
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

31 July 2002

We can meditate for a while as usual. First, sit in a comfortable, proper physical posture. On the basis of being physically comfortable, we also have to make the mind comfortable. Actually, the very first thing we should do when we meditate is to generate a good motivation. Those with the correct understanding can generate the motivation of bodhicitta; everyone else should at the very least have the motivation that: "I want to subdue my mind and make it happier so that I can benefit others more and make them happy".

One needs to first relax the mind and not let it wander off to outside objects. Rather, one should reverse the mind's dispersed focus from outside, and focus it inwards. This is done in a gentle, gradual way. Slowly one brings the mind back home, focusing it inwards.

After the mind is focused totally inwards, one lets it abide in that state for a while. When the mind is vivid and clear after abiding in that state for some time, we will find that it again wants to escape to the outside. At this point, we direct the mind's focus to the coming and going of the breath. Here again this is to be done gently, and the breathing should be very light. The breathing should flow freely and lightly before one places one's [full] attention on it. (*Pause for meditation.*) Now maybe we can stop. We've only got a short while to meditate tonight.

It is good to practise meditation and to try and subdue one's mind. If one practises meditation and from time to time investigates the state of one's mind, one will become more aware of disturbing mental states as they arise. Then, if one is aware of the antidotes to these disturbing mental states, one can apply them at these times and subdue the mind. The experience of practitioners shows that this is possible.

If one meditates for only five minutes and during that five minutes keeps the mind calm and peaceful, then one will benefit from the meditation. This can be confirmed through our own experience. When the mind has wandered off to outside objects and is then brought back home and focused inwards, it experiences greater inner happiness. Once the disturbing thoughts again take over and distract the mind to outside objects, one can confirm through one's own experience that this destroys one's inner peace and happiness.

Whenever the mind is disturbed, agitated, or unhappy, if we sit down and do this practice of bringing the mind back home and focusing it inwards – removing it from disturbing thoughts – it will bring inner peace and happiness, and remove any mental disturbance.

If one is not aware of this meditation technique, quite often at times of distress and problems, one will turn to outer solutions – for example, alcohol or cigarettes, or whatever. These are not true, permanent methods for

attaining inner peace and overcoming inner problems. Perhaps temporarily they might bring some sort of relief, but they are not the actual method to overcome inner problems.

Of course if we never meditate, we will find meditation very difficult, because if one doesn't meditate, one will not get the benefit. Even if one just practises for just one, two or three minutes, by doing this again and again, continually, the practice will become more effective, and much easier.

Last week, we talked about transforming the objects of anger into the path, so today we will talk about transforming the objects of desire and attachment into the path.

Verse 21 (of the root text, *The Thirty Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997) reads:

*Sensual pleasures are like salt water:
The more you indulge, the more thirst increases.
Abandon at once those things which breed
Clinging attachment –
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

There are various interpretations of the 'sensual pleasures' referred to in the first line. Sometimes the translation is 'objects of desire and attachment'. The five main objects of desire are the five sense objects – sounds, sights, smells, taste and tactile sensations.

The five sense objects are the main objects of our desire. For example, after something beautiful – certain colours and shapes – appears to the eye consciousness, one will generate desire for that object. The same occurs when melodious and nice sounds appear to the ear-consciousness – again one generates attachment for those sounds. In the same way, one is attached to nice smells, tastes – depending on whether one likes sweet things, very hot food, etc. – and soft tactile sensations. These five are the main objects of one's attachment.

Whenever one experiences these five sense objects, they generate a certain internal response. Seeing nice shapes and colours generates a certain inner response, as does experiencing nice sounds, smells, etc. Their function is supposed to be of benefit to us, to give us some kind of benefit or happiness. In fact, the smells, tastes and tangible sensations that we encounter every day are quite coarse compared to other types of enjoyment.

Basically, as a human being, one cannot escape the five sense objects – one has to encounter the five sense objects continuously. For example, whenever one sees a nice form or a nice shape, because the mind exaggerates the desirable or beautiful aspect of that object, one generates strong attachment for the shape or colour of this object of eye-consciousness. If one were to understand the real nature of the object, attachment wouldn't be generated. However, because the mind imputes a whole lot of qualities and beauty and desirability on the object, it generates attachment for the object because it appears so desirable.

Because we are constantly surrounded by the five sense objects, it is difficult for us to abandon attachment to

those five sense objects, particularly because experiencing those sense objects generates a certain happiness in the mind. Seeing nice shapes or colours with the eye-consciousness generates some happiness in the mind. Also, hearing nice melodious sounds generates a certain happiness within the mind. The same occurs when one eats something one likes.

It is difficult for us to see the disadvantages of attachment, because attachment is always concurrent with the happiness that a particular object gives us. Therefore, it is difficult for us to see any reason for abandoning attachment and desire. Instead, one thinks: "If I abandon attachment and desire, I won't be able to experience any happiness in my life". Why? Because attachment accompanies the particular type of happiness that is generated by the sense objects.

When attachment is generated in the mind, one experience the problems caused by attachment. However, because it occurs with a certain [sensual] happiness, it is difficult to recognise. If one checks up whether one can become happy by experiencing sense objects, one will see that no matter how many times one experiences sense objects, one will not become happy. Instead, when one has one nice pleasurable sensual experience, it will lead to another one, and a third one, etc. So, the only thing that happens is that the initial experience increases one's dissatisfaction, desire and attachment, in the same way that drinking salt water to quench one's thirst [will only make us thirstier]. No matter how many times we experience the sense objects, we will not find satisfaction.

That is why it says here that the experience of sensual pleasures is like salt water – it doesn't solve the problem, but just increases one's craving. Quite often, people end up being completely overcome by their attachment and desire. The more they indulge, the more their 'thirst' increases. Here, it says: "Abandon at once those things which breed clinging attachment". So, instead of indulging and increasing the thirst, it is much better to abandon it from the beginning. Abandoning the things that breed clinging attachment is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

If one gives up attachment to the five sense objects, even though now you might not at first be aware of it, it will actually generate great inner happiness.

On the other hand, if we have strong attachment towards an object, and desire an object very much, we will want to keep the desired object close to us, and will even worry about losing it. So, first, there is the suffering of not having the object when one first meets the object. Then, because the mind exaggerates the attractive aspect of the object, one generates attachment to it, and experiences the suffering of dissatisfaction when one is separated from it. So, even when one gets what one wants, one's attachment will not let one abide peacefully. One will start to worry about losing the object. Then, if one actually becomes separated from the object of one's attachment, again great mental suffering occurs.

Actually, when one is separated from the object of one's attachment and experiences inner unhappiness, it is

good to investigate one's mind to identify the actual cause of one's unhappiness at that time. In this way, one will learn more about the problem of attachment. [Giving up attachment] does not mean that one is not allowed to see nice sights, hear nice sounds, smell nice smells, etc. If one doesn't have attachment, one can still encounter such objects but will not experience the problems brought by attachment. A Buddhist master once said that if one continuously indulges one's desires and doesn't find satisfaction, but keeps indulging one's desires more and more, what suffering could possibly be greater than that?

It is good to try and generate contentment – to have less dissatisfaction and more contentment. This is called the knowledge of contentment. It will make one's life much easier, and one will be content with the things one has. One will be able to be able be happy with whatever one has.

Otherwise, if we don't reduce our attachment, many types of problems will beset us. To begin with, if we are practising meditation, why is it that we find it difficult to meditate? And why does our meditation not improve? The main reason for this is attachment. If one gave up attachment, it would benefit one's practices of listening, contemplation and meditation. Also, many people constantly complain about not getting on with other people. How do these fights and disputes arise? People do not get on with each other because of attachment. Of course there is also the condition of anger, but actually the primary cause is attachment.

If we could generate some knowledge of contentment and be happy with what we have, it would greatly benefit us. There's a story in India about a beggar finding gold. He thought: "I want to offer this gold to the poorest person in the country". After having thought about the matter for some time, he finally offered the gold to the king. The point to this story is that, even though the king, was the richest person materially, because of his dissatisfaction he was also the poorest. The beggar saw him as being the neediest person – the person with the greatest dissatisfaction and desire. This is why he gave the gold to the king.

It is good if we can meditate a bit on the antidote to attachment, which is the meditation on impurity. The meditation on impurity counteracts the mental image we create of the beauty and attractiveness of an object. Many people may feel uncomfortable about meditating on impurity in relation to the body of another person. However, we can also meditate on the impurity of our own body, starting with our feet and working our way up through the legs and the rest of the body, imagining how the body looks under the skin. That's basically how it's done. The Indian master, Shantideva, advised practitioners to go to the cemetery to understand the actual situation of their bodies. These days, you don't necessarily need to go to the cemetery – we just have to look at pictures of a [surgical] operation. If we look at such pictures, we won't see anything desirable there! *(Laughter)*

Do you have a question?

(Question inaudible on tape, but lots of laughter.)

Answer: People who have strong desire and attachment are the neediest persons, because a person who has strong desire will never have enough. Whatever they have, it will never be sufficient. That is the point of the story. Having thought about who might be the neediest person, the beggar decided it was the king, because the king had the greatest desire.

(Same questioner continues, but is still inaudible.)

Answer: Probably the king was quite happy when the beggar gave him the gold. Generally, one should practise generosity towards those in need, but in this particular case, we don't really know the full situation. When the king asked the beggar: "Why are you giving it to me?", the beggar said: "Because I thought you were the neediest". We don't know what happened after this, because we only have this part of the story! *(Laughter)*.

Actually, although the beggar gave a lesson to the king, it is not clear from the story whether the king learned the lesson or not. However, from the beggar's point of view, he was quite happy that the king had the gold; he actually viewed the king suffering more than himself, and that's why he gave the gold to the king. He also gave the king a lesson, but we don't whether the king took the lesson or not. If the king was an insightful person, it would have made him think about his ways, and caused him to reduce his attachment and desire.

Question: In talking about desire and controlling desire, is it a good practice to think of objects of desire as a bad thing?

Answer: No. Meditating on the object as being bad is probably not advisable. The point of the meditation is to meditate on the object as being undesirable, so we meditate on the **undesirable nature** of the object. Meditating on the object as bad brings a certain danger, because some of the objects of our attachment might actually be spiritually advanced beings. This would bring complications if began to think of them as being bad. Perhaps if the object of attachment were some non-sentient object, it might be different. But with sentient beings, there's the possibility that they are highly advanced practitioners, so thinking of them as bad would not be advisable.

Questioner continues: In the case of, say, sex, for instance, as an object of desire...does it make sense if we were to say that we are going to give up, in this instance, the objects of our desire? Does it make sense to use that technique to control our desire?

Answer: If you think that sex is not good, that's OK! *(Laughter)*

(Next question inaudible.)

Answer: Desire is the main mental factor that causes distraction within the mind. One of the main obstacles to attaining calm abiding is mental excitement. This particular disturbance known as mental excitement belongs to the family of attachment. If you wanted to meditate on calm abiding, to try and attain single-pointed concentration, it would be necessary to reduce one's attachment. If the mind had strong attachment and desire was rampant, it would easily become distracted from the object of meditation.

Also, if you compare the disturbance that anger brings to the mind to the disturbance that desire brings, desire brings vastly more disturbance, because when we try to focus the mind inwards, there are many, many outside objects to which one is attached that the mind will wander towards.

So, dealing with the distraction of anger is much easier. Anger is usually directed at a few objects, and one can see the disadvantage to oneself quite clearly. One quite likes to get rid of anger, so as a distraction it is easier to deal with. However, attachment 'glues' the mind to many, many objects. For example, if you met a group of ten people, within a very short time, perhaps at the moment of meeting, you will probably have generated attachment for about five or six people out of that group, but you probably won't have generated any anger towards any one of the group – well, maybe for one! *(Laughter)*

(Next question also inaudible on tape.)

Answer: There are various techniques for attaining calm abiding, but they are all similar – the main difference is the meditation object that one chooses. One can choose the object of meditation that one finds most suitable and agreeable.

The two main methods for attaining calm abiding are mindfulness and mental introspection, through which we can counteract the two main inner obstructions that prevent the attainment of calm abiding, which are mental excitement and mental sinking. The concentration that one meditates on should have the quality of clarity and of non-conceptual stability or non-conceptual abiding.

The practitioner can choose the object of the meditation according to his or her own personality. For example, if their main delusion is attachment, it is recommended to choose 'impurity' as the object of one's single-pointed meditation. If the greater problem is having an over-conceptualising mind, it is recommended to meditate on the coming and going of the breath. So, the practitioner can choose the object of meditation according to the main type of delusion or disturbing mental state within their mental continuum.

(Next question – inaudible.)

Answer: You generate love for the other person because they are impermanent. Also, the generation of love only comes about because the other object is impermanent, and because one's own mind is impermanent.

(Another question.)

Answer: You meditate on the impurity of the object of your attraction. To meditate in such a way on attachment itself would be difficult, because it is a non-physical object.

This meditation on impurity happens within your own mind. You meditate on the **appearance** of impurity to your own mind – this counteracts the appearance of beauty, which has been sending the mind crazy. This doesn't mean viewing the object as bad, because this would actually again distract the mind to the outer object – as something you want to avoid. So, you don't view the outer object as bad, but you counteract the

internal appearance [to your mind] of the object as beautiful by meditating on it as being impure.

The idea is not to meditate on the object as being bad. For example, if you decided to meditate on your partner as being impure, but made the object of your meditation your partner as 'a bad person', this might just lead you to accuse him or her of something and start a fight. The intention of the meditation on impurity is not to lead you to into a dispute or breakup with your partner!

As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focus it inwards, and concentrate on the sound of the name mantra of the Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed from tape by Gabrielle Thomson

Edited by Mary-Lou Considine

Edited Version

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