
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas
Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga
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27 March 2002

We can start out by meditating for a little while as usual, so sit in the correct physical posture.

At the present time, our mind is like a piece of paper blown here and there by the wind – the paper just goes wherever the wind blows it, without any control. Quite often, the wind will blow the paper onto a rubbish heap! Our experience shows us that, like the paper, our mind can be blown around by the various unsuitable disturbing thoughts and conceptions.

We can analyse for ourselves what type of mental attitude is beneficial in helping us accomplish our aims, and what type of mental attitude is obstructive and harmful to accomplishing what we wish for.

It is important to subdue one's mind. If we practise meditation and subdue the disturbing thoughts within our mind through the practice of our meditation, we will see the benefit. This will come about through our practice.

So, we will free the mind from the control of the disturbing thoughts and unsuitable mental states, and bring it back home, focusing it 100% inwards. After leaving the mind in that state for some time, we will focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. *[Pause for meditation]*

Now, I [i.e. Geshe Doga] am going to read verse 11 on page 42 [of the text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1997]. We explained the meaning of that verse last week:

All suffering comes from the wish for
your own happiness.
Perfect Buddhas are born from the
thought to help others.
Therefore exchange your own
happiness
For the suffering of others –
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

As we explained last time, the two methods for generating conventional bodhicitta are the seven-point cause and effect method, and the method of exchanging self and others. As you can see, the root text follows the second tradition, exchanging self and others.

Of the five steps of the second method [i.e. exchanging self and others], last time we covered the first step, which is equalising self and others. Here, we use simple reasoning to equalise self and others – we reflect that, just as we want happiness and don't want suffering, in the same way all other sentient beings want happiness and don't want suffering.

So, by employing this easy form of reasoning, we can equalise self and others. It is actually very effective and beneficial for one's Dharma practice, because when we realise that the other person wants happiness in the

same way we do, and doesn't want suffering in exactly the same way we don't want suffering, then automatically we will become more considerate of the other person. We'll be more supportive of their happiness and be more compassionate, trying to lessen their suffering.

This is a basic meditation that anyone can do – reflecting that oneself and others are completely equal from the point of view of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. If we genuinely understand how others are exactly equal to us in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering, then automatically, even if we can't benefit them, at least we can do the very basic practice of not harming others.

When we do this meditation [exchanging self and others] we take ourselves as the example, reflecting on how we don't want any type of suffering and how we wish for perfect happiness. Then, we apply this understanding to others. The basic Buddhist practice is to avoid giving harm to others – even if we cannot benefit them, at least we can avoid giving them harm. If we do this meditation of equalising self and others, the need for this becomes obvious, and automatically we will stop giving harm to others.

We should make this promise or pledge in our mind: "I will abandon harming others as much as I can, and will benefit others as much as I can". It is good to make this type of pledge within one's mind to completely abandon harming others.

The place where our Dharma practice has to happen is within our own mind, and the outer manifestation of this practice is that we don't harm others and benefit them as much as possible. If we say we practise the Dharma, we have to be able to show something for it. If we don't engage in these practices, we are not practising the Dharma. We have to be able to generate some result from our Dharma practice.

If we can demonstrate our practice by not harming others and, on top of that, being able to benefit them, this would be excellent. If we think about someone who completely refrains from harming others, even if they don't benefit them, within that person's lifetime he or she will receive fewer problems and less harm from others. If, as well as not giving harm to others, that person also benefits them, then that person will receive benefit in return.

So, if we can relate our desire for happiness and aversion to suffering to other people's aversion to suffering and desire for happiness, we will have generated some Dharma practice within our mind.

The practice of avoiding giving harm to others and benefiting them also has an immediate benefit in this life. If we are always harmful, aggressive and angry, for example, our neighbours or the people we live with will very soon not want to have anything to do with us, and won't want to see us.

However, if at the very least we do the basic practice of not harming those people with whom we have daily contact, then even if we don't benefit them, we will receive the immediate benefit of being able to live

harmoniously with them. If we were also able to benefit them and make them happy on top of that, then our relationship with those people would be that much better. Our circle of friends and acquaintances and our relationships and friendships would become much more stable.

We will move on to the second and third steps of this practice, the second step being reflecting on the disadvantages of self-cherishing, and the third step being reflecting on the benefits of cherishing others.

In relation to the second step – reflecting on the various disadvantages of self-cherishing – first, we have to make one point clear, because otherwise you will not like this meditation very much!

Sometimes, people generate the misconception that self-cherishing means: “I’m not allowed to take care of myself. I’m not allowed to protect myself. I’m not allowed to work for my own purpose, since it is said that one has to reflect on the various disadvantages of self-cherishing”. It is important that we understand the difference – giving up self-cherishing does not mean that one doesn’t take care of oneself, or that one gives up one’s purpose in life. This should be very clear.

Doing this practice doesn’t mean we stop taking care of ourselves. In fact, this practice actually shows one the proper way to take care of oneself. We want happiness, to accomplish our aims, plans and so forth, but if we try to accomplish them by following strong self-cherishing, we usually encounter many types of problems and suffering.

So, giving up the self-cherishing attitude is actually the correct way of taking care of oneself. As it says in the Mahayana thought-transformation teachings, “I will give all the sufferings and the problems I encounter to the self-cherishing thought”. In other words, the self-cherishing thought is responsible for all our problems. Therefore, giving up the self-cherishing thought and developing the attitude of cherishing others is the proper way of taking care of one’s own happiness.

In his work, *Entering the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*, the great bodhisattva Shantideva said that any problem we encounter in our life arises from self-cherishing; whereas, any type of worldly and ordinary happiness we experience comes from the cause of cherishing others.

Without going into an elaborate enumeration of the faults of self-cherishing, the only thing one needs to reflect upon is that oneself or other ordinary beings – Shantideva talks about ‘childish beings’ – follow the self-cherishing thought, whereas the Buddhas follow the thought of cherishing others. We don’t need to say much more than that. The Buddhas also started out as ordinary beings, but as long as they followed the self-cherishing thought, they were ordinary beings. By giving up the self-cherishing thought, and developing the attitude of cherishing other sentient beings, they became enlightened. We, however, haven’t given up the self-cherishing thought, and so we are not enlightened. If one wants to know the disadvantages of the self-cherishing thought and the benefits of the

thought of cherishing others, this is all that one needs to reflect on.

Since we cherish ourselves, we wish for our own happiness. We wish for a perfect material situation, or for a handsome, beautiful complexion, or to have a good circle of friends.

To make the nature of the self-cherishing thought clearer to us, take the example of wishing to have a good complexion, to be beautiful or handsome. If we see another person who is beautiful or handsome with a good complexion, because of our self-cherishing thought we don’t generate joy that the other person has what we wish for, but we generate jealousy and aversion. This is contrary to the thought of cherishing others which, for example, a mother has for her child. If the child is beautiful or handsome, and if the child has good friends, the mother will rejoice in that. The mother will rejoice in the good aspects of the child’s life through the attitude of cherishing others. If we reflect on this, then the difference between the thought of cherishing self and the thought of cherishing others will become clearer.

Because of self-cherishing, we experience many completely unnecessary and illogical sufferings and problems. For example, if we are going to school and we see that someone out of our class or our circle of friends have what we wish for – good friends, a happy relationship with someone, or a beautiful or handsome appearance – then because of the self-cherishing thought, we will be jealous towards that other person. This creates completely unnecessary and useless suffering within one’s mind.

However, if one instead reflects on how good it is that this other person has what they wished for, just as we wished for those things, then we will rejoice that the other person has what they wish for; it will generate joy in one’s mind, seeing that the other person has this good situation. It won’t create problems within one’s mind. On the other hand, if jealousy arises, this can destroy the relationship or friendship we have with them. If we reflect in that way, we can see the benefits and disadvantages of cherishing others and cherishing oneself.

One wishes to have a happy life and all the features of a happy life, such as being in a good situation. All of those qualities come about through the ripening of virtuous karma, while all the sufferings that one doesn’t wish for come about through the ripening of non-virtuous karma. If, through our self-cherishing thought, we get upset or get jealous seeing the tiniest qualities in the lives of others that we desire but don’t have, it will generate exactly the opposite cause of what we wish for. If we react with the thought of cherishing others and rejoice in their good fortune, it will create the karma, the causes for the happiness we want.

We normally generate pride towards those lower than us, jealousy towards those that have a higher station in life and are more successful, and a competitive attitude towards those who are equal. We compete with those we regard as equals, we look down upon those who are less successful, and we are jealous of those who are more

successful. If we have this type of attitude and then think about karma, we can see where this attitude will lead us. Reflecting on karma will make the benefits of cherishing others and the disadvantages of cherishing self clearer. Also, it is very good to reflect on the kindness that has been shown to us by others, particularly the kindness shown to us by our parents.

If we have a lot of self-cherishing, we can't even bear other people looking at us in a certain way. If other people look at us in a certain way, we immediately get angry and upset. Or maybe they look at one's friend, at one's partner in a certain way – again, immediately one can't bear that and gets angry and upset. Or one may just hear one word that is not agreeable to one, and again one immediately gets angry and upset. Then, within one's mind, everybody will appear as an enemy – one transforms all sentient beings around one into enemies. This comes about through the power of the self-cherishing.

There are certain people who complain "Nobody likes me. Nobody is ever kind to me. Nobody ever likes me". How does that come about? One won't experience the happiness of close friendships and harmonious living if one is a self-cherishing person. If one is a self-cherishing person, it will basically be difficult to live harmoniously with others, and quite difficult to experience the happiness of a close relationship. On the other hand, if one is not self-cherishing, one's relationship with others will be more harmonious. One will be able to experience the happiness of harmonious living and of harmonious relationships.

Because of one's self-cherishing, one finds it difficult to have a harmonious relationship with one's parents, one's acquaintances, one's sisters and brothers. This is all because of the self-cherishing thought. If one has the attitude of cherishing others, one will be able to have a harmonious relationship within one's family and also with other acquaintances and friends. One will be able to experience the happiness of having close friendships and a close relationship. If we are very self-cherishing, it will be difficult for us to become close with anyone, so it completely closes the door to experiencing the happiness of a close relationship anywhere.

If you reflect on these points, you should see the benefits of cherishing others and the disadvantages of cherishing oneself.

Generally, it is accepted that being egotistical and self-cherishing is not a good thing. Quite often we say, "That's no surprise – that person is very self-cherishing". So, we can clearly recognise the faults of others' self-cherishing. If we can apply this understanding to our own self-cherishing, it will be quite useful for our practice. If we can recognise the faults of the other person's self-cherishing but can't recognise the faults of our own self-cherishing, there is something missing in our thinking.

On one occasion, someone complained to me [i.e. Geshe Doga] about an acquaintance, saying, "That person is always so incredibly angry". So, I asked this person "Well, what about your anger? How much anger do you have?". This person couldn't say anything, because they

had never thought about how much anger they actually had! They were not aware of whether or not they had anger. In the same way, instead of focusing on the mistakes and faults of the other person's self-cherishing, we should apply the analysis of those faults of self-cherishing to our own mind.

One has to identify one's own faults, not the faults of others. If one doesn't identify one's own faults, what happens is that the faults of others always appear clearly to one's mind, whereas one's own faults don't appear all that sharply to one's mind. There's a certain type of person who is never wrong. They always say that it [i.e. a problem] is never due to their mistake. No matter what kind of misfortune or problem happens to them, it is never, ever their mistake!

There's a story about our little Tara, when she was smaller. I'm not quite sure if Tara can remember this or not. On one occasion when Tara was smaller, and Suzi [her sister] was even smaller, Tara was having some food in the dining room during mealtime. Just to see how she would react, I said to her that Suzi really is a very good girl, and Tara said, "Actually, sometimes she does some quite naughty things". So then I went on to say, "So does Suzi sometimes do wrong things?". And she said "Yes".

"And does your mother sometimes make mistakes?"

"Yes."

"And your dad, does he make mistakes?"

"Yes."

"So do you make mistakes from time to time?"

"No!" [Laughter]

This is a very funny story – Tara was very tiny at the time.

As explained in the beginning, bring the mind back home, free it from the disturbing thoughts, focus it inwards, then concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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