
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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We will practise a bit of meditation first. It is important to sit in a correct and relaxed physical posture, because being physically tense will make you mentally tense. On the basis of sitting in a good, relaxed physical posture, we also have to relax the mind. If, after sitting and making yourself comfortable and relaxed, you don't put your mind in the right space, you will have missed the point.

When we practise meditation, it is important to focus the mind on just one meditation object. Focusing the mind on a variety of meditation objects will distract it and harm our meditation. If you find it difficult during meditation to concentrate on one object and your mind does not abide on the object, when you investigate the reason, you will find that the mind is unstable because it is going out to a variety of objects. So, to stabilise our mind, we need to train it to focus on the one meditation object.

We have to free the mind from the disturbing thoughts that distract it towards outside objects, and bring it back home, focusing it completely inwards. Next, we direct the mind to our object of our meditation. If it is a physical object of meditation, we don't actually focus on the actual physical object but on the reflection of the object in the mind.

For this meditation, the object is the coming and going of the breath. After having brought the mind back home and having focused it completely inwards, we direct it to the coming and going of the breath. Our concentration on the object should not be so loose that we lose the object easily; it should also not be too tight. Rather, the mind should be tuned just right. We will meditate in this way for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*)

This meditation on the coming and going of the breath has great benefits. Since the breath doesn't have any particular shape or colour, when we focus on the breath, it soon puts our mind into a neutral state. Sometimes, we might experience obstacles when we use shapes or colours as the object of our meditation, because we might be attached to those shapes or colours, and this attachment will disturb the mind.

Since the coming and going of the breath doesn't have any particular shape or colour, it more easily puts the mind at rest when it is used as a meditation object. Also, concentrating on the coming and going of the breath makes one's energy more pliable. One's energies become more pliable and subtle and this induces mental pliancy or flexibility. When we meditate on the coming and going of the breath and calm the mind, we can direct it to any type of object we wish to. Therefore, sometimes this meditation is used as a preliminary to other meditations.

Making the breath more pliant and subtle and our energies and mind more pliant will induce mental happiness. Therefore, the meditation on the coming and going of the breath has many benefits.

Practising meditation on the coming and going of the breath is very effective in calming down the conceptualising mind. By meditating on the breath, one can calm down the conceptualising mind, because there is a very close relationship between the breath and the conceptualising mind. While the English language uses two separate words for 'breath' and 'subtle energies', in Tibetan it is the same word.

Our conceptualising mind becomes agitated through our breathing, so there is a close association between the breathing and the subtle energies in the body. Through the breathing, the conceptualising mind becomes agitated. By calming down the breathing through focusing on the breath, one can also calm down the conceptualising mind. For example, if one is caught up in a certain way of thinking and mentally tense, this will affect one's breath and also the subtle energies in one's body. In this way, physical sickness can be induced through mental tightness.

In the tantric system, we say that the subtle energies in the body are what cause the mind to make contact with the object. The mind is that which sees the object, but the corresponding subtle energy is that which brings the mind to the object and makes contact with it.

Once the breathing ceases, all coarse levels of consciousness also cease simultaneously. If our breathing is disturbed, it also disturbs the mind. Quite often then, one perceives things that do not exist, and one is mistaken regarding the real situation.

[*Resuming the commentary on the text*], last time we dealt with transforming loss into the path. Today, we will deal with transforming gain and profit into the path.

Last time, we said that when one experiences loss of friends and wealth, or one is overcome by suffering or sickness, then during such times, one should never lose one's optimism, courage or strength of mind – one's mind should not get too depressed. We said that we need to keep our spirits up in times of difficulty.

Now we are dealing with the opposite. When one has much success and material gain, this can cause the mind to become too excited and proud – too full of itself. Normally, our mind goes up and down, between being depressed to being elated. However, as a Dharma practitioner, one should try to stabilise the mind.

When we experience any type of loss, such as loss of happiness, friends or wealth, we should not let our mind be depressed – but keep up our mental strength, courage and optimism. With such an optimistic mind, we can engage in the practice of virtue while dealing with our situation. If, at a time of difficulty, we let our mind be completely overwhelmed by problems, it will be impossible for us to change our situation. If we let our mind be overcome by depression, we will not be able to deal with our situation.

As the great Shantideva said, "At such a time of difficulty there is nothing to be gained by being

depressed. Instead, one should remain optimistic and maintain one's mental courage. Then one can deal with the situation and change it."

Verse 19 from the text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997) reads:

*Though you become famous and many bow to you,
And you gain riches to equal Vaishravana's,
See that worldly fortune is without essence,
And be unconceited –
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.*

There are many reasons for becoming famous or renowned. One may be born into a good family or a high lineage; one may have a good physical appearance; or one may be rich or have great power. There are many reasons why people would pay respect to you. To "gain riches to equal Vaishravana's" – Vaishravana is said to be exceedingly wealthy, so having wealth equal the wealth of Vaishravana would make one extremely wealthy.

However, one should see all these worldly accomplishments as without any essence, like a dewdrop on a blade of grass, which does not remain there very long; it will only be there for a short time. It doesn't really have any essence. In the same way, one should see one's worldly accomplishments as without any essence, and so be humble and unconceited – this, then, is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The text is saying here that although one may have worldly success, one should remain unconceited, without pride. There is a lot to say about the disadvantages of pride.

First, if someone is proud and conceited, that person won't have many friends, because they cannot interact harmoniously with others. Also, a conceited and proud person will not learn anything new; they will not generate any new qualities or insights. Those qualities and insights they have already generated will decline.

When we have any type of success, or become wealthy, or have a beautiful appearance, or come from a highly respected family, or have power – all these qualities can act as a cause of pride. Pride or conceit is generated in the mind, yet it actually destroys the person.

There is nothing wrong with being wealthy, or handsome, or beautiful, or coming from a good family, or being powerful, or having inner qualities or knowledge. However, once we generate pride in these qualities, it will destroy us. We will become conceited and generate a discriminating attitude, looking down on those with lesser qualities and viewing them as being of lesser worth and treating them badly. That is one danger of pride. Generally, if a person is without pride and conceit, that person's mind will be quite happy and at ease.

Although we should be without pride, it is mentioned in *Entering the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* by Shantideva that one should meditate on pride in the context of

combating the delusions. So, in the context of opposing one's mental afflictions, one should generate great pride, as said by Shantideva. But Lama Tsong Khapa, in his great exposition on the path, says, "This kind of pride that we generate in our Dharma practice is not the actual affliction of pride." Rather, here one is generating strong determination and self-confidence that one will not be overcome by the afflictions, that one will not be controlled by the delusions. This type of self-confidence or pride is to be meditated upon.

Someone who has overcome the inner enemy of the mental afflictions can really be called a conqueror or hero; they have successfully overcome the inner enemy of the delusions and mental afflictions. But someone who gives a hard time to another who is less powerful than them or in a less fortunate situation could not be called hero or one with great courage.

If we overcome the inner enemy of the afflictions, this shows courage. So one should generate strong pride in one's ability to overcome the delusions, of not being controlled by the delusions, instead saying, "I will overcome and subdue the delusions". This type of self-confidence or pride is to be meditated upon.

The type of pride that causes one to say, "I will not give the delusions the slightest chance, even for an instant," is the type of self-confidence one needs in one's Dharma practice or in one's worldly activities. We need to have this strong mental courage and determination. Having such a determined attitude, we can build our mind up at times of difficulty and we will be successful. The attitude that, "I can do whatever I want to do, I will be achieve whatever I have aimed for" is needed both in Dharma practice as well as in one's other activities.

After having made the determination to accomplish a certain aim – which may be a Dharma aim or some other aim – we then set out to accomplish it. We will encounter adverse conditions and conducive conditions. Whatever we do, it will never be easy. We will always encounter adverse conditions and problems in the course of achieving our aims. So that we don't let those adverse conditions stop us, we actually transform those adverse conditions into conducive conditions for the path. Also, since one will encounter adverse conditions and problems while achieving one's aims, there is no benefit in becoming depressed by the problems one encounters. This will not help change the situation and bring us success. What is needed is mental strength, optimism and courage, so that when one encounters problems, one can overcome them, instead of the other way round.

The various successes we experience should also be transformed into conducive conditions for the path. One shouldn't let one's success go to one's head and make us conceited and proud, because that leads to carelessness. For example, if we acquire a certain amount of money, this can cause us to feel a bit more conceited and proud, which causes us to be less conscientious and to act carelessly, causing harm to both ourselves and others.

Do we have any questions? I don't want to talk too much about the faults of pride ... because many people they say that I have lots of pride! (Laughter)

Question from student about the need to differentiate between temporary and chronic depression.

Answer: There are some people who are always depressed and never happy. It is like a natural tendency of their mind to be depressed. People who are naturally lazy and don't want to do anything are susceptible to depression.

This type of person is very attracted to the happiness of not doing anything. (Laughter) They prefer to remain in a state of inactivity. It is said that of the various types of laziness, the laziness of depression may be the most harmful.

Question from another student requesting clarification of 'correct pride'.

Answer: That is more like 'attitude', what we were talking about before, the type of pride that is more like mental courage. This is not the pride we talk about when we say pride is an affliction. For example, taking pride in one's work is more a mental attitude of self-confidence and determination – a positive mental attitude is needed.

The afflictive type of pride is a mental attitude where you start to feel very full of yourself, become arrogant and feel you are better than someone else. However, the more positive type of pride – let's call it mental courage or determination – is in relation to some future aim. We have the mental courage, determination and self-confidence that we will achieve what we set out to do – the self-confidence that we are able to definitely achieve our aims. It is very important that we have this type of mental courage and self-confidence about achieving our aims.

Further question from student: Is the inner enemy ever really conquered, is it likely to recur?

Answer: It is possible to overcome and conquer the inner enemy of the delusions, because the Buddha has already done so.

Of course, if we just take our own mind as an example, one might doubt whether it is possible to overcome the delusions. If you take the ordinary mind, you might doubt whether it is possible to conquer the delusions. So, we have to look at it from the viewpoint of the Buddha.

I can understand why some people doubt that it is possible to overcome the delusions, because many people say, "I cannot overcome my attachment. No matter how much I try to overcome my attachment, immediately more attachment seems to pop up!"

Other people feel that if they gave up their attachment, they would have no happiness. They feel it is impossible to completely give up or eradicate attachment.

I can understand how one could doubt whether it was possible to completely overcome the delusions. But if you think about how it is possible to oppose the delusions with the antidotes, and how the delusions can be reduced by the antidotes, without harming the individual's happiness, you could arrive at the

conclusion that the delusions could be completely overcome.

It is possible that some people will get the idea that it is impossible to abandon attachment, because they feel that attachment is necessary for them to have a successful life. They feel that if they don't have attachment, they will not work for their aims and will not be happy because they won't achieve their aims.

But if we analyse the nature of our mind and of our various afflictions and emotions, we will see that they are not always the same rock solid entities in our mind – they are actually constantly changing. In the past, you might have had strong attachment towards a particular object, but now that attachment has dissipated. Also, we might have had strong aversion and anger towards an object, which by now may have calmed down. This is a common experience for everyone, which clearly shows that strong delusions are not an integral part of the mind – they are not of one nature with the mind.

Also, quite often the objects of our attachment change. At one time, we will have attachment for one object, but that attachment diminishes, and we generate the mind of attachment for another object. Then it changes again to another object! This proves the same point – if attachment for one object were an integral part of our mind, it would be of one nature with our mind, so once it arose, it should never go away. But the fact that it does go away proves that the mental afflictions are not of one nature with the mind.

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

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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