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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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We can practise some meditation as usual. Sit in a good physical posture and then place the mind in a good state. If one can do this then one can experience both the bliss of mental and physical pliancy. If one experiences that bliss then one will be happy. The way to make oneself happy is just that, and it's very cheap... there's no expense [*laughter*].

Once one has a relaxed physical body then one places the mind in a relaxed state, lets it rest and frees the mind from the control of disturbing thoughts that try to distract the mind towards the outside. Instead we focus the mind completely towards the inside. We concentrate on the coming and going of the breath, single-pointedly. The mind shouldn't be just partially placed on the coming and going of the breath. One should place one's mind completely, 100%, on the coming and going of the breath. Focusing on the breath in such a manner we can meditate for a few minutes. *Pause for meditation.*

It is good to meditate and to apply the techniques for subduing and calming the mind. Of course when we start out to meditate we will experience difficulties. That is not very surprising as our mind is very much acquainted with the very destructive ways that we have lived maybe half or most of our life. We have let our mind run wild and let it be distracted... running after outside objects for the better part of our life. When we sit down to meditate it is not surprising that we find it difficult to focus the mind calmly towards the inside. One shouldn't despair but should remember all the benefits of meditation. One should think that having spent all this time in the pursuit of outer pleasures one should now have something to show for it, but still one experiences dissatisfaction. One might reflect that there could be a different way for attaining happiness such as drawing the mind back from disturbing objects and placing it in a calm inner mental state through which one can experience inner happiness. By being aware that there is another way, a better way, for attaining happiness one starts out to use the methods (of meditation).

Last time we talked about self-grasping, or true grasping, and we discussed self-grasping at a person and self-grasping at phenomena. Self-grasping at a person is the grasping at the self or the "I" as being inherently existent and self-grasping at phenomena is the grasping at the aggregates as being inherently existent.

On one side we have this notion of inherently existent self, or a self that exists from its own side, a self that actually can be found if looked for. Those three modes of apprehension are synonymous. On the other side we have the wisdom that realises selflessness. The wisdom realising selflessness comes about by negating or refuting the appearance of true existence. By refuting the concept of true existence one arrives at the absence of true existence or inherent existence which is selflessness. The wisdom that understands the absence of inherent existence, or the absence of existing from its own side, is the wisdom realising selflessness. We can see that the wisdom realising selflessness and self-grasping are polar opposites. The way they apprehend the object is completely different, completely contrary, and the more our wisdom realising selflessness increases the more true grasping decreases because they are direct opposites.

The wisdom meditating on selflessness in meditative equipoise is called the ultimate Bodhicitta. When one arises from meditative equipoise on emptiness, then, through the force of the realisation of selflessness during the meditation, one will still remember emptiness in the post-meditational period. One will still be aware that things are empty.

Here we come to the next major outline of the part dealing with ultimate Bodhicitta which is eliminating true grasping during the post-meditational period. Through the force of the realisation of emptiness during meditative equipoise, through familiarising oneself very well with the view understanding emptiness during meditation, when one arises from meditation and the various objects of attachment and aversion appear to the mind as being truly existent the practitioner won't believe in that true existence. Through his/her understanding of emptiness, he/she will understand that there is a discrepancy between the way objects appear to the mind and the way they really exist.

One talks about the appearance of objects as illusory, meditating on objects as being illusory, meaning that even though they appear as truly existent the practitioner doesn't believe in that appearance because, through the force of the meditation on emptiness, he/she can still ascertain in the post-meditational period that phenomena are empty. That doesn't mean that all those consciousnesses, those various types of awarenesses, are all realising emptiness. That is not what is meant.

For example if a mother whose only child has just died recently is reminded in some way of the death of her child then immediately very strong mental distress will arise in her mind. She will remember the death of her child whatever she's doing... whether she's eating or drinking or walking. That doesn't mean that all the types of awareness that are present within her mental continuum are mental suffering, but whatever she does, in her mind, she's never separated from that mental suffering. It pervades the whole being.

It is the same with the realisation of emptiness during meditative equipoise. Once one arises out of that meditation one's being is pervaded by that realisation of emptiness and the phenomena of attachment and aversion appear as illusory. Despite appearing as if they are truly existent they are not. Through the realisation of emptiness one's attachment and anger are lessened.

The same applies to other realisations such as the realisation of Bodhicitta. These are also present within one's mind continuously as in the example of the mother and the mental distress if her child has died. Sometimes we can see, if someone is very angry, that anger arises very easily in their mind just by being reminded of its object. The habits in the mind are very strong and arise very easily. Now we will deal with this point, abandoning true grasping during the post-meditational period.

Firstly one deals with lessening the grasping at the true existence of the objects of one's attachment. Verse 23 (of the text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York, 1997);

*When you encounter attractive objects,  
Though they seem beautiful  
Like a rainbow in summer, don't regard them as real  
And give up attachment -  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

In the first line it talks about encountering attractive objects. How objects become attractive depends very much upon the mind. Even though one generally talks about the beauty or attractiveness of outer objects being dependent upon worldly conception, whether something appears attractive to a person

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or not depends very much on the mind of the person. When the object for some reason agrees with one's mind, even if the object is, according to conventional standards, not attractive or beautiful, it will appear as attractive to one's own mind and one will be drawn towards it. If that attraction within one's mind doesn't happen then one will not generate attachment towards the object. If the object doesn't agree with one's mind then it doesn't appear as attractive and one doesn't generate attachment for it. The attractiveness of the object comes very much from one's own mind.

When attractive objects appear to the mind that 'attractiveness' appears to be created by the object, so *"Though they seem beautiful, like a rainbow in summer, don't regard them as real"*. The object doesn't just appear as beautiful, its beauty appears as inherently existing. It appears as if it is beautiful from its own side. If we analyse this in relation to a beautiful face, the beauty of a beautiful face comes about through many causes and conditions. Many things need to come together - two eyes, one nose, two ears - to get a beautiful face. But when the beautiful face appears to the mind it doesn't seem to depend on all those factors. It appears very vividly from its own side as if it's an object in its own right independently of the various causes and conditions that are actually needed for a beautiful face.

If one analyses this appearance of the beautiful face independent of the needed factors one will find that it is a mistaken appearance. As one doesn't know that this is a mistaken appearance, mainly created by the mind, but believes in the true appearance of this beautiful face the mind generates attachment for the beautiful face. This appearance of the beautiful face as existing from its own side comes about through the karmic stains on the mind. Then, if one is not aware that this is actually just a mental creation one generates attachment for this beautiful face, believing in the true existence and inherent nature of this beautiful face. Therefore it says here that one should regard all the objects of attachment like a rainbow in summer. One shouldn't regard them as real. A rainbow in summer appears very vivid and very solid but it is not something that can actually be used. There is a discrepancy between the appearance of the rainbow and the actual rainbow, between the way the rainbow appears and the way it actually exists. It seems to exist as some kind of solid, substantial phenomenon, but actually it is quite ethereal, merely certain types of light.

Another example to illustrate this is the way one is mistaken with regards to appearance when looking at a magical creation, like those created by an illusionist or a magician. For example a magician can create an illusory horse. This is done through mantras, through a certain substance, etc, so that those people in the audience whose mind has been affected by the mantra of the magician will see the illusory horse and they will believe in its appearance. The illusory horse appears as an actual horse and the members of the audience whose mind is affected by the mantra and who don't know better will believe in that appearance. In that way that part of the audience is like a person who hasn't realised emptiness. To a person who hasn't realised emptiness phenomena appear as if they exist from their side and the person, because they have not realised emptiness, believes in that appearance. But the magician, even though his mind is also affected by the mantra, knows that what the mantra creates is just a mere illusion. Even though the illusion of a horse appears to his mind he won't believe that it is an actual horse and won't believe in the appearance.

In the same way an ordinary being that has realised emptiness conceptually will not believe in the appearance of inherent existence of phenomena. Even though phenomena appear as if they exist from their own side a person who has realised emptiness conceptually won't believe in that appearance.

There are many examples of how one can analyse the discrepancy between appearance and reality. For example we all know that a person can appear as very attractive and beautiful, be it male or female, beautiful or handsome, when one looks at them from a certain distance because of their dress, their make-up etc. As long as one looks at them from a distance they appear as attractive and beautiful. But one knows that quite often as one gets closer that appearance can change very drastically and one sees that they are not actually that beautiful or handsome at all. Here one can clearly see that there is a discrepancy between the initial appearance of beauty from its own side and the actual reality. When one looked at that person from a distance that person appeared as attractive and beautiful but that appearance of beauty was just a creation of one's own mind. It doesn't appear as if it is coming from one's own mind - the beauty appears as if it actually comes from the side of the object, as if it's actually findable on the object, it's somewhere there. If one believes that there is actually beauty to be found somewhere there in the object then one generates attachment for the object. But if one analyses (the situation) one understands that the beauty doesn't exist from its own side but is created by the mind.

Reflecting in this manner, on how the appearance of beauty is created by one's own mind, helps one to lessen one's attachment. The point of meditating on emptiness is to lessen one's delusions. Even if we haven't realised emptiness we can still do this analysis of how the appearance of beauty is actually something that is created by one's own mind and, through that, stop believing in its true existence or stop believing that it is actually somewhere to be found on the object, that it exists from its own side. It will benefit our mind because it will lessen our delusions a little bit. This is a very profound way of thinking but it is very beneficial for the mind.

So would you have a question?

*Question inaudible.*

There is a problem here with the wording in talking about the part of the mind that becomes attached because that part of the mind that becomes attached is the attachment itself.

*Questioner makes another short inaudible comment.*

.. Geshe-la is saying that your question is "Does the part of the mind that is attached to the object also perform the analysis?". Geshe-la is saying it doesn't make much sense to say "that part of the mind that becomes attached" because attachment is that which is attached to the object. So the attachment within our mind is that which is attached to the object.

*Questioner continues.*

For example when we see an object with our eye-consciousness what is seeing the object is the eye-consciousness but the eye-consciousness is not that which is attached to the object. Attachment is another part of the mind that then desires the object, following the seeing of the object by the eye-consciousness. First you see an object, then in your mind you generate a desire for the object, some kind of wish to have the object. That wish to have the object, that is the desire.

Attachment is preceded by what we call mistaken conception. This mistaken conception is what creates in our mind the appearance of beauty of the object. That which transforms the object as beautiful to our own mind is what we call the mistaken conception. It's a certain type of mistaken conception that exaggerates the desirable aspect, the beautiful aspect of the object, or completely imputes a beautiful appearance to the object. Then after the mistaken conception has been created within the mind this appearance of the object as being very beautiful is created. The greater the appearance of beauty that

is created the stronger the wish to have that object arises. The wish to have that object is the attachment.

The reason why attachment is regarded as a wrong awareness is because the object at which it grasps doesn't actually exist. The object of attachment is actually an appearance within one's own mind created by the mistaken conception. The mistaken conceptions create this aspect of beauty within one's own mind. As one is not able to distinguish between the appearance to one's own mind and the actual object one believes that the appearance is the actual object. The attachment then latches onto that and desires that object. One desires the object because there is the appearance of beauty. The object becomes attractive but that attractiveness was generated by the mind. Attachment focuses on that appearance and takes it to be the actual object, and then you want the object. The more attractive the object appears the more you want it, even to the point where you think "If I have that object, then it will make me happy". This is a live or die situation; "If I have the object, then I will be happy. If I don't have the object, I won't be happy". The object has been so greatly exaggerated within one's own mind by the mistaken conception and the attachment believes in that and one is held down by one's attachment. One comes under the power of one's own attachment.

We can observe this mental exaggeration by mistaken conception through our own experience. We all know how an object appeared to the mind while we had a very strong attachment toward it. It appeared as if one needed that object in order to be happy. One couldn't be happy without it. But after some time has passed, and the attachment for the object has subsided, one looks at the object without the attachment present and the object doesn't appear in the least attractive any more. So at this time one can very clearly see how this attractiveness and the beauty of the object is a mere mental elaboration by the mistaken conception. But at the time the person doesn't understand that it is just mere appearance and attachment but believes this appearance to be the actual object and completely fixates on this appearance of the object. No matter how many disagreeable sides there are in reality to the object of attachment one doesn't see these parts of the object. One doesn't see any of the faults of the object. Nothing undesirable about the object appears, and the object appears as being wholly and completely, purely, solely desirable. In such a way attachment for the object completely takes over the mind and the mind loses independence to the attachment. The person and their mind are taken over by attachment. Actually it's all just a belief in one's own fiction.

*Question inaudible*

Liberation is attained slowly, slowly. It is said that the mind realising emptiness is the entrance gate to one's liberation. By first realising emptiness, and then slowly, slowly familiarising one's mind with emptiness more and more, meditating on emptiness more and more, one can gradually pacify the various levels of delusions and also purify the mind of the karmic imprints of the delusions and in such a way slowly attain liberation.

It is said that samsara doesn't have a beginning but it has an end and the end comes about through the realisation of emptiness. If we look at a sprout and we try to find the beginning of the continuum of the sprout you look at the seed from which the sprout came and then you try to follow the cause-effect relationship back and back and back. You know you cannot reach the first cause. So I can say the continuity of the sprout... it doesn't have a beginning. The continuity of the sprout is without beginning but the sprout definitely can have an end. If you throw it into the fire then the continuity is severed... has come to an end. In the same way samsara doesn't have a beginning but it definitely has an end. If one

realises emptiness and then overcomes the delusions gradually then samsara has come to an end. By understanding the nature of the delusions, by understanding that they are wrong awarenesses, one understands that it is possible to abandon them. One generates the conviction that liberation is definitely possible. One ascertains the possibility of liberation when one understands that the delusions are wrong awarenesses.

*Question inaudible.*

Oh so you wonder why the "I" itself cannot be the object of refutation?

*Questioner continues, inaudible.*

Of course it cannot be found, because the unfindability of the object at the time of analysis is the emptiness of the object. I have said many times the "I" cannot be found when it is looked for. Why? Because the basis of imputation doesn't exist inherently.

As I said before the object cannot be found at the time of analysis. It is the absence of the object at the time of analysis that is the emptiness of the object. If you look for the "I" you check whether it is the body or the mind. You go through the different parts of the body, refuting how each of them is the "I". Then you go through the different parts of the mind refuting how each part of the mind is the "I". You end up with the unfindability of the object. The object cannot be found. In the same way you can use the clock as an example. You check which part of the clock is the clock: is it the number 1 or the number 2, or the number 6, 7 etc, or is it the hands, the big hand or the small hand, or the thin hand? Which part of the clock is the clock? You cannot pinpoint any part of the clock to be the clock and you arrive at the understanding that the clock is actually a dependent arising, being dependent on its parts.

*Questioner continues (inaudible)*

I stated that very clearly the last time, if you want to do that meditation properly then the object that you are looking for is the object of negation, the appearance of the inherently existent "I". You look for the object that appears to your mind. If you don't do that there's the danger of falling towards the extreme of nihilism. This idea comes about that the "I" is non-existent when you perform this analysis because you haven't clearly identified the object of negation.

*Questioner continues (inaudible). (Translator clarifying the question)* When you say that the self cannot be found, is it specified that it generally cannot be found, or it cannot be found at the time of analysis?

*Questioner continues (inaudible)*

This is actually asserted not just by some people, but by many great scholars, that if an object cannot be found at the time of analysis, then it becomes non-existent. That's why they actually assert that objects can be found at the time of analysis. That's the reason. But another master said that this is not true. The object cannot be found at the time of analysis, but that doesn't mean it's non-existent.

The significance that escapes the lower tenet holders is that the basis of imputation also doesn't exist from its own side. The important point that escapes the lower tenet holders such as Bhavaviveka is that the basis of imputation of the self doesn't exist from its own side. When Bhavaviveka performed that analysis and he went through the various aggregates, refuting them to be the self, and was looking for the self in the aggregates what he found within the aggregates is mental consciousness and because mental consciousness goes from life to life he asserted that mental consciousness is the self. The mistake he made is that he forgot that the basis of imputation also doesn't exist from its own side. From the point of view of

the Prasangika there is only the mere concept of "I" or self. The "I" is just merely imputed and nothing exists from the side of the object at all.

Last time I went into various aspects of the refutations such as when one reflects on the difference between consciousness and the self. The self cannot be consciousness, as asserted by Bhavaviveka, because the self views the consciousness as something that it uses and experiences... one thinks in terms of 'me' and 'my consciousness'. As one thinks in terms of 'me' and 'my consciousness' that clearly shows that there is a distinction made between the self, the 'me', and the consciousness and the consciousness cannot be the self. The same applies to the body. There is a distinction between the self and the body, and the self is viewed as that which uses the body and experiences the body. That wouldn't be possible if the body actually is the self. I explained last time.

*Question inaudible.*

One's own awareness performs the analysis. There's a discrepancy between the way that the self appears and the way the self really exists. The self appears as if it exists in its own right on the aggregates. That's how the self appears. But when we look for that appearance of the self, for that self that seems to appear in its own right on the aggregates, it cannot be found. Here one can very clearly say that there is a discrepancy between the appearance and existence of the self and that's why the self is referred to as a deceptive or false phenomenon...a phenomenon where there is a discrepancy between appearance and existence. For example, if you look at Damien, we will have the impression that there is a "Damien" existing from his own side on the aggregates. But when we actually look for that "Damien", then "Damien" cannot be found anywhere [laughter]. That makes Damien a deceptive or false phenomenon [laughter]. There's a discrepancy between the appearance of Damien and the existence of Damien, so that establishes Damien as a deceptive person [laughter].

*Question inaudible.*

No, no, love and compassion are like an illusion and that gives them more and more power because the only thing that means is that they appear to the mind differently from the way that they exist. There is a discrepancy between appearance and existence. That's all it is saying. It doesn't say that they are non-existent. Love and compassion do exist.

The realisation of emptiness actually supports the generation of compassion. Compassion lacking focus is actually generated upon realising that all sentient beings exist as a mere imputation by the mind. That realisation greatly facilitates the generation of equal compassion for all sentient beings. On our level, where we still believe in true existence, in inherent existence, we have this appearance of attractive and truly existent, unattractive and undesirable, and we generate compassion for those people who appear to us as attractive and desirable and it is very difficult for us to generate compassion for people we find undesirable because we believe in the true existence of that appearance of unattractiveness, undesirability. If we realise that this division of attractive and unattractive, these various appearances, are just a mental fiction created by our own mind then we can let go of those very concrete concepts of attractive and unattractive and we can regard sentient beings as more equal and then generate love and compassion more equally for them by understanding that they are all equally merely labelled.

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

*Transcribed from tape by Gabrielle Thomson*

*Edited by John Burch*

*Edited Version*

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