
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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26 June 2002

We can start by practising a little bit of meditation as usual. Sit in a good, comfortable physical posture. If you sit in an upright posture, the energies in your [psychic] channels can flow better; it is said that this will help you to have a stable focus during meditation.

We practise meditation to make the mind clearer and more stable. We also have to investigate the reasons why our mind is unstable and unclear. Whatever we do, we all experience the problem of having an unstable mind, which is particularly obvious during meditation. Everybody experiences this problem of having an unclear, unstable mind.

What are the causes of having a mind that cannot abide peacefully? The mind is like a piece of paper being blown about by the wind. As soon as there is a slight breeze, the paper is blown here and there. At the moment, our mind is like this piece of paper being blown here and there by the wind of the conceptualising mind. These disturbing concepts are what cause the mind to be unclear and unstable.

One starts to think about one thing, then starts thinking about the next thing, and already the mind has become distracted and unstable. This destabilised mind finds it difficult to experience inner peace. When disturbing thoughts disperse the mind's energy, it is difficult for us to utilise its ability to experience inner peace. Therefore, it is important that we prevent the mind from being distracted by disturbing thoughts.

So, now we will try to free the mind from disturbing thoughts and bring it back home, focusing it completely inwards. Since it is difficult for the mind to abide without an object, we will focus the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. Even if we are not able to focus for long on the coming and going of the breath, if we maintain a good meditation for just a minute, this meditation will be qualified by clarity and stability. Slowly that one minute will increase, and finally we will have attained fully qualified single-pointed concentration having perfect clarity and stability. *(Pause for meditation.)*

It is good to practise meditation continually, and to reflect on the benefits one gains from meditation. Sometimes, one becomes so focused on one's problems, that the mind constantly goes around in circles, contemplating the problems, what one can't do, and so forth. The mind becomes fixated by one's problems. This becomes a great obstacle for one's life and one's practice.

Now, we come to the next part of the text [Verse 18 from the root text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997], which is about transforming poverty into the path – dealing with a decline in one's material situation, experiencing loss, etc. Verse 18 reads:

*Though you lack what you need and are constantly
disparaged,*

Afflicted by dangerous sickness and spirits,

Without discouragement take on the misdeeds

And the pain of all living beings –

This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

When it says: "Though you lack what you need", this can apply firstly to a person who has never had much, who, since birth, has always lacked material things. It can also apply to a person who might have been well off at one time, but through various causes and conditions, he or she has experienced a decline in their fortune, and do not have enough materially.

Of course, sometimes everything seems to come together – not only is one financially and materially not so well off, but on top of that, one is constantly criticised and disparaged. Further, one may also be afflicted by a life-threatening illness, or experience some spirit harm. At such a time, when all these obstacles and problems come together, the practice of a Bodhisattva is to take on the misdeeds and pain of all living beings, without experiencing mental discouragement.

Just as we experience a variety of problems, we should also be aware that others experience the same types of problems. Thus, without experiencing mental discouragement or depression, but meeting it with great courage and strength of mind, a Bodhisattva takes on the sufferings of others at such times.

What is being referred to here is having great strength of mind, just like Bodhisattvas. There will be times when one experiences different types of destitution or lack. There can be material destitution, which may come about through a decline in business success, or through other causes and conditions. One can also lack friends, and may be separated from someone dear and not able to find new friends. One can experience lack in any area of one's life. However, at these difficult times, one must not get depressed and does not lose the strength in one's heart. One should keep up the strength and optimism within one's heart, and not get depressed, but keep up one's courage and strength of mind. Then, one will be able to get on with one's life and improve one's situation, changing it if one is able to change it.

As a famous Tibetan Lama said: "Does depression free one from being destitute?" Whether one is experiencing material destitution or lack of human warmth and friends, one should analyse whether being depressed will help the situation.

Being depressed does not liberate us from problems and destitution. Therefore, one shouldn't let one's mind be overcome by sadness and suffering, but should work out what one wants to achieve, then rely on skilful means or ask someone skilful to show one the way to achieve it.

By applying method and effort, one will be able to overcome one's problem. If one remains depressed, not doing anything and not seeking help, one won't overcome one's problem or be liberated from destitution. In short, it is up to us whether we deal with our situation or not. If we don't deal with it and remain

depressed and sad, it won't change the situation or liberate us from destitution. However, if one implies skilful means, one will be able to overcome one's problems.

When one experiences different kinds of problems or poverty, there is no point in remaining sad and depressed. Rather, one should again gather up one's confidence, maintain an optimistic attitude, and then deal with the problems.

The mind can go up and down like a yo-yo. If someone criticises us, it goes down. If someone praises us, we become proud and our mind goes up. Then, someone comes along and criticises us, and our mind goes down again. It is not useful to have a mind that goes up and down like this all the time. We should try to have a more stable mind.

Everyone shares the experience of destitution and loss. We Tibetans have experienced great loss. Many Tibetans have lost family, friends and children to the Chinese. When they arrived in India, some Tibetans couldn't bear it and committed suicide, while others didn't let their minds be overcome by depression but remained optimistic. Eventually, although they had lost everything, they were able to start new businesses, find new friends and start a new life. So, it is important not to let one's mind be overcome by depression, but to keep an optimistic attitude.

Some Tibetans lost their girlfriends or boyfriends in Tibet, but as soon as they came over the border, they found new girlfriends or boyfriends! (*Laughter.*) It was almost instantaneous – one moment there was loss, then immediately afterwards they gained!

This verse places great emphasis on keeping up a positive and optimistic attitude and not letting one's mind fall into depression. As Buddhist practitioners, at times of depression when the mind is down, one can reflect on the positive and uplifting aspects of the Lam Rim – for example, reflecting on the qualities of the Three Jewels, or reflecting on karma. In this way, one can uplift one's mind.

If one is depressed and sits down and reads a Dharma book, automatically one's mind will be uplifted and happy. When the mind becomes too uplifted, it is important to think about those aspects of the path that bring the mind down a little, so that one doesn't get too excited and over-confident. In this way, one can keep one's mind in a stable and optimistic state.

Otherwise, if we let the mind be overcome by depression, it creates an obstacle to one's Dharma practice. Some people don't practise any Dharma at all, but just wallow in their depression all the time. This is a great danger. There is no need to let one's mind fall into depression.

Even if we get physically sick, if our mind is happy, we will be happy. For example, when I was in hospital some years ago, although I was physically so sick that I couldn't even get up and go to the toilet, mentally I was able to remain happy. The doctors were surprised. I was too sick to get up, but my mind was happy. My mind was fully functional and I had the opportunity to do my

prayers, so I was happy. The doctors found that quite surprising!

If we are sick, we are already experiencing physical suffering, so there is no need to add mental suffering to this. If we are mentally happy while experiencing physical suffering, this will make the physical suffering bearable. Otherwise, if we let the mind become too fixated on our problem – whether it is physical suffering or some kind of loss – it will be difficult to get out of the situation.

For example, if we have experienced the loss of a friend, there is no point in letting the mind get too fixated on this loss, constantly thinking about it and becoming obsessed by it. If one does this, one will rob oneself of the possibility to again experience happiness, because one will not be able to apply any type of methods to deal with one's problems.

In the case of losing a friendship, the other person is already estranged from us. There is nothing we can do about that – it has already happened. However, instead of letting the mind be overcome by depression, we should focus on our other close friends and keep the mind optimistic and upbeat. By applying skilful methods, we can slowly work our way upward and change our situation.

We usually talk about "transforming problems into the path". This is actually quite difficult to do. One needs to have a very pure and good Dharma mind to do that. However, even now, we can reflect on how other people experience the problems we experience. By meditating on exchanging self and others – taking on the problems of others and imagining that we have freed all other sentient beings from suffering by taking on their problems – this practice will definitely have a beneficial effect on our mind.

We can also look at the positive aspects of our problems. Shantideva, in his *Entering the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* explained five benefits of problems. Perhaps we can go into those at a later time.

Do you have a question? We have time for a question or two.

Question (not audible – paraphrased): How do you take on the problems of others? Is it a mental thing or do we try to make a physical effort to do this for other people?

Answer: The question is, if we take on the problems of others, do we do it just mentally or do we also physically try to do it?

At the beginning, it will be on a mental level. It will be confined to training the mind in compassion. However, through continuous practice, when one's compassion and mental capacity increases more and more, it is said that practitioners can also physically take on the sufferings of others. At a beginners' level, however, it is confined to mental training and building up the power and ability of the mind.

(Further exchange with student asking question.)

Answer: It depends on why they are depressed – on the particular loss they have experienced or the particular problem they face.

For example, if someone is experiencing financial difficulty, we can help them financially by offering them a loan.

In the case of depression, we can take the person for a walk and talk pleasantly with them, tell them a story, try to distract them from their problem. In this way, we can ease their depression, build their mind up again, and make them more relaxed and happy. This works with some people, but there are others who hold onto their problems tightly. They say, "I have this problem and it is my problem. It is not your problem." They hold onto their problem making it very difficult to help such a person.

(Further comment from student about one of her cousins having lost a child tragically and wondering how she could help the mother who was very upset, angry and depressed.)

Answer: Of course, from your side, you can help as much as you can, according to your understanding and ability. It is quite difficult to say whether the anger and depression your cousin is experiencing was caused mainly by the loss of the child, or whether it had already been there for a long time, coming from other causes and conditions, with the death of the child acting as the catalyst for that anger and depression to arise.

There are cases where strong anger brought on by a problem or by some unhappy circumstance was not actually caused by that particular situation, but had already been there for a long time, laying dormant or latent within the mind and catalysed by that particular situation. So, we don't know exactly how the mental state of your cousin came about.

There are other people who keep track of their own shortcomings and problems. They have a mental list that goes: "No.1, I have this problem; No.2, I have that problem; No.3, I did not achieve this thing, etc." They keep a mental list of their own shortcomings and problems, and through make their mind depressed. This is also possible.

If it is anger alone, that is not too bad, because anger dissipates easily. By employing various methods and means, anger can be pacified.

For example, if we someone is angry and we offer them something nice to wear, a dress or something nice, that also helps to overcome that person's anger.

Student: Are there any particularly beneficial prayers or practices you could do for someone who is in the clutches of depression – prayers that a person could do for their own well-being and a prayer for them to do for another's well-being?

Answer: It would be difficult to build up the mind of another person through prayer, but to build up one's own mind, it can be beneficial to recite the Tara Praises and the Heart Sutra. These practices are useful for restoring optimism and a positive attitude.

Of course, there are situations where parents recite prayers for their own child. Some mothers have said prayers such as Tara Praises or the Heart Sutra for a child who was experiencing sadness or depression, and it was beneficial. So, instead of immediately taking the child to the psychologist, it can be useful first to try

saying some prayers for the child. There was a situation where I advised the mother not to take the child immediately to the psychologist, but first to try those prayers, and it helped.

Also, you may accept the concept of certain types of non-human beings that can disturb the minds of human beings. This concept is also accepted in western society. Many people say that they accept the notion of beings other than humans, and they think it is possible that these beings could inflict harm on human beings – for example, by disturbing their minds. In such situations where the mind of a person is disturbed by certain non-human entities, reciting Tara praises and the Heart Sutra is very beneficial.

We can leave it here. As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focus it inwards, and then concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of the Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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