
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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We will practise a bit of meditation as usual. Sit in a good, upright physical posture. If you sit in the appropriate physical posture, you will have already brought your body under control. Next, you have to bring your mind under control.

If one has control of one's body and mind, one's life will be very happy. If this group of three – the body, mind and the 'I' – work well together, one's life will be very happy. If there is disunity between the body, mind and self or 'I', usually the culprit is the mind. The mind is the one that usually causes disunity.

In the same way, if there is a group of three people and there is disunity, there is usually one person causing the disunity. Here, the one of the three that is causing disunity is the mind.

The other two in the group of three people can easily deal with the third person causing the disunity simply by expelling that person from the group. But it is difficult to expel the mind when it causes problems. From this perspective, the problems and disunity caused by the mind are worse [than disunity within a group]. No matter how many problems the mind causes us, we always follow it – we are always under its control. So, it is beneficial if the mind remains calm and peaceful and does not cause a disturbance within that group of three [body, mind and 'I'].

If you contemplate the benefits of meditation by keeping that simple, clear example in mind, understanding in this way how meditation practice can benefit your day to day life, your meditation based on that understanding would be very beneficial.

First, we sit in an appropriate physical posture. Then we look at the mind, particularly the disturbing thoughts that distract the mind towards the outside world, causing disturbance and disunity. We have to reverse the mind from these disturbing thoughts. Instead, we have to focus it completely inwards and not let it be distracted towards the outside world.

If you do this effectively, the mind will appear clear and will retain its inner focus. From within this state, you place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, taking the coming and going of the breath as the meditation object. We can meditate like this for a few minutes. *[Pause for meditation]*

As we mentioned last time [in discussing the text, *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*], regardless of the aim we wish to accomplish, while there will be always conducive conditions that will help us achieve our aim,

there will also always be adverse conditions preventing us from achieving it.

If we are able to accept and bear these obstructive conditions, we will be able to achieve our purpose. If, however, we are not able to put up with such conditions, we won't achieve our aim. This applies to both Dharma aims and worldly aims. Here, the practice of patience is the main method we have to use in putting up with obstacles and difficulties so that we can achieve our aim.

Of the three-fold division of patience, the patience we must meditate on in such circumstances is the patience that willingly bears suffering and problems. As to the question of how we meditate on patience, we have already discussed the first point of giving up our dislike of suffering and problems. Now we come to the next point: the need to willingly bear problems.

As we said last time if, when we experience suffering and problems, we become mentally agitated and worry about those problems and generate aversion to them, we will have added mental suffering to the problems we are already experiencing. If, instead, we practise patience, at least we will not have added further problems to the ones we already face.

Regarding the topic of being able to bear suffering, there are various points to reflect upon. The first point is the benefits of suffering. Reflecting on the benefits of problems and suffering brings about acceptance of those problems. I think we have already covered this topic in the past, but we can go through it again anyway.

The first benefit of suffering is that it induces one to work for liberation, because if one did not experience suffering, one would not generate disgust for suffering. And if one did not generate disgust for suffering, one would not generate the wish to attain liberation. Without the wish to attain liberation, one would not work for liberation.

Experiencing suffering causes disgust for suffering. This makes one turn towards liberation, generating the thought of wanting to be free from suffering, which makes one work for liberation. This is one benefit of suffering.

The second benefit of suffering is that it cuts down pride – it cuts down the mind that thinks: "I am the best".

People who are proud while they are healthy become humble when they become sick. People who experience suffering such as sickness become aware of how they need others have to rely on them, and this cuts down their pride.

The next benefit of suffering is that it creates apprehension of non-virtue. If one experiences suffering, one will reflect upon the cause of the suffering. Since suffering doesn't arise without cause, it has to arise from non-virtue. So, one will automatically generate within one's mind apprehension about creating non-virtue, which could then act as the cause for further suffering.

For example, if one developed a stomach-ache after eating a certain food, to avoid becoming sick again one would definitely not eat that same food. Similarly, the benefit of experiencing suffering is that it makes one apprehensive about creating non-virtue.

A further benefit of suffering is that we will generate a liking for virtue, because what we wish for is happiness, and the cause for happiness is virtue. So, automatically, we will generate a liking for the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

Therefore, the experience of suffering can bring about a great change within one's mind, because, on the one side, one generate fears about creating non-virtue and, on the other side, one generates a liking for creating virtue. One will therefore achieve a change within one's mind and will have received great benefit.

A further benefit of [suffering] is that we generate compassion. Our experience of suffering can facilitate the generation of compassion, because it teaches us about the experience of others' suffering. It teaches us how it feels for others to suffer; it shows us how other sentient beings suffer within cyclic existence so that we generate compassion.

By reflecting upon suffering in relation to oneself, one generates renunciation. By reflecting upon suffering in relation to others, we generate compassion. If one reflects upon suffering in relation to oneself, one will generate the wish wanting to be free from that suffering, and that will automatically cause us to generate the wish to attain liberation. If one reflects on suffering in relation to others, it will generate the compassionate thought wishing them to be free from that suffering experience, and so we will generate compassion.

Our meditation on compassion will only be fruitful if we have experienced suffering. Once we have fully understood our own suffering and transferred that understanding to others, our generation of compassion will be successful. If one has not understood suffering in relation to oneself, one's meditation on the suffering of others won't be fruitful.

These are the five benefits of suffering. Reflecting upon these five benefits will automatically it show us why we should accept and bear suffering. Actually, the whole path is contained within these five points, because they teach us that in order to experience the happiness we wish for, we need to create virtue. To become free from the suffering one does not want, one needs to abandon its cause – non-virtue.

These five points [i.e. the benefits of suffering] also teach us about compassion and not harming others. By understanding the suffering of others, we generate compassion within our mind, which automatically counteracts the harmful intent of wishing others to have problems or wishing to give suffering to others.

Suffering also teaches us about the situation of others – how everyone is afflicted by suffering. No matter how good someone else's situation looks, no matter how smart they are, inside they will experience suffering. No

matter how good their home is, how many friends they have, how beautiful or handsome they look, how good the food they eat is – no matter how good their outer conditions, they still experience inner suffering. By becoming aware that everyone shares this situation, we will also not feel so lonely because of our own suffering.

Certain people will immediately generate jealousy towards those they perceive as having greater success and wealth than they have, and will feel depressed when they see the success of others. But this can be counteracted by reflecting upon how the situation of those they envy is not much better than their own in the final analysis.

Even though [the lifestyle of others] appears to be better, that is just the nature of cyclic existence. Although things appear to be bright for them, if one analyses more deeply, there is a lot of suffering to be found.

One can apply this understanding of the situation [of cyclic existence] in various ways to overcome the different types of obstacles one experiences. Understanding that one's own situation is shared by others will make one feel less depressed and increase one's compassion for others.

There are many benefits from putting up with difficulties by accepting them. Ordinarily, we know from our own experience that we will put up with many difficulties in order to achieve some comparatively insignificant worldly aim. But we normally disregard the longer-term view. We focus more on immediate, short-term, small gains. Ignoring the bigger picture, we are happy to put up with many difficulties to achieve short-term immediate aims.

However, we have the opportunity to achieving a great purpose – we have the opportunity to create the causes for liberation and enlightenment. So, if one is now able to put up with difficulties to achieve the aim of enlightenment, the benefits one will reap from that will be much greater than the benefits one will get from putting up with difficulties to achieve some short-term aim.

Until now, we have been willing to put up with great difficulty in order to achieve insignificant aims that actually benefit neither ourselves nor others. But it is better for us instead to generate the motivation of exerting lots of effort to achieve a greater aim. By reflecting upon the benefits [of achieving liberation and enlightenment], one will achieve the ultimate purpose of benefiting both oneself and others, and one will generate a willingness to put up with difficulties.

Also, by experiencing very small suffering right now, one will eliminate the experience of greater suffering in future. For example, if one knew that one was about to die, but that it could be averted if one's finger were amputated, then one would happily give up one's finger to be able to continue living. One would be happy to put up with the comparatively small suffering of having losing a finger to avoid the greater suffering of death.

Similarly, one can eliminate the future experience of great suffering by experiencing comparatively smaller suffering right now. Experiencing comparatively minor suffering now can act as purification of non-virtuous karma that would otherwise lead to the experience of greater suffering in the future.

Reflecting on those points will reduce the fear of suffering within one's mind, and one will generate more courage and the strength of mind, so that one will be willing to put up with difficulties and sufferings.

However, you might still be wondering about your own ability to meditate on the patience that willingly bears suffering. You should remember there is nothing in which the mind cannot be trained. It is the nature of the mind that it can be trained, that it can be changed. By starting small, by practising the patience that bears lesser sufferings and difficulties, one can gradually train one's mind, familiarising it more and more with that patience. Gradually, as one's patience increases, one's ability to bear greater and greater problems also increases.

It is important to develop great strength of mind, the willingness to put up with difficulties and problems. One's mind shouldn't be like cotton. If one has a weak mind, like cotton, it will be blown here and there as soon as a breeze comes up. But if one has great strength of mind, one's practice will be successful.

In one sutra, the Buddha taught a woman that in order to overcome all types of suffering and problems, she should generate strength of mind, thinking: "I am willing to put up with any type of problem in order to overcome the immeasurable great problem of the delusions". So one should generate the great strength of mind willing to put up with any type of problem in order to overcome the problem of the delusions.

We need to have this strong mental determination. If the mind is weak and 'thin', one's practice won't progress very well. One needs strong, solid determination. If, from the start, one has generated strong determination, one will even be able to transform very great problems into the path, and turn them into conditions for one's spiritual growth. The example given is that of a brave soldier when he is shot or wounded. Instead of discouraging him, the sight of his own blood will cause him to become fiercer and will give him greater strength.

We can observe this when football players are wounded during a game. They will proudly smear the blood over their head, maybe put on a bandage, and will be inspired to play even more roughly!

If we don't have that strong determination from the beginning, and rather have a small mind lacking self-confidence, even very small problems will pose great obstacles to our progress along the path. We will throw in the towel easily, and readily give up our practice because of very small difficulties and problems.

If one has a weak mind and doesn't generate courage and determination, one will be easily discouraged by small problems. [To take the earlier example of the soldier], there is another type of person or soldier who,

when one of their companions is shot, will lose their courage and strength of mind when they see the blood of the other person. They will just curl up somewhere, waiting for everything to be over. *(Laughter)* That's what happens if one doesn't have strong determination and courage.

I have heard that someone got so frightened that they actually put their head into a hole in the ground, with the rest of the body still sticking out. Just like a small child who thinks they are invisible because they have closed their eyes, this person thought that by sticking their head into the ground, they could not be seen, even though the rest of the body was sticking out! *(Laughter)*

This completes the patience that willingly bears sufferings. Next time, we can talk about patience that definitely relies on the Dharma, and then we can move onto the fourth perfection of enthusiasm.

As explained in the beginning, bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards, and from within that clear state, place the mind single-pointedly on the sound of the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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