
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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3 July 2002

As usual, first we will do some meditation. Sit in an appropriate, relaxed physical posture. It is our responsibility to work with our mind every day and try to improve it. Every day, we should try to improve our mind, making it happier and more pliable. My opinion [i.e. Geshe Doga's] is that when we work with our mind, it should become happier. This is the purpose [of working with the mind].

Working with our mind on a daily basis is important. Even if, through our practice, we have made our mind happier and clearer, we still need to continue working with our mind on a daily basis. Otherwise, there is a danger that the mind will degenerate. Should our mind degenerate, we need to recognise the objects that brought about that degeneration, then remove those objects from our mind. Through eliminating the cause of mental degeneration, the mind will automatically improve again.

It is important that, from time to time during the day, we investigate our mind. We need to find some time to be introspective and check up on the state of our mind. Otherwise, the unsubdued mind can inflict great harm on us.

The great Bodhisattva, Shantideva, used the metaphor of a wild elephant for the unsubdued mind. He said that a wild elephant could not harm us as much as our own unsubdued mind. He went on to say that to prevent our unsubdued mind, disturbed by mental excitement, from inflicting harm on us, we need to bind the wild elephant of the mind with the rope of awareness. This is what we do in meditation. During meditation, we bind the wild, unsubdued mind with the rope of mindfulness. The object to which we bind the mind with the rope of mindfulness is the meditation object.

Therefore, while we are sitting in a good and comfortable meditation posture, we should generate the motivation to subdue our disturbing states of mind by recognising the faults and disadvantages of having a distracted mind. Then we bring the mind back home, focussing it inwards. With the rope of mindfulness, we bind it to the meditation object, which is the coming and going of the breath. When our mind remains mindfully on the coming and going of the breath, it is abiding on the object of meditation. This abiding aspect of the mind is single-pointed concentration, which comes about through the method of mindfulness.

So now we will meditate in this manner for a few minutes. [*Pause for meditation.*] I think that maybe we can stop there.

When you meditate, first of all, it is important that physically you sit in a good posture, and that you are relaxed. Being physically relaxed is important.

Regarding your eyes, whether you are staring into space or have your eyes closed, it does not matter, because we meditate with our mental consciousness. When our mental consciousness is engaged, even if our eyes are open, the eye-consciousness won't be engaged. Therefore, it won't hurt the meditation to have the eyes open. Also, there is no need to have wrinkles between the eyebrows, because that will only cause you a headache! If you wrinkle your forehead a lot while you meditate, later you will say, "My meditation gave me a headache!".

Last week, we were at verse 18 [of the text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997)].

The verse said that, in a situation when one experiences material lack or lack of friends, and on top of that, one is constantly disparaged and afflicted by problems such as sickness, spirit harms, etc., at such a time, when all these problems come together, it is important that one doesn't become discouraged and depressed.

Rather, one should remain upbeat and optimistic and show great courage. At such times, one should practise taking and giving [meditation] – taking on the problems and non-virtues of all living beings. It is important that at times when many different problems come together – such as lack of friends and money, sickness and other problems – we don't become discouraged, but remain positive and optimistic and try various means of dealing with the problem.

If one is experiencing a lack of funds or friends, one won't be able to act skilfully and alleviate the situation if one stays depressed. However, if we remain positive, upbeat and optimistic, we can deal with the situation and rectify the lack of whatever it is we are missing in our life.

While suffering is undesirable, there is still a certain benefit in experiencing suffering and problems. For example, if we experience relationship problems, such as a lack of friends, we will also experience the pain of being separated from a dear, close friend. Through directly experiencing that suffering, one can reflect on how other people are experiencing exactly the same feeling when they are separated from their friends.

So, one can take one's own suffering and pain as a teaching about the situation of others, and one will not want to inflict that situation on others. Since one has experienced that pain oneself, automatically one won't inflict that pain on others, and cause others to experience the loss of a friend. One's own pain and suffering becomes a teaching on compassion.

Avoiding inflicting pain and suffering on others is a basic practice that everyone can do. When we practise the Dharma, we have to be able to show something for it, if we want to call ourselves Dharma practitioners. This practice is one that everyone can do. We may say many prayers to be able to do high and important practices, but just praying that we will do high and important practices in the future and not doing anything now is not very skilful. Even though we do prayers for future practice, we should also do whatever little

practice we can at the present time. That makes us a Dharma practitioner.

At times of pain and suffering, we have to train in the practice of patience that willingly bears suffering. In our Dharma practice, we have to be able to put up with difficulties and bear problems. When we actually experience suffering and pain, we should even be able to pray for the happiness of our enemies. When we are happy and everything is going well, we might find it difficult to wish happiness for our enemies and for them to be free of suffering. But when we are facing problems and really experiencing pain, we can realise that it is something we would not even wish on our enemies. So, we can use such an opportunity to meditate on love and compassion for our enemies.

The Bodhisattva Shantideva said that another benefit of suffering is that it will motivate us to attain liberation. When experiences suffering, the wish to be free from suffering is much stronger. So the benefit of experiencing suffering and problems is that they motivate us to turn the mind towards liberation.

Shantideva said a further benefit is that problems and suffering destroy our pride. When we experience problems, our pride automatically vanishes. When someone who is normally proud gets very sick and needs someone to look after them, all their pride is gone. If that person normally does not listen to what we have to say because of their pride, when they are sick and want a companion they will instead be grateful for us talking with them.

Another benefit of suffering is that it makes us apprehensive about its cause, which is non-virtuous karma. When we experience great suffering and pain, since we don't want to experience that suffering again, we will automatically be cautious and apprehensive about the cause of our problems. Since the cause of our problems is our non-virtuous karma, our suffering teaches us not to create non-virtuous karma.

The next quality of experiencing suffering is that it will make us joyful about creating virtue, which is the cause of happiness. When one is suffering, one wishes very strongly for happiness – suffering automatically makes the mind enthusiastic about creating the causes of happiness. Since virtue or virtuous karma is the cause of happiness, one becomes enthusiastic about creating virtuous karma.

The last benefit is that suffering teaches us compassion.

If we are skilful in applying these mind-transformation techniques at the time of experiencing problems, they will definitely help us. Otherwise, if we only let our mind become overwhelmed by the problems and become depressed, this will not make the problems disappear, even though it might appear like that at the time. One needs to keep one's mind optimistic, which one can do with the above ways of viewing the problem.

Sitting around being uptight and depressed, with our shoulders hunched, remaining focused on our own problems is not beneficial. It can be very helpful in such a situation to do some physical exercise, like to go for

walks or go for running or do some other type of physical exercise or sport. Through that physical activity, you can loosen up the mind and distract it from the problem. In this way, physical activity can be useful at such times. Through physical exercise or through some other means, one can find a way to move the mind away from the problem.

One Kadampa Geshe said that by experiencing some small problems in this life, one purifies a great amount of non-virtuous karma and, in our future life, we'll experience great happiness. Remembering cause and effect when we are experiencing problems, and viewing our experience of suffering as a purification of non-virtuous karma that will bring about the experience of happiness in a future life will also help us keep a positive outlook whenever we face a problem.

I don't want to go on to the next verse today. Now that we have dealt with transforming destitution and loss into the path, the next topic is transforming success into the path, but I don't want to go onto that today. [Another point is that] a Kadampa Geshe said that sometimes human beings are just unhappy, whether or not they have experienced loss or gain.

We have some time for question and answer. Do you have a question?

Question: You have talked of the purification of negative karma. What if one is not actually suffering and does these practices? How then does that work?

Answer: When we say that we purify non-virtuous karma or non-virtue, what is meant is that we won't experience the result of the non-virtuous karma. What we are purifying is the experience of the result of the non-virtuous karma.

At our beginners' level, we won't purify the root or the cause of non-virtue from our mind. That would be very difficult. However, what we purify is the experience of the result of non-virtuous karma. This experience is stopped – that is the purification. To purify non-virtuous karma, we practise virtue. Any type of virtue acts as an antidote to non-virtue and purifies it.

Even though it is agreed that non-virtuous karma doesn't have any good side, we can say that non-virtuous karma has one quality, which is that it can be purified. This is one good aspect of non-virtuous karma. When we ask how the practice of virtue purifies non-virtuous karma, that is difficult to answer. What is purified or stopped is the experience of the future suffering result of the non-virtuous karma.

When we have purified a great deal of non-virtuous karma, our mind will feel happy, as if a load has been lifted from it. The mind will feel happy having purified such an amount of non-virtuous karma.

Certain signs may occur that indicate we have purified our negative karma, and that our Dharma practice and purification practice has been successful. For example, one might dream of drinking curd or milk, or that light from the sun or moon is entering us, or that one is meeting ordained people or one's teacher, or one is on the top of a mountain. One might also dream of fighting or overcoming sinister beings that one encounters in a

dream. These are all signs of mental purification during purification practice. When we encounter these signs, we should enthusiastically meditate more.

If we are honest and think carefully about it, it is the non-virtuous mental states that agitate and disturb our mind. If we did not have non-virtuous mental states in our mental continuum, our mind would become very flexible and light.

However, because of the various non-virtuous mental states we are prone to at present – such as anger, attachment, competitiveness, pride and jealousy – our mind becomes disturbed and coarse. Whenever we try to abide calmly and peacefully, these mental states will agitate and disturb the mind and induce a multitude of thought processes and conceptualising.

These non-virtuous mental states distract the mind outside, making it difficult to concentrate the mind inwards. Since these disturbing thoughts are coarse mental states, they obstruct us from coming into contact with more subtle states of the mind. They can also disturb our sleep or prevent us from falling asleep. When the mind is overcome by disturbing emotions and non-virtuous mental states, it can prevent us from falling to sleep. Sleep is a more subtle mental state. If coarse disturbing thoughts have taken over the mind, they prevent us from accessing the more subtle states of mind associated with sleep.

Student's comment: I read a book by a Tibetan author who intimated that Tibetan monks could 'astral travel' at will.

Response: That's probably a book related to tantric practice where one refers to a 'dream body'. The tantric texts talk about employing a subtle body at the time of sleep for various purposes, but there also seems to be this 'dream body' that one can use.

There is also a 'dream elephant' – I don't know if you have come across the dream elephant yet. It is not an easy thing to understand. It could be regarded as a deep subject. A dream elephant, of course, is not a real elephant, but is related to the reality of the dream. We can actually say there is such a thing as a dream elephant that appears to that particular dreaming mind.

So, we have the dream itself, which is a mental state. Then we have the object of the dream, which is the dream elephant. The dream elephant is, of course, not the actual elephant, but an object that is posited as being separate from the dream, perhaps a more subtle form.

As we said at the beginning, we will again focus the mind inwards and concentrate it single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

We also have cases of people sleep-walking while dreaming. This is interesting, because they might sleepwalk at a precipice, or somewhere where there is a risk of falling, but as long as they are still within their dream and asleep, they won't fall down. But if we were to wake them up suddenly causing them to come out of their dream, there's a danger of them falling. I don't know if that's what was being talked about in that book, but that's a situation that can occur.

Student's further comment: I was actually talking about the 'third eye'.

Response: That wasn't Lobsang Rampa, I hope! (Laughter)
I don't know if you have come across a book written by Lobsang Rampa, who talks a lot about the third eye (*Geshe-la laughing*). He talks a lot about monks flying in the sky, then going below the ground, and things like that. Lobsang Rampa composed maybe 15 or 18 books, and even though many of those stories he made up for the books are completely untrue, they still had the effect of making many people interested in Buddhism and generated interest and enthusiasm about Buddhist practice. So he actually did a very good thing! (*More laughter*).

His writing is very uplifting and positive. I [i.e. Geshe Doga] haven't really met him, although it is said he lives in Madras. Anyway, even though he has a Tibetan name, he's not Tibetan but European. Many people thought that the author of the book was actually a Tibetan, but he was not.

The meaning of the name 'Lobsang' is having a good mind with many qualities. 'Rampa' – maybe here he tried to indicate his affinity with the practice of tantra. Rampa is also sometimes used to refer to a certain high level of bureaucrat in the Tibetan Government. So I don't know why he chose the name Rampa!

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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