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*The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*  
Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga  
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17 April 2002

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We can start by practising a little bit of meditation as usual. Sit in a comfortable and correct physical posture.

The purpose of practising meditation is to improve the positive states of the mind, to make the mind more peaceful and pure. If we improve our mind and make it more positive and virtuous, the actions of our body and speech will also become more positive and virtuous.

We can analyse the difference it makes to us whether the actions of our body, speech and mind are positive and virtuous, or whether they are negative and harmful. In relation to individual actions, first, there will always be the feeling of 'I' – "I'm doing such and such an action". Then, during that action or as a result of the action, we have the feeling, "I'm experiencing suffering", or "I'm experiencing happiness".

If we investigate, we will find a very definite relationship between what we call the 'self' or 'I' and the actions of our body, speech and mind. We would probably find that if our body, speech and mind were positive and virtuous, then the 'I' would feel very happy. If the actions of our body, speech and mind are negative and harmful, during such times the 'I' usually feels, "I'm suffering, I have problems" etc.

If we investigate our mind during the times when the 'I' feels unhappy and experiences problems, most likely we will find that the mind is temporarily obscured by some mental affliction. Even though our fundamental consciousness is clear and pure, that innate, clear purity can be temporarily obscured by the arising of afflictions or delusions. Delusions will arise and obscure the clear and pure nature of the fundamental consciousness. During such times, one experiences mental unhappiness.

At those times when we feel unhappy, if we ask ourselves, "Where does this unhappiness come from?" we will see that it doesn't come from the outside. Rather, we will find that this unhappiness is given to us by certain conditions present in our mind, and these conditions are the different afflictions or delusions.

Therefore, it is important that, through the process of meditation, we learn to free our mind from the control of the mental afflictions. The reason why we experience mental happiness is because we have let our mind fall under the control of those disturbing thoughts – we have let the afflictions take control of our mind. Through the process of meditation, we have to free the mind from the control of the mental afflictions and focus it inwards, not letting it be distracted by the disturbing thoughts.

It is beneficial during our meditation to keep in mind what it is we are supposed to be doing. Otherwise, if we just sit there with our hands folded at our navel in the seven-point posture, but don't really know what to do, it is quite pointless and will have no result.

However, if we meditate in the appropriate manner, then slowly, slowly – because it is in the nature of the mind to follow mental patterns or habits – as we acquaint our mind more and more with positive and virtuous states, the process will become easier and easier. Slowly, slowly we will be able to purify the fundamental clear consciousness of the temporary obscuration of the mental afflictions. It is like cleaning a mirror – we clean away one speck of dust after another until the whole mirror is completely clean. This is the same for meditation.

Therefore, we can now free the mind from the control of the disturbing thoughts, bringing it home, and focusing it inwards 100%. After having let it rest in that state for some time, we can concentrate single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. We can meditate in that manner for a few minutes. *[Pause for meditation]*

Last time, we were discussing the practice of exchanging self and others. We said that, once one has gained some experience in the meditation of exchanging self and others, then one could combine this meditation with the meditation of taking and giving. The meditation on giving becomes a meditation on love, and the meditation on taking becomes a meditation on compassion.

We already explained last time that we can understand the benefits of love and compassion very clearly through our own experience. We went through the benefits of love and compassion, which we can confirm through our own experience. If we have love and compassion in our mental continuum, the attitude of harmful intent or ill-will won't arise in our mind towards the other person. If we have love for the other person, we won't generate ill-will towards them. Similarly, if we have compassion for the other person, we won't generate ill-will towards them.

Here, compassion is the wish for another being to be free from suffering, after we have seen the suffering and problems of the other being and are unable to bear the problems and sufferings of that other being. Love is the wish for the other person to have temporary or ultimate happiness.

If we have either one of those two attitudes within our mind, ill-will and harmful attitudes won't be generated towards that person. The absence of ill-will is the practice of morality. Morality is always posited as the cause for higher rebirth, for gaining higher status. How does this come about? It is not just an idle assertion – the reason is that if we have love and compassion, we won't have ill-will. The absence of ill-will is the practice of morality.

Love and compassion purify lots of non-virtuous karmas. The powerful purification of non-virtuous karmas by love and compassion is unequalled. We just have to remember the story of Asanga, without now going into the story in great detail. However, if we don't have any non-virtuous karmas to purify, then that's a different story! *[Laughter]*

Ordinarily the mental attitudes of love and compassion don't mix all that well with attachment. So, first, one has

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to differentiate between them. While I [Geshe Doga] know you will say it is very difficult not to have attachment for others, we can however analyse in our mind the relationship between attachment, love and compassion. If we have true love and compassion for another person, then the first question to ask is: Do we need attachment in order to have a harmonious relationship with that person? Secondly: Doesn't attachment, when it arises, harm that love and compassion? This is an important point to investigate.

As we have mentioned, in the practice of taking and giving, the practice of giving is related to the meditation on love, and the part of the meditation related to compassion is the taking. The first in the sequence is meditating on compassion. Compassion is a mind that is not able to bear the suffering of others. As soon as one becomes aware that another person has a certain problem or suffering, then within one's mind one is not able to accept it, one is not able to bear it, one wants to free that person from that suffering.

An analogy is that, sometimes, when someone is using chalk on a blackboard, it makes a screeching noise that gives you an unbearable pain in the teeth! Similarly, when somebody who has compassion sees another person suffering, they get that same type of feeling. In the same way you are not able to bear the screeching of the chalk, that person wouldn't be able to bear the suffering of others. So, being unable to bear the suffering of others, that person wants to alleviate their suffering. In order to alleviate their suffering, in the meditation on giving, one visualises or sends out all of one's possessions, virtuous karmas and even one's body. One visualises giving them away to others and meditates on the thought that they have been completely alleviated from their suffering and established in happiness.

In the Tibetan tradition, the practice of taking and giving was the other way round – as giving and taking. Anyway, somewhere in the English translation, it became taking and giving – which is actually the way it is supposed to be practised!

In this case, if we go back to our explanation of giving – as we said, when the part of the meditation on giving is done in conjunction with the meditation on love. Love is the wish wanting to make other sentient beings happy. The basis from which one starts is that one sees how other sentient beings are destitute of happiness and lack what they want. Recognising this and being unable to bear the fact that other sentient beings are destitute of happiness, one generates the wish for other sentient beings to have happiness.

Then, one meditates on giving, sending out one's possessions, virtues, etc. and meditates on how other sentient beings have received those things and are established in happiness. One thinks, "Now they've been completely satisfied".

Then, on the basis of recognising that other sentient beings have suffering, one meditates on taking. When we meditate on taking, we visualise that we are taking on all the sufferings and causes of the sufferings of other sentient beings. All their sufferings and delusions

absorb into us and absorb into the self-cherishing thought within us, which becomes completely non-existent, together with all the sufferings of other sentient beings. In this way, one meditates on compassion.

However, as we said earlier, the sequence one should use is to meditate **first** on the **taking**, because it makes more sense to first take away the suffering of others, and then to establish them in happiness.

Once one has become familiar with this meditation, one can combine it with the coming and going of the breath – one combines the in-breath with the taking, and the out-breath with the giving.

We can also combine this meditation with visualisation of white and black light. When we meditate on the giving, we visualise sending out our happiness and virtues in the form of white light, which exits from our nostrils. This is not just white light – it is actually our happiness and our virtues, which we send out to sentient beings. [The white light] enters sentient beings' bodies via their nostrils and completely satisfies their wishes and generates superior, unequalled perfect happiness in their mindstream.

The visualisation for the taking is that, with the in-breath, one visualises that one is breathing in the sufferings of sentient beings. These sufferings just fall off other beings, in the same way that if you cut or shave your hair, the hair just falls off. So, we visualise that the suffering of sentient beings just falls off from them and we breathe it in, in the form of black light.

We breathe in this black light with the in-breath through our nostrils, and it absorbs into the self-cherishing mind. The self-cherishing mind has already been identified as the root cause of all suffering, so we absorb this black light – which is actually the suffering of all sentient beings – into the self-cherishing thought. Then both [the sufferings and the self-cherishing mind] together dissolve into emptiness. This last step is also important, because if the meditator lets the black light remain within the body or mental continuum, this would cause some mental disturbance and unhappiness. So, once the black light has absorbed into the self-cherishing mind, both dissolve into emptiness.

Doing this meditation has many benefits. Training in love and compassion through training in exchanging self and others greatly facilitates the generation of bodhicitta. The more effective one's practice, the more love, compassion and bodhicitta one will have, and the more quickly one will become enlightened.

When we do this practice of meditating on taking and giving, if we meditate on taking and giving in this 'inter-changing' way, in conjunction with meditating on love and compassion, we will generate superior intention, the next step necessary for the generation of bodhicitta. Superior intention – taking personal responsibility for the welfare of all sentient beings – will arise naturally within one's mind. If one has the basis of strong love and compassion, then naturally one will want to take responsibility for the happiness of sentient beings. Naturally, one will think there is no way to

avoid taking personal responsibility for the happiness of sentient beings.

Once one reaches the stage of superior intention, one investigates whether one now has the ability to free sentient beings from suffering, etc. One realises that one does not have the ability to establish all sentient beings in happiness. One understands that, since one is now an ordinary being, one doesn't yet have the ability. One would need to find out how to develop that ability.

We would look for those who had that ability, and find that they are the enlightened beings – only an enlightened being has that ability. Through this understanding, one would naturally want to become an enlightened being, a Buddha, for the purpose of being able to help all sentient beings. This thought would be 'aspirational bodhicitta'. However, in order to generate such a thought, one would need to have established the very strong basis of love and compassion. One would need to have a very strong concern for other sentient beings in order to generate the motivation of wanting to fulfil one's own potential for the purpose of other sentient beings.

We should check up on the kind of qualities possessed by person who has generated bodhicitta. We should look at the qualities one has to generate in order to generate bodhicitta. As we said before, everybody has a buddha-nature. Now, one also has the causes and conditions to generate bodhicitta. So, there is no reason why one shouldn't be able to do so.

This completes the outline of generating bodhicitta in meditative equipoise.

If you have a question, we have time for one.

*[Question from student about the visualisation.]*

*Answer:* To answer the first part of your question, we start out by focusing on those sentient beings who are close to us, those we have daily a relationship with – our friends, etc. – because if you don't start with those who are close to us, it wouldn't be very effective.

Sometimes, you will hear a family say, "Whenever that person is with us, he is always angry. But when he goes out to mix with other not-so-close friends, he seems much happier and is friendlier with them than he is with his close relatives and family."

So, it is very important to start out with the people who are close to oneself, and then widen the circle [of concern]. From the choice of friend, enemy or stranger, we would start out with our friends, because it is easier to have love and compassion for people we like. As a beginner, it is difficult for one to have compassion for one's enemies. With this understanding, one would start out with the easier [object] and then widen the circle. We could even include people we wouldn't necessarily regard as enemies, but for whom we ordinarily would not feel love and compassion, because we think they have everything – for example, rich people, who have a lot of nice clothes, etc.

Regarding the visualisation of light, normally the right side of the body is associated with method, and the left side is associated with wisdom. So, when we do the

meditation on giving, we imagine the white light emanating from the right nostril; and when we take in the black light, it usually absorbs into the left nostril.

We shouldn't think that this meditation is just something we do at the beginner's stage. Rather, it is something we do throughout the whole bodhisattva path, right up until one has reached the tenth 'bodhisattva ground'. Even tenth-level bodhisattvas will do this meditation at the time of meditative equipoise when they become enlightened. So, it is good to think that in the future there will be a time when we will become enlightened with this meditation.

The meditation on taking is usually not done in relation to Buddhas and one's teachers, because they don't have any suffering. In the past, I found out that some people meditated like this with regard to their teacher, but this is not a very skilful way of doing it, because it creates interferences with the dependent-arising relationship between student and teacher. Many [used this meditation because they] thought that the Lama had some problems, but normally this is not done.

However, the giving part you can practise in relation to the Buddhas as well as the teachers. You can visualise that perfect pure happiness has been generated in the teacher's mind and in the Buddha's mind.

*[Other questions from students about the visualisation here.]*

*Answer:* You can visualise that the whole place around you is completely filled with sentient beings and that you yourself you are sitting there – only you have to take care that they don't come too close and trample you! *[Laughter]*

In Tibet, the Sera Monastery is close to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. There is a river that flows through Lhasa. The monastery is about an hour's walk from the city and the river.

This monk in the monastery was doing his visualisation of the merit field – a very, very expansive visualisation of the merit field, visualising all the Buddhas, etc. His visualisation got bigger and bigger. At the back of Sera is a mountain, so he couldn't expand it in that direction. He could only expand towards the city. Because he kept expanding the merit field more and more, he came closer and closer to the city and thus the river. As he expanded the merit field more and more, he finally he fell into the river! *[Laughter]*

Although he had done a very good visualisation, this monk had misunderstood the method involved when we talk about the merit field occupying the whole of space.

If we become very well trained in the meditation of taking and giving, eventually we will even be able to give away not only our possessions, but also parts of our body. The reason why we are now not able to do that is because our mind is not trained for it. At the moment, because our mind is not very well trained in giving, we might find difficult to give away even a few possessions, like a small amount of money. On the contrary, for a person whose mind is very well trained in giving, even though they might not have much, whatever they have

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they always freely offer to others. This difference is whether one's mind is trained in giving or not.

As we said at the beginning, free the mind from the disturbing thoughts, bring it back home, and concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

*Transcribed from tape by Gabrielle Thomson*

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*Edited Version*

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