
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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8 May 2002

We will meditate for a little while as usual, so please sit in a comfortable and appropriate physical posture.

Once we have attained inner freedom and liberated the mind, we will definitely experience inner happiness. We generally regard freedom as being important, so it is important to have inner freedom. To attain inner freedom, we have to start taking control of the mind. Once we gain control of the mind, we will be able to attain inner happiness. Whenever we buy something, once when it is under our power, we are able to utilise it as we wish for our happiness. In the same way, we need to be able to utilise our own mind for our own happiness. To be able to do this, we need to master the mind.

We can see from our own experience how disturbing states of mind and disturbing thoughts harm our mental happiness. One moment we are happy, then that happiness is destroyed when disturbing mental states arise in our mind.

Once our mind falls under the control of the disturbing thoughts, these thoughts distract the mind and scatter its attention towards hundreds and hundreds of different objects. When the mind is distracted in this way, we find it, for example, difficult to concentrate or focus on a certain subject, or to comprehend a certain subject, or to think clearly. We even easily forget things we thought we understood. So, reflecting on the disadvantages of leaving one's mind under the control of the disturbing thoughts, we should generate the motivation: "There is simply no other way but for me to work with my own mind and free it from those disturbing mental states".

Then we bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards 100%. After leaving it in that space for some time, we focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. It shouldn't feel as if the mind and the breathing are different; rather, the mind should enter the breathing and become one with it. We can meditate in this way for a few minutes. [*Pause for meditation.*]

Please arise from your meditative equipoise!

Last week, we dealt with transforming problems into the path, specifically losing or not finding material resources. Today, we deal with the next part, which is transforming suffering into the path. The verse reads [verse 13 of the translated root text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997]:

*Even if someone tries to cut off your head
When you haven't done the slightest thing
wrong,
Out of compassion take all his misdeeds
Upon yourself –
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

This situation happens all the time – being harmed even though one hasn't already harmed the other person. Normally, if we first inflict harm on the other person and that person retaliates, the anger we generate is slightly less intense than if we hadn't done anything [to provoke it] from our side. However when, out of the blue, someone inflicts harm on us, our anger is usually stronger. This happens all the time.

As we said last week, when someone steals or takes away our possessions without our having given them harm, we dedicate all our possessions to that person. In the same way, if someone

harms us even though we haven't inflicted harm on them first, not only do we *not* get angry, but we also we take upon ourselves their non-virtues and suffering.

Here it is very important that we meditate on the patience that is willing to bear suffering. The patience willing to bear suffering can make a big difference to our lives, because in our lives there are many conditions that can cause problems, and far fewer conditions that will bring happiness.

We can analyse this by taking the situation of two people leading exactly the same life – getting up in the morning, spending the day at work, coming home, having to cook dinner, etc. If one of them is continually upset because things are not according to their wishes, and they constantly think: "This is not right, this is not right, this didn't work out again, etc.", while the other person is practising the patience willing to bear suffering and thinks: "That was sort of OK, that was also OK, that wasn't too bad", then at the end of the day, what state of mind will each of these two people have? Well, the first person will be upset, and it will only take something small to cause an explosion, while the other person will still have a relaxed and happy mind. This is the difference that the patience willing to bear suffering can make to one's life.

Meditating on the patience willing to bear suffering is important, because if one is not able to bear different types of problems or adverse conditions, and completely relies on whatever input one gets from the outside environment, one will always find it difficult, for example, to relate well to other people. Other people's moods can change. Sometimes they change quickly; sometimes they change over several days. Our friends will not always be laughing and smiling. There will come a time when they will show us a dark, grim face. If we are not able to deal with this, our mind will immediately generate various types of concepts and become disturbed and, from our side, we will generate aversion and lose our patience. The function of anger is to disturb one's mind, and the practice of patience is to avoid that type of disturbance. So practising this patience willing to bear suffering is very important.

Previously, we talked about the practice of giving and taking – giving away all our possessions, merits, happiness, etc. to other sentient beings and taking on their sufferings, non-virtues, delusions, and so forth. When we reflect on the happiness other sentient beings will receive from us giving them our possessions, happiness, etc. we are willing to give away our happiness and possessions, and try anything to make the other person happy. Then, by reflecting on how the other person generates non-virtue through having an angry state of mind, and how suffering is the definite result of non-virtue, one generates compassion for the other person.

By having these two mental states – being willing to give up one's possessions and happiness, and having compassion for the other person and being willing to take on their suffering – one's mind won't be disturbed by the adverse actions of others. Of course, this practice will not come about all at once. We have to practise the various stages of the meditations, then slowly, slowly our mind will develop.

As the great bodhisattva Shantideva said: "If I can do something about it, there is no need to be upset, and if I cannot change the situation, then there is also no purpose in being upset". Being willing to bear suffering is very important for our meditation, because if we experience certain problems and suffering, and we can do something about it, there's absolutely no benefit in becoming upset. There's no benefit in upsetting one's mind if one can deal with the situation. And, if one cannot change the situation, if we have to experience that problem, there is also no purpose in becoming upset, because that won't

change the situation. Reflecting on this very simple technique for a few minutes can make a great difference to our mind.

Practising patience and not letting the mind become disturbed and agitated is very important. Otherwise, on top of experiencing externally a problem, if we experience internal problems as well, the problem will become quite heavy.

Also, what often happens is that our mind tends to completely exaggerate the situation. Take a situation of two people, a couple, living together. One of them usually comes home at 5 o'clock every evening. However, the other person begins to worry when their partner doesn't turn up at 5 o'clock, when they have prepared food or whatever. The one at home starts thinking: "Where did he or she go? What is he or she doing?" The longer it takes for the other person to turn up, the more the person who is waiting thinks about what the other person is doing and where they might be, even though he or she doesn't really know what the other person is doing. Mentally, one can create all kinds of scenarios and situations, and become more and more upset, without there being any outer basis for that mental disturbance, because one doesn't know why the other person hasn't turned up on time.

Then by the time the other person does come home, one is already incredibly upset and angry, and will greet the other person with a grim face or a frown. However, the reason one has become angry is one's own mental exaggeration. There is nothing there from the object's side – it is a complete mental elaboration from one's own side.

It is important that we know how our own mind works, and understand how the minds of ordinary beings work. Once we understand how the minds of ordinary people work, we will not be surprised if we get harmed in our relations with others, and we also won't need to get angry. If we put our hand into a fire and get burned, then we do not get angry at the fire for being too hot. It is the nature of the fire to be hot, so if we put our hand into the fire, we'll get burned. In the same way, dealing with ordinary beings brings problems, because that is in their nature. So there's no reason to be angry with other sentient beings if they cause us problems – you must not get angry with them.

Through our Dharma practice, we have to protect our own mind from the disturbing thoughts and from disruptive mental attitudes such as anger. By practising patience, we can become the bodyguard of our own mind. We can protect our own mind from the disturbing thoughts and from harmful mental states. So, the practice of Dharma is definitely something very beneficial. We shouldn't regard the practice of Dharma as something different from our own mind, something that has to somehow be done externally, that is unrelated to us. Instead, we have to relate the Dharma practice to our own mind. We have to practise the Dharma within our own mind, and then we can get the benefit.

Now we have some time for question and answers.

Question from student (inaudible on tape).

Answer: If we have a headache, instead of being upset about having a headache, we can go and buy some medicine and then take medicine for the headache. So, first we see whether we can do something about the headache. Then, if we find there is a medicine that can help, we take it. There's no point in being further upset about the headache. Similarly, we definitely need wisdom in our practice of patience. We need the wisdom that understands the disadvantages of becoming angry, and we need the wisdom that understands the benefits of practising patience. The discriminating awareness that understands the benefits of patience and the disadvantages of anger is necessary for our practice of patience.

We can also relate our practice of patience to the meditation on cause and effect. If we experience certain problems, we can relate the problem back to our own karma, understanding that our experience of suffering comes about because of us having previously created the cause to experience such suffering. Also, one can relate it from a different angle, thinking that the experience of suffering becomes a means of purifying non-virtuous karma. In this way, we will become more enthusiastic about the accumulation of merit.

Geshe Potawa once said that worldly people prefer the experience of happiness to that of suffering, but that he preferred to experience suffering rather than happiness. He said this from the point of view of having thought about the benefits of suffering.

If you don't have any further questions, we can finish here for tonight. As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards 100%, and then concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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