
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas
Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga
Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

13 March 2002

First, we will practise a little bit of meditation as usual. In order to meditate, we should sit in an appropriate physical posture, with the body held upright. After having placed the body in the correct meditation posture, we can turn our attention to the mind.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that, at the moment, our minds are unstable, unclear, and unsubdued. If we check our mind, that's most likely what we will find. If we don't check up on our mind, we might not find these faults of not having subdued it. The reason why our mind is unclear and scattered is that we have not yet subdued it.

It is very important to subdue one's mind to attain mental happiness. At present, we find it difficult to utilise the potential of our mind because it is scattered, and our power of mindfulness is limited. To be able to utilise the mind's potential, we need to develop greater mindfulness and concentration.

If we just let our mind do whatever it wants, let it go wherever it wants and then just follow it, that might be OK for a child, but if we don't stop that habit, later in life one will find that one will be unable to concentrate effectively when one needs to, or that one's mindfulness and awareness is deteriorating. If we then want to improve the mind, we will encounter great difficulty, because we have become accustomed to allowing it to play around like a child – the mind can't remain on one object for long, and goes here, there, and everywhere.

Usually, as a result, as one grows older the power of one's mindfulness decreases. This happens as we grow older anyway, making it difficult to meditate. So, it is useful for us to be prepared, so that we do not encounter these obstacles. At an ordinary material level, we prepare for our later life, in terms of material happiness, having enough money etc. In the same way, we also have to prepare for our mental happiness. The longer we let our mind remain unsubdued, the more difficult it will be to develop stronger awareness, and so the more difficult it will be to attain mental happiness.

It is said that if one wants one's cow to give lots of good milk, one first has to feed the cow well and give it good grazing land. In the same way, while we are young, it is good to prepare one's mind for later life. It's very good to use the opportunity while one is still young.

As I [i.e. Geshe Doga] always say, it is important to place the mind single-pointedly within, and not let it be distracted by outside objects. So now, we will bring the mind back home, focussing it 100% inwards. After having done this, we concentrate the mind on the coming and going of the breath. Of course, one can meditate on whatever object one wishes to, such as light or [visualised] seed syllables [of a mantra] as the object, but here, since the objective is to calm our uncontrolled,

conceptualising mind, we focus on the coming and going of the breath. [*Pause for meditation.*]

It is important for us to develop a stable mind. Sometimes, we find ourselves in certain situations such as being in a restaurant eating a nice meal, but at the same time having a lively conversation with someone else. Because we get so involved in the conversation, we no longer appreciate the nice taste of the food. This is interesting to note – even though the food may taste nice, at such a time the 'ear consciousness' overwhelms the 'taste consciousness', and even though one is eating one doesn't actually experience the taste because the mind is focussed on the conversation.

I also have friends who, when they watch TV, say: "Don't disturb me, otherwise I will lose the thread of the show I'm watching"!

The implications of this everyday experience, which we can all confirm, are extensive. First, it clearly shows that the mind can be changed. The mind is not fixed. In relation to whatever object we ought to focus on, the mind will go there. This proves that one can train the mind to go to certain objects, and it proves that the mind is changeable, not static.

The great Bodhisattva Shantideva said that people we ordinarily regard as friends can turn quickly into enemies if they do the smallest thing or say the smallest thing to offend us. In one instant, our perception of that person can change from friend to enemy.

On the previous Wednesday, we talked about the mind of enlightenment, what the mind of enlightenment is, and our potential to actually become enlightened. We discussed how every sentient being has buddha nature, and how it is actually possible to become enlightened.

Today, we will talk about the benefits of bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. To have spontaneous bodhicitta within one's mind is a very great attainment. But, even if we have not such a highly realised mind, every one of us has love, compassion, understanding, and so on. One could say that because one is a sentient being, love, compassion and understanding do exist on one's mind. So, we should not feel that because we may not have very high realisations, our mind is completely useless. Everybody has love, compassion, and understanding within their mental continuum. What we need to do is to improve those positive qualities.

Nobody starts out being enlightened – nobody starts out on 'the top floor'. Everybody, including a buddha, has to start from where they are at that particular moment, and increase the qualities they have at moment – such as love, compassion and understanding. By gradually increasing these qualities further, by making them stronger and more expansive, that person will become enlightened, but nobody can start out from this state. Atisha showed the importance of having a caring attitude – an attitude of cherishing others and wanting to benefit them – when he said that the definition of having a quality is having a mind wanting to benefit others.

The first benefit of bodhicitta is that it is the door to the Mahayana. Within the Mahayana, there are two

vehicles – the Perfection Vehicle, and the Tantrayana or Tantric Vehicle. There is no other path within the Mahayana apart from these two, and in order to enter either of these two, one needs to generate bodhicitta within one's mind. If a person's mental continuum is separate from bodhicitta, then that person cannot be called a Mahayanist. If a person's continuum has bodhicitta, then that person can be called a Mahayanist. Also, if a person loses their bodhicitta, then that person is no longer a Mahayanist.

One needs to have at least 'effortful' [or contrived] bodhicitta. If we are able to generate the thought of bodhicitta – even if it requires effort and does not arise naturally or spontaneously within the mind, and even if it is only for one or two minutes – then the benefits are vast. This one instance of effortful bodhicitta plants the seed for you to further generate and increase bodhicitta.

The mental attitude of bodhicitta is an attitude of wanting to benefit others. We need to consciously cultivate this attitude. When we do this, we plant the seed for the future generation and development of bodhicitta.

Regardless of the religious tradition one practises, if through one's meditation and spiritual practice one's love, compassion, and attitude of wanting to benefit others increases, then this practice will plant the seed for the generation of bodhicitta. The more these positive attitudes develop, the closer that person will come to enlightenment. This would be the correct way of understanding bodhicitta.

Once a person generates the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta within their mental continuum, they can be called a son or daughter of the Conquerors; when one generates bodhicitta, one is eligible for the name 'Child of the Buddha'. When one generates the mind of enlightenment or bodhicitta within one's mind, one will outshine even the Hearer and Self-liberated Arhats through the force of one's lineage. One will not necessarily be superior to Arhats through the force of the qualities of one's mind; rather, one will outshine the Arhats through the force of the lineage.

Even in worldly terms, a prince is not necessarily superior to others through the force of his mental qualities; rather, it is through the force of his lineage – as the child of a king – that he is regarded as superior. Whatever country a prince may visit, he will be treated with respect, and people will want to take his photo. They just want to touch the hand of such a person, in the hope that something will rub off. This is not possible with a princess, because princesses usually wear long gloves!

The next quality of bodhicitta is that a person who has generated bodhicitta within their mindstream will become the supreme object of veneration and offerings amongst humans and gods. When one generates bodhicitta within one's mind, one becomes a very special type of being. One will also have various qualities such as the different types of clairvoyance, and become the supreme field of merit for humans and gods.

A Bodhisattva is regarded as the root of all happiness for all sentient beings, so the happiness of sentient beings comes from the Bodhisattva. In dependence on bodhicitta, one accomplishes the aim of giving happiness to all sentient beings. Therefore, making offerings to a Bodhisattva is a supreme and special method for the accumulation of merit. Once one generates bodhicitta, one will accumulate merit very quickly. With even one instant of bodhicitta, one can accumulate an amount of merit that an ordinary person couldn't accumulate over many, many aeons. In the same way, one can purify non-virtuous karma by generating the sincere wish for countless sentient beings to be free from all their individual sufferings. That type of wish is very powerful, and the more expansive that wish, the more non-virtuous karma is purified.

So bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, is the root of happiness of all sentient beings. If we think about where the happiness of sentient beings comes from, it comes from love and compassion. The more love and compassion a person has, the more that person can give happiness to sentient beings and can free them from their suffering. If a person doesn't have affection for another, it would be difficult for that person to make the other person happy. However, if a person has love for the other and wants the other to be happy, then the stronger this motivation of love and of wanting the other person to be happy, the stronger the action one will do to actually make the other person happy.

It is the same for compassion. If we don't have the wish wanting the other person to be free from suffering – which is compassion – it will be difficult for us to actually free another person from suffering. However, if we have the wish for the other person to be free from suffering, the stronger this wish, the more we will work to liberate the other person from their problems and suffering. Having this strong mental attitude of love and compassion is very important and bodhicitta, which arises from love and compassion, is the root of all sentient beings' happiness.

Having a mental attitude of cherishing the other person is very important. Everybody wants to experience the happiness of living together harmoniously. But this happiness will not arise if one doesn't live harmoniously with others. To live harmoniously with another, it is important that one has an attitude of cherishing the other, of having love and compassion for the other. This is a very good daily practice.

Often we find that, even though a relationship may initially be based partly on attachment, after a time, when the attachment goes away, the two people find that the relationship is actually stronger and better than before, because it is based on pure love and compassion. This has happened to couples here in Tara House.

Conversely, one may not have love and compassion for the other person, and may not have an attitude of cherishing the other person, but instead have the intention to harm them. One may physically refrain from harming them because there's a danger one will be imprisoned. However, in this country, nobody gets put into prison for inflicting mental harm on another

person. It happens quite often that people will happily engage in mentally terrorising the other person out of ill-will, and so on.

In this case, it is good to remember how one feels when one experiences mental anguish and unhappiness; one should be aware of one's own need to overcome one's own mental unhappiness and anguish. By seeing, for example, how difficult it can be to overcome mental unhappiness, one can take one's own mental unhappiness as a teaching and see that the other person is experiencing the same type of mental unhappiness. In this way, you can use your daily experience as practice, and transform it into the practice of love and compassion.

The next point is how to meditate on bodhicitta, and this we will explain this next Wednesday. Maybe you have a question? Give me a good question please! I have talked a lot and you have listened to me, so now I have to listen to what you have to say!

Question: When you say people are not born with more bodhicitta than the next person or they're not born enlightened, are there some people, when they're born, who because of their past or whatever, can become enlightened a lot quicker?

Answer: What you say is correct. There are certain people, certain beings, who have very strong karmic imprints on their mind from having meditated on bodhicitta in previous lives. Then, by merely listening to a teaching on bodhicitta, they will generate strong bodhicitta within their mind.

There was once a king who had strong karmic imprints on his mind from having meditated and listened to teachings on emptiness in previous lives. So, he had strong karmic imprints for the realisation of emptiness, planted through his practice in previous lives. While this particular king was making an offering to Manjushri, at the time he was actually presenting the offering to Manjushri, to his mind the offering dissolved into emptiness. He then realised the three spheres of emptiness. This can happen through strong karmic potential within the mind.

Also, Chandrakirti said that for someone with a strong karmic potential relating to emptiness, merely by hearing a teaching on emptiness in this life, will be overcome with emotion – they will start to cry, their hairs will stand on end, and so forth – because of the strong imprints from a past life. So we should now make good preparations for our future lives.

It is good to make this type of karmic preparation. When we see the benefit of our practice even in this life, through this we can infer the benefit our practice will have on future lives. We can see the direct benefit of our Dharma practice in this life, and from this we can infer that our Dharma practice will have a benefit in future lives. Even though we cannot see that future benefit directly, we can still be certain it will happen.

So, it is good to train one's mind in the mental attitude of cherishing others. Everyone accepts that, of the two attitudes of cherishing others and self-cherishing, the attitude of cherishing others is the correct and better

one. However, even though everyone accepts this at an intellectual level, on a practical level, because one is still overcome by harmful emotions, one's practice does not always follow this belief. So, sometimes, because of being overcome by negative emotions, one will still harm others. It is therefore good to practise the mental attitude of wanting to cherish others. I have great hopes that in future lives you will generate bodhicitta by merely hearing a teaching on it, because you have been able to accumulate very strong imprints for the generation of bodhicitta.

It is important that we distinguish between beneficial and non-beneficial mental attitudes. Generally, a person who cherishes others and is loving and compassionate will be well-liked, because they are always kind to others, always smiling and laughing and warm. Everyone likes that kind of person. They make other people happy and help them with their problems, so they are well-liked. Everyone will regard such a person as a good person, someone whose behaviour is worth following. On the other hand, it's generally accepted that if a person is selfish, if they are usually angry and have a lot of ill-will and so on, they are seen as someone to avoid, someone we would rather not be like.

So, there is this general understanding of what is good and what is bad, what is to be developed within the mind and what is to be purified, which type of mental attitudes are worth increasing and which types of mental attitudes one should purify. It is important that we have a very clear understanding of this.

As at the beginning, bring the mind back home, free it from disturbing thoughts, focus it inwards 100% and concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed from tape by Gabrielle Thomson

Edited by Mary-Lou Considine

Edited Version

© Tara Institute