
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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12 February 2003

We will start by doing a little bit of meditation as usual. Please sit in the seven-point Vairochana posture in a relaxed manner.

After having assumed the correct physical posture, if we check up on the mind, we will find it to be in a disturbed, non-virtuous state. So, we need to change the mind to a virtuous state.

At the outset, before our meditation, we need to generate a virtuous motivation. Whether the meditation turns out to be virtuous or not depends on our motivation. It is important that everyone has a vast, all-encompassing motivation.

So, after having placed the body in the seven-point posture, one needs to also place the mind in a good state.

As I mentioned last time, if we subdue the mind, we receive great benefit. Engaging in methods to subdue the mind is important and of great benefit to us.

If we don't subdue the mind, it will fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts and the conceptualising mind. Then, the conceptualising mind will agitate one's consciousness, and one will not be able to meditate.

It is important to generate a strong aspiration to overcome the disturbing thoughts. The types of thoughts that agitate the mind make it unhappy. We then carry this unhappiness around with us, regardless of what we are doing – whether we are sitting down, walking around, or lying down. So – understanding that as long as we have not overcome that type of thinking we will always be unhappy – we need to generate a strong aspiration to be free from that mind and to subdue it. It is the disturbing thoughts that prevent the mind from being peaceful and happy – sort of soft and pleasant.

If such disturbing mental habits have no benefit for our worldly life, they certainly have no benefit for our Dharma practice. Therefore, to overcome these disturbing and mistaken states of mind, we need to acquaint the mind with their opposite – the more beneficial states of mind. The meaning of meditation is familiarisation – one familiarises oneself with those positive and virtuous mental states that counteract the disturbed mental states.

The more one can familiarise oneself with positive and virtuous mental states, the more the disturbed mental states will subside. One should refrain from becoming more familiar with the negative states and rather become more familiar with the positive states of mind. Then, automatically, the disturbing negative states of the mind will subside, and the person will experience greater

inner clarity and greater inner happiness. The mind will become clearer and more stable.

So, with this purpose in mind, we will meditate for a few minutes. First, we focus the mind completely within, not following the disturbing thoughts that distract the mind towards external objects, but rather reversing the mind towards the inside, focusing it completely and totally on that inner state. After some time, the mind will more easily focus internally. A courageous person, recognising that external objects don't hold any particular benefit, will free the mind from those external objects and focus it towards the inside.

After we have totally focused the mind internally, we leave it in that non-conceptual state for some time, not letting it be distracted by any type of thought, positive or negative. Then, from within that state, we place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, and meditate single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation.*)

If the meditation is too long, there is a danger you will lose your focus! It is important that one meditates very well, with the mind 100% focused towards the inside so that it merges with the meditation object [in this case, the breath]. It is more important to keep this total focus for a short time than to do a longer meditation where one is constantly losing one's focus, becoming distracted, and having to again refocus. It is better to do short sessions with a very good focus and increase the length of the sessions over time, rather than start out doing long sessions where there is no good focus and from which you cannot progress.

It is important to acquaint the mind from the beginning with the proper way of meditating. If we get used to doing a meditation where the mind constantly wanders away from the object of meditation and then try to do longer meditation sessions – such as one hour – we will find it tiring and unfruitful, and we will lose the wish to meditate.

Returning to the text, *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997), we have finished the first four of the six perfections. We have completed the perfection of generosity, morality, patience and enthusiasm. Now we come to the perfection of mental stabilisation. Verse 29 of the text reads:

*Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed
By special insight with calm abiding,
Cultivate concentration which surpasses
The four formless absorptions –
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

There are two primary obstacles to attaining calm mental stabilisation – laziness and the disturbed mind. Initially, one needs to overcome laziness.

Words and phrases such as meditative equipoise, calm abiding, concentration and mental stabilisation all refer to the same thing. What is calm abiding? Calm abiding is

concentration that is held by the special bliss of mental pliancy, with which the meditator can focus on the object of meditation for however long they wish, and which has been attained through the method and the means of attaining calm abiding.

There is no hard and fast rule regarding the object of calm abiding: one can choose an object according to one's wish and how comfortable one feels with it. Certain people will feel more comfortable with one meditational object than others.

There are four categories of meditational objects mentioned. [The first three are]: Object of experts, referring to the Four Noble Truths; pervasive objects, which pervade all objects of knowledge; and pacifying objects, or objects that pacify afflictions – this refers to viewing the lower realms as unsatisfactory and the higher realms as possessing peace and happiness. For example, viewing the desire realm as coarse and unsatisfactory subdues the afflictions contained in the desire realm; this is combined with focusing on the higher realms as possessing bliss and being desirable.

The fourth category [of meditational object] includes those valid objects selected according to the particular affliction one wants to counteract. If a person is particularly afflicted by anger, they choose compassion [as a meditational object]. If a person is particularly afflicted by pride, they chose the vast categories of objects of knowledge and study. If a person is afflicted by ignorance, they choose, for example, dependent-arising. If a person is afflicted by attachment, they choose the impurity of the body, and so forth. So, one chooses a meditational object according to the particular affliction one wants to counteract.

It is important to know the purpose and significance of the individual objects, and what affect they have on the mind. One should choose the object of meditation that counteracts the strongest affliction disturbing the mind, because if the mind is very disturbed by a particular affliction, one cannot meditate properly. For example, if a person's mind is strongly disturbed by anger, that person wouldn't benefit much if they chose the impurities of the body as their meditational object. In fact, there is a danger that this person might get angrier! Or, if a person with too much attachment chose love as their meditational object, there is the danger that this person's attachment would increase.

If one's mind is overcome by attachment, one has to meditate on the impurities of the body. The mind goes slowly through the body, starting at one's feet and working one's way up through the body up to one's head, reflecting on all the impure parts contained within one's body. Then one does the same in reverse – meditating on all the impure parts one can find within one's body [from head to toe]. Doing this meditation counteracts attachment.

A person overcome by anger should meditate on love. If a person's primary affliction is pride, they should meditate on the different objects and categories of knowledge. If one reads something one cannot

understand, this will undercut one's pride. If one is feeling proud and reflects on all the things one doesn't know or understand, this will cut down one's pride.

When one meditates on calm abiding, there is no investigation or analysis of the object involved. Rather, the aim is to let the mind remain on the object without analysing it or investigating it. So, when one selects an object of [calm abiding] meditation, it shouldn't be an object that increases one's attachment or disturbing thoughts.

If one chose an object of meditation to which one was particularly attached, this would be counterproductive if it increased one's attachment during the meditation. People have different ideas about selecting objects of meditation. You might think, "I'll meditate on that person because I like that person very much", but that would be counterproductive, because it would increase your attachment, so one has to also be skilful.

When one visualises the object, it is visualised at the level of your eyebrows and about four to six feet in the space in front of you. It is usually recommended that one visualise the object at a distance that would make up one full-length prostration.

If you visualise the meditational object too high, this causes the fault of mental excitement. If you visualise it too low, this causes the fault of mental sinking. So, it has to be visualised at the right height – at the level of one's eyebrows. Also, the object should appear radiant in nature, radiating clear light but, at the same time, it should possess a certain heaviness.

These two aspects of meditational object – the radiance and heaviness – counteract the two main faults that prevent the attainment of calm abiding, which are mental excitement and mental sinking. The radiance of the object counteracts mental sinking, which is a heaviness and lack of clarity within the mind. And the heaviness of the object counteracts mental excitement. Mental excitement belongs to the family of attachment. When the mind is distracted through thoughts of attachment, this is caused mental excitement, which can be prevented by apprehending the heaviness of the meditational object.

In the same way that the object should have those two qualities of radiance and heaviness, the object possessor or subject – the meditating mind – should also possess two characteristics.

True calm abiding or concentration is characterised by two features. On the one hand, it requires intense clarity; and on the other hand, it has to be single-pointed. Proper calm abiding has these two characteristics of single-pointedness and of intense clarity.

The attainment of these two characteristics is obstructed by mental sinking and mental excitement. The attainment of intense clarity is prevented by mental sinking. Even though the mind may be totally focused internally, what prevents it having intense clarity is mental sinking – a laxity and lack of clarity within the mind. What prevents single-pointed abiding of the mind

is mental excitement. One may have focused the mind totally within, but because of mental excitement, the mind again wanders off to external objects.

So, the two main obstacles preventing the attainment of calm abiding are mental sinking and mental excitement, and the two main antidotes for overcoming mental sinking and mental excitement are mindfulness and introspection.

The main method for beginners to attain calm abiding is mindfulness. One characteristic of proper mindfulness is that one needs to be familiar with the object. One cannot be mindful of something that one hasn't seen or that one is unfamiliar with. A fleeting contact with the object is not enough – one needs to be thoroughly familiar with the object and then one can be properly mindful of it.

The function of mindfulness is to not forget about the object. One constantly remains mindful of the object or remembers it; this counteracts the wandering mind so that it doesn't wander off from the object and become distracted. When we place the mind on the object of meditation with mindfulness, we don't actually place the mind on an external, physical object. Rather, due to our familiarity with the appearance of the physical object, a reflection of the object will arise within the mind – one meditates on that reflection with mindfulness. One continues to be mindful of that reflection of the object within the mind.

In this way, we slowly train the mind to be mindful of that meditational object for longer and longer periods. We also need the aspiration of not wanting to be distracted from the object – by being aware of the faults of mental distraction and the benefits of calm abiding, we have the strong aspiration of not wanting to be distracted from the object, even for a moment.

So, for the beginner, meditating on the reflection of the external object that arises within the mind with mindfulness and out of strong aspiration is the special method for attaining calm abiding.

One tries to attain a focus of the object that is free of the two faults of mental sinking and mental excitement. When that focus becomes more stable, one attains what is called mental pliancy or suppleness. This means that the mind becomes more supple and workable, which induces physical pliancy or physical suppleness. This physical suppleness then spreads throughout the whole body, causing the bliss of physical pliancy. The bliss of physical pliancy, in turn, induces the bliss of mental pliancy. After having attained the bliss of mental pliancy, one has attained proper calm abiding.

So, mental pliancy is attained first and then physical pliancy. Then, out of the two types of bliss, the bliss of physical pliancy is attained first, followed by the bliss of mental pliancy.

Maybe we can leave it for here for tonight. We have time for some questions.

Question from student.

Answer: After the attainment of calm abiding, one moves on to the generation of the ultimate antidote against the afflictions, which is superior insight. With superior insight, one can root out all the afflictions. During the meditation on calm abiding, the afflictions are temporarily subdued because of one's focus, but with superior insight, one can completely root them out.

When one attains calm abiding, one has for the better part subdued all the manifest afflictions. Therefore, there is a danger that someone who has attained calm abiding may think they have actually attained liberation, by mistaking the temporary absence of manifest delusions and afflictions for liberation. What happens is that, during the meditation on calm abiding, the manifest delusions subside temporarily, but they are not yet rooted out completely. That has to be done through superior insight.

One can temporarily subdue the afflictions with other antidotes, but to purify them from the root, one needs to see emptiness directly. One can only see emptiness directly with a combination of calm abiding and superior insight.

If we want to look at a picture using the light of a candle flame, the flame but must be undisturbed and still. If the candle flame is disturbed by a draught, one can't see the picture, the thangka, or whatever, very clearly. Here, the clarity of the candle flame is a metaphor for superior insight, and the stillness of a candle flame undisturbed by a draught is a metaphor for calm abiding. Both of those are needed in order to see emptiness clearly. This will be made clearer when we go through the root text next time.

As said before, focus the mind towards the inside, not letting it be distracted towards external objects by the disturbing thoughts. Then place the mind single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha, concentrating single-pointedly on the sound of the mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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