
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We can start by doing some meditation. As usual, first sit in a relaxed physical posture.

By sitting in a good physical posture, we have already transformed the body. Next, we need to transform the mind. We need to have both physical and mental discipline. Who will benefit when we discipline the body and mind? The answer is oneself.

So, we need to discipline the mind. Letting it run wild in the ten directions will not benefit us. In order to discipline the mind, we need to practise meditation, to practise the Dharma. The way we practise meditation is to try and free the mind from mistaken objects, guiding it inwards, away from mistaken objects. We try to focus the mind inwards on a correct, positive object, instead of letting it be distracted towards a mistaken object.

First, we free the mind from the disturbing thoughts that try to distract it outside, then focus it 100% inwards. After having left the mind in that non-conceptual state for a short while, we focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. The coming and going of the breath is the focus of our meditation.

The more we do this meditation, the longer we will be able to hold our focus. Generally, having single-pointed concentration is very useful for whatever activity or work we engage in. If you can give any activity 100% of your attention and maintain a single-pointed mind during an activity, you will be more successful in whatever you do. So, a single-pointed mind doesn't just benefit our Dharma practice, but every activity we do.

As we said before, bring the mind back from the disturbing thoughts that distract it towards the outside, focus it 100% inwards, then direct it towards the breathing. (*Pause for meditation.*) Maybe that's enough!

Now, we can return to the root text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997).

Here, the text is trying to explain that one needs to have at least some patience. If one doesn't have patience, it will be difficult to live a good life. There are two particular situations the text points out here in which it is difficult to practise patience. One situation occurs, when somebody we may have cherished and cared for turns around and treats us badly. From our side, we have treated this person very well, yet in return they treat us very badly. In such a situation, it is difficult to practise patience.

The other situation occurs when somebody, out of a very strong delusion, puts us down and diminishes our sense of self-esteem.

In verse 16 it says:

Even if a person for whom you've cared
Like your own child regards you as an
enemy,

Cherish him specially like a mother
Does her child who is stricken by
sickness –

This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

This verse explains how a bodhisattva would practise. It is difficult to practise patience in a situation where somebody for whom we have cared a great deal and have helped a lot does not treat us in kind but rather regards us as his or her enemy. This is actually a very sad situation.

I [i.e. Geshe Doga] have always said that if a parent gets angry with a child, there is a good reason; they are usually justified in getting angry with the child. However, a child getting angry with a parent is completely unjustified. There is no reason for it. If the parents have invested lots of care and attention in the child, and if that child then turns around and abuses the parents and doesn't take care of them or is not kind to them, the parents will feel sad and get angry with the child. But they have good reason; their anger is justified. If, after having being cared for over many years and having been brought up by the parents, a child does not respect his or her parents, and criticises them or gets angry at them because they do something the son or daughter doesn't like, this kind of anger and attitude is not at all justifiable.

It says here: "This is the practice of a bodhisattva". We might feel that to be able to practise patience towards someone who regards us as an enemy, even though we may have helped them a great deal and cared for them a lot, is too difficult. We might think: "This is such a great disappointment. It is too difficult for an ordinary person to practise patience with someone like that."

However, we must remember that, firstly, bodhisattvas are able to practise patience, even with this kind of person. So, if we train our mind in the appropriate meditation techniques, we will also be able to practise that type of patience.

In the situation referred to in the text, even if a person we have cared like our own child regards us as an enemy, at such time one can practise patience by reflecting on how the other person is under the control of the delusions. One should think: "You are like my child"; or "It is not through his/her own choice that he/she is treating me badly". We should reflect on how the other person is under the control of the delusions and does not really have a choice in the way he or she is acting at that time.

We know from our own experience that even if we don't want delusions to arise, they will arise anyway. So, if a person is under the control of anger, there is nothing that person can do. Rather than getting angry at that person and assuming they have complete freedom of action, we should reflect on the delusions behind the person – the anger that is pushing and inciting them to behave in such a harmful manner towards us.

We generate compassion and meditate on patience. We generate compassion for the other person, thinking: "Definitely, I have to free him or her from the control of his or her anger." We are therefore not only able to practise patience with the other person, but also able to

generate compassion for them. Ordinarily, we find it difficult to generate compassion or love for an enemy, because our ordinary love and compassion is mixed with attachment. Because of this, we find it difficult to have love and compassion for an enemy. However, if our love and compassion is combined with the practice of patience, we will be able to have compassion, even for an enemy.

There are various techniques for meditating on patience. It is a common misunderstanding about the meditation on patience that patience means not expressing one's anger but keeping it inside. This may lead one to think that maybe it is much better to express one's anger instead of keeping it inside, and that one would rather not practise patience but rather express one's anger.

However, this is a misunderstanding, because the meditation on patience doesn't mean that we don't express the anger we hold inside, but rather that we don't generate anger in the first place. The meaning of 'patience' is that we can have a peaceful, undisturbed mind in the face of adversity and difficulties, even if we encounter harm. This is really what the meditation on patience is - not to get angry in the first place.

By practising patience, by being able to keep a peaceful and undisturbed mind, one can overcome anger. Anger is eliminated through the practice of patience, which 'harms' the anger. When this happens through one's practice of patience and one is able to avoid anger, one will not have to experience the various mental problems, suffering and anguish that anger brings with it. One's practice of patience will rescue one from the problems of anger. It becomes one's refuge from anger.

When one practises patience, one is practising the Dharma. Why? Because it is a practice that harms the delusions. If it harms the delusions, then it is Dharma. Otherwise, if one does not have patience, the mind will be overcome by anger, and one will experience various problems associated with anger and so forth. By practising patience, however, we will be rescued from these problems. A person who doesn't have an angry mind is a happy person, while a person whose mind is disturbed and agitated by anger will be unhappy.

In the situation of the person repaying our kindness with anger, we should first reflect on the state of the other person - they probably wouldn't have become angry in the first place if they had been happy. By getting angry, they experience mental anguish and suffering. So, by reflecting on their suffering, automatically we generate patience for the other person.

Thus, there is really no reason to let one's mind be disturbed by anger and gradually let it to be overtaken more and more by anger. There is no purpose or benefit in letting one's mind be overtaken by anger and not practising patience.

We need patience to be able to bear sufferings and problems. If we are not able to bear the difficulties we encounter, we will give up easily. So, we also need patience to be able to bear problems. As Buddha Maitreya mentions in his Ornament of Mahayana Sutra: "Bodhisattvas will not only not get angry at a person

who repays their kindness with harm by reflecting on how the other person is under the control of the power of their afflictions, but they will even make this person a cause to strengthen their compassion and love for the other person." So, someone who repays our kindness with anger and harm actually becomes a teacher - someone who teaches us patience, love and compassion.

Do you have a question?

Question from student (inaudible).

Answer: If other people in a group don't know how to meditate on patience, of course their minds will become disturbed, because this is the way the ordinary mind works.

We generate attachment to something that appears desirable to us, and if something appears undesirable, we generate aversion. This is how our ordinary mind works. So, if the other people in a group are not able to practise patience, then of course their minds will become disturbed by anger. At the very least, one should not let one's own mind be disturbed by anger and one should practise love and compassion. As for the other people, once their minds have been overtaken by anger, it becomes difficult to meditate on patience. Once anger has taken control of the mind, patience becomes very difficult.

The group might also include some people who may not have heard formal teachings on patience yet who, because of their own intelligence, understand that if they let their minds be disturbed by anger, it will prevent them from accomplishing their own purpose. Seeing that another person is under the control of anger and aversion, these people will generate some apprehension and think: "I shouldn't let myself be affected by the negativity of that person. Otherwise, it will just harm my own purpose, what I want to accomplish."

Quite often, if one is in a situation where one can't separate oneself from someone acting in a disturbing manner, for example, at work, then one should ignore the other person and focus on one's own work. All one really has to do is say: "Good morning" in the morning, and then in the evening say: "Good evening, see you tomorrow." (*Laughter.*) Then, during the day, one just concentrates on one's work, because the purpose of going to work is to earn money - this is the whole point of going to work. So, we shouldn't let our purpose be disturbed by the disruptive behaviour of another. We just ignore them, and give them a "Good morning" in the morning and a "Good-bye" in the evening.

By doing this over a few months, the other person may become a little bit embarrassed, and may realise that from their own side, they haven't really behaved properly. Apart from that, our mind is our own responsibility.

If we return like a dark look with a happy face, it might also transform the dark face of the other person into a happy face. If we think: "Why is that person looking a bit grim today? There is probably some reason or some problem behind why he/she is looking so grim. Maybe I should try to make him/her a little happier." Then if

we smile at the other person, it might help to change the situation.

It is very beneficial to return a dark look with a smile. If somebody is frowning and a bit aggressive, smiling at that person and talking to them nicely can have a transforming and beneficial effect.

We need to do that type of practice every day with the people with whom we have daily contact. If you find yourself in such a situation, it is good to spend a few minutes trying to cheer the other person up, speaking kindly to them, and so forth. By practising in this way again and again, day after day, slowly our mind will transform and our practice will become more natural and effective.

Taking care of one another is very beneficial. Certain people are always close and friendly when the other person's mind is happy. But when the other person's mind is unhappy, they start to distance themselves. This is not appropriate or acceptable behaviour. When the other person's mind is distressed and unhappy, one should feel a responsibility to take care of them – maybe take them out for lunch, or take them for a movie. Taking care of the other person in this way will help greatly.

Is there another question?

Question (also inaudible).

Answer: First, if you don't say anything, this might make the other person angry. Some people will get angry if you stay quiet and don't give them a reply. So, just meditating on patience and not saying anything might not be the correct thing to do.

Further question/comment.

Answer: There is no need to stay quiet. We can reply to the other person, but it should be more in the nature of a constructive dialogue. On the basis of our mind not being disturbed by anger, we try to explain our view to them calmly, and try to have a constructive dialogue rather than having a fight in which each will strongly cling to their own view.

It is good to reply to the other person in a way that doesn't exacerbate their anger, because the other person is already strongly caught up in their own point of view and their own anger. It was out of this strong point of view and strong anger that they said something to us. So, from our side, we shouldn't say anything that would increase that anger. Rather, we should take care that the mind of the other person can calm down. This is how to deal with the situation.

Otherwise, when the other person's mind gets agitated and they say something to us, our mind will also get agitated and, on the basis of our agitated mind, if we reply in kind, this will exacerbate their anger and they will react more strongly. If we let it happen, our anger will also get stronger and so each of you will just increase each other's anger. One shouldn't respond like that, but rather try to calm the other person down.

If you put dry wood on even a small fire, that small fire will quickly transform itself into a big fire. The other

person's anger might not be that great at first, so we should take great care that the anger of the other person doesn't increase. The way we deal with the situation should be at least to contain it so that the other person's anger doesn't increase. If we cannot reduce the other person's anger, at least we should take care that the situation doesn't escalate. If we live with other people in relationships, etc. this is quite important. We would not want a small confrontation to escalate into a big one.

As explained in the beginning, bring the mind back home, and free it from the control of the disturbing thoughts that try to distract it outside. Then, focus the mind 100% inwards and concentrate it single-pointedly on the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version*