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## *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

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We can practise a bit of meditation as usual. Sit upright in a comfortable, relaxed and correct meditation posture. It is important to sit upright, because if you do, the energy channels within your body will be upright and straight, allowing the energy within those channels to flow freely. This in turn makes the mind more flexible, and makes concentration easier.

It is important to transform our mind; we do this using various methods. The meaning of meditation is to acquaint one's mind with virtuous mental states. When one meditates and focuses the mind inwards, it will become more supple, serviceable and peaceful. If you don't meditate, your mind will fall under the control of the distracting thoughts. If your mind falls under the control of the distracting thoughts, there will be no real benefit, because throughout your life, you will follow that distracted mind. This is something we can all observe directly – that there's no benefit or happiness to be gained, in this life or in future lives, [from following the distracted mind].

Therefore, one should be aware of the benefits of meditation and of subduing the mind, and the disadvantages of leaving the mind uncontrolled. When we free the mind from the distracting thoughts, it will be able to abide more peacefully and calmly.

Here, we must also ask ourselves: "What is this mind that we are trying to transform and work with? Who is this 'I' or self? Who is the person who is actually having these various types of experiences?". There is the person who wants happiness and doesn't want suffering. There is also the person who understands that, by experiencing certain states of the mind – by leaving the mind under the control of the disturbing thoughts – the result will be suffering; and that if one meditates and subdues one's mind, the result will be happiness. Then there is the question of who this person is.

If we can focus the mind internally, even just a bit, we will experience fewer aimless, distracting thoughts. The benefits will be immediately observable. If the mind is controlled by aimless, distracting thoughts, one will not feel inclined to take on a project, or embark on some kind of a plan. Even if one did manage to embark upon some kind of action, one's work would not turn out well or one would not complete it because of the distracting thoughts. Then, even if one did manage to complete that work, because the mind is under the control of the disturbing thoughts, the job will not have been done very well. So, these disturbing thoughts bring many disadvantages, even within this life.

To overcome these problems, one practises meditation, freeing the mind from disturbing thoughts, making it sharper, more stable and clearer. That is a simplified explanation of what meditation is about.

So now bring the mind home, and free it from the control of the disturbing thoughts that try to distract it towards the outside. Instead, try to focus the mind towards the inside.

By focusing the mind internally, it becomes more pliable. Keep it focused internally in a gentle, peaceful manner, so that it becomes very relaxed and peaceful. From within that peaceful state, place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, taking the coming and going of the breath as one's meditation object. We will meditate like that for a few minutes. [*Pause for meditation.*]

It's important to meditate for a short time like this again and again, because it is greatly beneficial. As well as being concerned about our physical health and wellbeing, we should also be concerned about our mental health and wellbeing, so we should meditate regularly to make the mind calmer and more peaceful.

It is especially important for young people to start meditating early, and prepare for their old age. When one is young, the mind and body are still fresh; the mind is clear and the body is strong. At this time of life, one has an opportunity to take control of one's mind and protect it. If one doesn't make use of that opportunity and instead lets one's mind fall under the control of pointless, disturbing thoughts causing it to become scattered, one will receive great loss. Later on, the clarity of mind and strength of body one had when one was young will degenerate. As one grows older still, the mind becomes weak and unclear and the body becomes weak and sick. Most people generally experience great suffering at this stage, because of not having made any preparation when they were young.

So, when one is still young, it is important to increase the 'capital' one already possesses. Instead of letting one's mind fall under the control of aimless, disturbing thoughts and letting it become scattered, one should train one's mind to make it clearer, more stable and more peaceful. Rather than aimlessly wasting the 'capital' one possesses, one should hold onto it and increase it further. In such a way, one will not receive loss.

We can achieve our aims on the basis of a strong and healthy body and a clear mind. If we have both these conditions, it is easy for us to achieve our aims. However, once those conditions degenerate, it will become very difficult to achieve any type of aim, if the mind is unclear or the body is incapable.

Now I am going to read a verse from the root text [Verse 28 from the text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997] that deals with the perfection of enthusiasm.

*Seeing even Hearers and Solitary Realisers, who accomplish  
Only their own good, strive as if to put out a fire  
on their head,  
For the sake of all beings make enthusiastic effort,  
The source of all good qualities –  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

Here, the first two lines refer to seeing practitioners of the Hinayana vehicle – the path of personal liberation [from cyclic existence] – who single-mindedly practise that path after having realised the faults of cyclic existence and the qualities of liberation. Even though the goal of these Hinayana practitioners is only personal liberation, they are so enthusiastic about their Dharma practice that they don't waste a single moment of their time. In the same way that we would not waste a moment in throwing off a burning object that fell on our head, these practitioners are 100%

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committed to their Dharma practice, even though it is only for their own personal purpose.

Taking the next two lines – by reflecting on one's own sufferings and problems, one will generate renunciation, the wish to be free of those problems and suffering. By transferring that understanding of one's own suffering to others and by reflecting on the suffering of others, one will generate compassion, the wishing for other sentient beings to be free of that suffering.

Here, Bodhisattvas – after having first meditated on their own suffering and having generated the wish to be free of that suffering – transfer that understanding to others, realising that others experience also suffering and lack happiness. In such a way, they generate love and compassion for others. Meditating in this way, on love and compassion, is very important for the Bodhisattva.

Having the strong wish to liberate sentient beings from their suffering is an intense feeling for Bodhisattvas, similar to that of a mother having the intense wish for her only child to be free of sickness. If an only child were very sick, his or her mother would feel an intense concern, day and night, about the child, and would have a strong wish for the child to be free of that suffering. The mother's concern is intense and present 24 hours a day.

Similarly, Bodhisattvas having realised that sentient beings have been their mothers in previous lives, and then having understood that they experience a great variety of suffering would generate an intense concern for the wellbeing of others, the intense compassion of wanting them to be free of suffering.

Then, however, one would realise that, at the moment, one does not have the capacity to liberate other sentient beings from their suffering. So, the Bodhisattva looks around to see who possesses such a capacity. He or she then realises that only an enlightened being, a Buddha, has the perfect capacity to liberate sentient beings from their suffering. This causes the Bodhisattva to generate admiration and to think: "If I could attain such a state, if I became enlightened, I could really help sentient beings. I could liberate them from their suffering". In this way, the Bodhisattva generates bodhicitta and enthusiasm for their practice.

After having generated bodhicitta and the wish to become enlightened for the benefit of sentient beings, the Bodhisattva needs to engage in the vast and extensive Bodhisattva trainings. They do this on the basis of enthusiasm, being enthusiastic about their practice. Thus, enthusiasm becomes the source of all good qualities, as it says here in the fourth line of the verse: enthusiasm propels the Bodhisattva along the Bodhisattva path .

What is enthusiasm? Enthusiasm is a liking for virtue. In general, we have different types of desire. We can be attracted to many different things, but not everything that we become excited about is virtuous. Here, however, enthusiasm particularly means a liking for virtue. If we like any virtuous activity that we engage in, we are able to complete it. We will encounter fewer obstacles and we will be happy to do that activity.

Enthusiasm is the cause for qualities that we haven't yet generated to be generated. It is also the cause for the qualities that have been generated not to decrease, but instead to increase. Enthusiasm is not only the cause to

increase those qualities, but also the cause for their perfection, for their completion.

For our practice of enthusiasm to be successful, we need to be aware of the benefits of enthusiasm and the disadvantages of not having enthusiasm. We must first reflect on these.

Maitreya taught the **benefits of enthusiasm** in his *Ornament of Mahayana Sutras*. He said that of the various virtues, enthusiasm is the most precious, the best, because all other qualities follow on from enthusiasm. Someone who has enthusiasm becomes a source and wellspring of happiness; they will attain both worldly as well as supermundane attainments. The happiness of cyclic existence is attained in dependence on enthusiasm. Likewise, in dependence upon enthusiasm, the person will become free from the view of the transitory collections and will attain the state of the pure sphere of a Buddha.

Next, the **disadvantages of laziness**. Laziness is that which obstructs enthusiasm. To overcome laziness, we need to apply the antidote of enthusiasm. Someone who has laziness will not be able to practise enthusiasm very well. Becoming aware of the disadvantages of laziness and the benefits of practising enthusiasm, one will naturally be attracted to the practice of enthusiasm – it will introduce one to the practice of enthusiasm.

In the sutras, it says that for those who are very lazy, enlightenment is very distant. For those who are lazy, there is no practice of generosity, morality, patience, enthusiasm, mental stabilisation or wisdom. Those who are lazy can't practise the Six Perfections very well. Those who are lazy don't possess any qualities and therefore cannot benefit others. In the *Sutra of Meditative Equipoise*, the Buddha said that laziness is the foundation of all other delusions. Those who are lazy don't possess even one instant of Dharma practice and don't possess any qualities.

If one doesn't practise enthusiasm and remains very lazy, it will harm both one's temporary as well as one's ultimate aims. The attainment of one's temporary and ultimate aims are combined with difficulties, and if one doesn't have enthusiasm and is lazy, one won't achieve either of those two aims.

If a person is lazy, even though they might have all the ingredients to cook a nice meal, they will not bother, and instead will just chew on a bit of dry bread! [*Laughter*] After two days, the ingredients they have bought will go bad. Even their temporary purpose will not have been achieved. Normally, one would think: "Now I have to go shopping again to buy good ingredients to make myself a nice meal", but the lazy person does not. Even if they did go shopping, when they came back, again laziness would set in, and it would be the same as before.

The function of laziness is that it causes the person to abandon his or her activities. This is the function of laziness as mentioned by Asanga in his *Compendium of Knowledge*. Laziness causes the person to abandon their activities. It makes them lose their purpose and their ability to act.

There are situations where a lazy parent, with perhaps three or four children, will say to one of the children, "Don't be as lazy as him or her", and point to another child. But this will not be very effective, because it is the parent who is lazy. It is important that one does not fall under the control of laziness and that one sets a good example. It may happen

that a child will say: "I don't feel inspired to cook a good meal, because even my parents don't cook". [*Laughter*] If the parents set a good example, for instance, by placing a high value on good cooking, healthy food, etc., then these values will automatically be passed on to the children through the force of example.

Enthusiasm has a threefold division of armour-like enthusiasm; the enthusiasm of accumulating virtue; and the enthusiasm of benefiting others. We can go into these next time. Do you have questions?

*First question from student.*

*Answer:* Prostrations are done on the basis of visualising the statue as the actual Buddha. By visualising the statue as being the actual Buddha with the [auspicious] marks and signs, and by bowing to the actual Buddha, one will receive the blessings of the Buddha within one's mind.

There are various meditations one does while doing the prostration. For example, when we place our folded hands on our crown, we reflect on the qualities of the Buddha's body. When we place our folded hands at our throat, we remember the qualities of the Buddha's speech. When we place our hands at our heart, we reflect on the qualities of the Buddha's mind.

Doing a prostration in this way will have a pacifying effect on one's mind. It brings peace to one's mind and becomes a very special experience. Then you can visualise that from the heart of the Buddha, light rays emanate and enter you, purifying your obscurations, delusions, non-virtuous karma, sickness and so forth, in the form of dirt being expelled from your body, and so visualise your body as having been purified and in the nature of clear light. Meditating in this way can have a very healing effect.

*Second question: How do you combat laziness and generate enthusiasm?*

*Answer:* By reflecting in the way we just explained – on the benefits of enthusiasm and the faults of laziness – the mind will naturally become attracted to the practice of enthusiasm and will reject laziness.

First, one must know the faults of laziness and the benefits of enthusiasm; by reflecting upon them, the mind will naturally turn towards enthusiasm and will reject laziness. If we have two types of food on the table in front of us and we know that one of them tastes nice and the other one tastes awful, automatically we will choose the one that tastes nice. First, however, we have to know which food tastes nice and which one doesn't taste so nice; we first have to identify which one is good and which one isn't good.

Similarly, we identify the faults of laziness and the benefits of enthusiasm. Because both laziness and enthusiasm exist in one's mind, by reflecting upon how the laziness that exists in one's mind brings only problems and faults, we will naturally reject laziness. By reflecting on the benefits of enthusiasm, which is also present in the mind, mentally we will turn towards the enthusiasm.

*Third question from student.*

*Answer:* It is possible to make other people more enthusiastic through one's own example. Working enthusiastically and acting as a good example will cause others to act likewise, because our actions influence others.

If one acts badly or destructively, there will be people around you who will take that as an example. Likewise, if

one acts positively and enthusiastically, this will also act as an example for others. For example, if one sees another person who is always meditating a lot, then by having the example of that other person and seeing their enthusiasm will bring some benefit to one's mind. One will think: "Maybe instead of lying down to sleep, I'll also sit down and meditate a bit".

Previously, when I was studying in the Tibetan University in Varanasi, there were two brothers. The older one was always on the back of the younger one, telling him that he should study more, that he was too lazy, that he wasn't doing enough, etc. He was always collecting money from the younger one and was very strict. The younger brother had to give all the money he received to the older one. Once, when the older brother thought there was some money missing, he hit his brother.

Even though the younger brother was constantly harassed by his older brother, he studied quite well. But still the older brother gave him a hard time. When the exam time came, the younger brother got much higher marks than the older brother. He told me then: "I went up to my older brother and said 'So now after the exam, we know who has been studying more and who has been studying less!'"

As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focus it internally and place it single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni 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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