurs when we say things that will cause hurt in the other person's mind. It doesn't matter whether the words are true or not. For example, if the other person is blind and we remark on their blindness, that may cause hurt in the other person's mind. So, one has to be very careful in this regard.

The last non-virtue of speech is idle gossip, which is talking about what other people do – who did that, who did this, who has married this one, and so on. From the point of view of the karmic result, idle gossip is the least harmful of the four non-virtues of speech. However, from the point of view of time, it takes up most of our time! *[Laughter.]* So, in the end, the negative karma will probably increase because of the time we devote to it!

Then we have the three negative actions of mind, the first one of which is covetousness. Covetousness is a form of attachment, of craving for possessions. If you see an object that you think you would like very much – "That is really beautiful, I would very much like to have it" – and then you generate the wish – "That is something I must have" – that is covetousness.

The second negative action of mind is harmful intent. Harmful intent is an obstruction to the generation of love and compassion.

Then we have wrong view. Wrong view is, for example, holding the view that the law of cause and effect doesn't exist, or that the Three Jewels don't exist, and so forth.

[A further question.]

The Buddha gave various teachings according to the different dispositions of his disciples. If the aim of a disciple was liberation from suffering, for their own purpose alone, then the Buddha out of his compassion showed those practitioners the practices by which they could attain liberation for their own purpose alone.

For practitioners who merely wished for a high rebirth, such as rebirth in the human or god realms, in a future life, the Buddha, again out of compassion, taught the various practices through which to accomplish that aim. And for practitioners who remembered the kindness of sentient beings and had the attitude of wanting to repay the kindness of sentient beings, the Buddha taught the various Mahayana practices.

This is a very important and profound point. The Buddha gave various teachings according to the dispositions and aspirations of his disciples.

[Another question.]

Actually, we need both. We need to take into consideration both the potential and the motivation.

The potential is related to the person. The Sanskrit word for a person (*purusha*) actually implies that different people have different potential. We can see this from experience. When this potential is related to the person, we talk about a person of small capacity, medium capacity, and so forth.

The motivation is the actual path those practitioners generate within their minds. For example, a practitioner of great potential needs to generate the appropriate motivation within their mind. The motivation, then, is the path they try to practise and generate. The individual motivation also identifies the individual attainment and aim.

[Another question.]

A delusion refers to a mental state, so when we talk about a delusion, we are talking about an actual mental state.

The wisdom realising impermanence is not a delusion. The wisdom realising impermanence is a virtuous mind. It opposes the grasping at permanence. So it is a virtuous mind that harms the grasping at permanence.

[Student: So the mind that sees impermanence and considers it to be reality is a state of delusion?]

Geshe-la just said that it is not. No, no.

Delusions are impure states of the mind. They are harmful, impure, unsuitable states of the mind. But impermanence is a very good thing. If we meditate on impermanence, this has a very positive effect on the mind. A practitioner who meditates a lot on impermanence will find that their practice will develop well.

The practitioner who realises impermanence views everything that happens in this life within the realisation of impermanence, and therefore gives up grasping for the things of this life. Because of the weakening of the grasping attitude, the practitioner generates more mental happiness.

As we explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focus it inwards 100% , and then concentrate on the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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