
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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Firstly we can practise a little meditation as usual. Sit in a comfortable and relaxed position. Put your feet into the vajra position and then hold the body upright. When one is sitting in a good and relaxed physical position one has to then place the mind in a relaxed state, focusing it inwards, not letting it be distracted by external objects. The type of mind that can remain focused internally, undistracted by internal objects, is the mind that one calls 'calm abiding'. It's also beneficial from the very beginning if one sets up a very strong motivation; motivating oneself very strongly that one is not going to let one's mind fall under the control of a disturbing mind that distracts the mind towards external objects. When the mind remains focused internally and is not distracted by external objects one develops the different types of wellbeing and bliss that come with concentration such as physical pliancy and mental pliancy. Firstly one generates physical wellbeing and then comes mental wellbeing. Being aware of the benefits that one can attain, the inner types of happiness that arise through the practise of calm abiding, is very important in order to inspire one to do the practice. We can meditate on the breath, the coming and going of the breath, for a few minutes in such a manner. *Pause for meditation.*

It's important that one doesn't let one's mind be disturbed. If one lets one mind be distracted then the psychic energies are disturbed and one's focus will be lost. Last time we reached the fifth perfection of the Bodhisattva practices, the perfection of mental stabilisation. We talked a little bit about calm abiding. The verse reads (Verse 29 from the text, *The Thirty Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997);

*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*

With special insight that is based on calm abiding one can destroy disturbing emotions. First of all one has the basis of calm abiding, the mind that can remain focused single-pointedly and clearly on the object of meditation undistracted by external objects and then, by taking that mind of calm abiding as the basis, one generates special insight and, with this special insight that is based on calm abiding, one can destroy disturbing emotions. This verse actually shows that one meditates both on calm abiding and special insight. With this combination one can uproot the disturbing emotions starting with all the

disturbing thoughts... the afflictions. We start with the affliction of ignorance up to all the other afflictions.

First of all the text deals with the mind of calm abiding; where the mind remains focused intensely and clearly on the meditational objects. At this time there's no investigation going on. One doesn't analyse the object. The only objective is to keep the mind on the object of meditation, to keep the object of meditation within one's mind. At this time changes in size or changes in colour and so forth are regarded as a distraction. For example if one ordinarily visualises something as small and it comes to mind as big it is regarded as a distraction. Likewise if one visualises the object in one colour, such as red, and it comes to mind in white even though it is the same object that's also regarded as a distraction. One can't change the object in any way and the mind is placed on the object of meditation undisturbed.

When one has this mind of calm abiding the mind can remain on the object of meditation for a long time in a relaxed manner but still retain a certain clarity and intensity and that induces the mental and physical pliancy and the associated blisses. When one has attained such a mind one then has to generate superior insight so one has to practise analytical meditation. Taking as the object of one's analysis the apprehended object of self-grasping; self-grasping being the root delusion, the root affliction. One investigates whether the apprehended object of self-grasping exists in the way it appears to exist. Here one has to find the discrepancy between the way the self really exists and the way it appears to self-grasping and then one has to realise that the apprehended object of self-grasping is actually non-existent. That analysis is done on the basis of the mind of calm abiding.

Wisdom is not only important in order to uproot the root delusion of self-grasping but is needed during any type of meditation. Meditation has to be accompanied by wisdom. When one starts out on the path of meditation, when one contemplates the benefits of meditation, the disadvantages of not having a focused mind, the disadvantages of laziness, the benefits of attaining calm abiding and when one familiarises oneself with the object and so forth, the mental factor of wisdom is needed. When one does analytical meditation one focuses on the object and the wisdom that has been generated with mindfulness. Wisdom is needed throughout the whole path not just when one does the finer practice of uprooting self-grasping.

By generating special insight one can free oneself from the extreme of existence. Of the two extremes, the extreme of existence is overcome by the union of calm abiding and special insight that is based on the mind of calm abiding. Special insight understands the absence of the apprehended object of self-grasping on the basis of calm abiding. With that type of mind one can cultivate the concentration that is the concentration that surpasses the four formless absorptions and free oneself from the

extreme of cyclic existence. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

There are the two types of extreme; the extreme of existence and the extreme of peace. The extreme of existence is overcome with the union of calm abiding and special insight and by eliminating the ignorance grasping at an inherently existent 'I' and 'mine'. The grasping at 'I' and the grasping at mine is generated because of the belief in an inherently existent 'I'; in an inherently existent self.. First one grasps at 'I' and from that arises the grasping at 'my friends', 'my happiness', 'my possessions' and so forth, and from that various problems ... all the problems arise and then, from that samsara arises. The chain reaction can be broken by taking away the root of self-grasping and this is done with the wisdom realising emptiness, which the union of calm abiding and special insight realises. With the union of calm abiding and special insight one overcomes the extreme of existence.

One still has to overcome the extreme of peace, thinking "Oh, as long as I get free from cyclic existence, as long as I am free from the extreme of existence, then that is good enough, that is my main aim". What keeps one within the extreme of peace, being focused only on one's own happiness, is self-cherishing. Self-cherishing has to be overcome by compassion. Self-cherishing is the type of mind that is the root of all one's problems. It causes unhappiness to oneself, it also causes one to make others unhappy.... so it causes unhappiness all around. It causes one to experience mental problems and difficulties within one's life and also causes others to dislike one because of one's own self-cherishing. This type of mind is completely useless and has to be overcome by the attitude of cherishing others. Instead of discriminating against others and competing against others one cherishes others as much as one cherishes oneself. This type of mind will overcome self-cherishing and will bring happiness and benefit within to one's own life. It will improve the quality of one's life, it will cause one to be more happy, it will cause one to have more friends, one will be more liked by others, and in general one's life will become more easy and comfortable.

One has to overcome the extremes of existence as well as of peace. If one is not able at the present time to generate those minds at least one can do it through prayer. If one is not presently able to have the mind that cherishes others more than oneself one can dedicate one's meditation practice to others and pray by this practice "May other sentient beings attain happiness and benefit from the virtuous karma that I created" and so forth. This is a way of putting one's knowledge of the dharma to some practical application. One's practice of dedication can be combined with the meditation on emptiness through reflecting on how the merits that one has created lack inherent existence, how oneself is lacking in inherent existence, how the aim of what one is dedicating also lacks inherent existence. Meditating that all of these lack inherent existence one remembers that even though phenomena appear as though they exist from their own side, as though they exist inherently, that

actually they don't even though they appear as such and that they completely lack any inherent existence or any existence from their own side. One meditates that if doesn't understand that then one can't free oneself from cyclic existence. Further in making a very strong dedication one may be able to realise emptiness and then apply emptiness to the virtue that one has created, meditating on emptiness, the lack of inherent existence of the virtue that one is dedicating. At the outset one prays that one's practice may be beneficial to others and then when dedicating one can meditate on the lack of the inherent existence of the merits that one created. In this way one can apply one's knowledge of the dharma to one's practice. If one has the mind there are many ways in which one can apply one's knowledge of the dharma to one's practice and put it into practice.

By reflecting on the suffering of sentient beings and then reflecting on their problems one will generate the mind that is not able to bear their sufferings, to bear their problems. When one can't abide that sentient beings are experiencing problems and that they are suffering one generates compassion. In the text when it describes how Bodhisattvas meditate on calm abiding, it also mentions that they meditate on calm abiding with the support of superior insight as well as the support of great compassion. One combines the practice of calm abiding with superior insight as well as well as great compassion. First of all at the root is compassion, wishing sentient beings to be free from suffering, then from that one moves on to the generation of wisdom, for example the wisdom that understands the root cause of suffering, karma and delusions, and then from that wisdom one can move on to the generation of calm abiding and then combine one's practice of calm abiding in such a way with wisdom and compassion.

Then there's a threefold division of mental stabilisation which, if you have any questions, we can do next time. If you don't have a question, then we can do it now.

Question: I was wondering about the home environment when you are trying to meditate...about keeping your concentration, keeping it ordered...meditation and its relationship with your surroundings?

Meditating on calm abiding and interacting with the environment can be problematic if the interaction with the environment generates further disturbing thoughts. When one meditates on calm abiding one tries to pacify the unsatisfied mind and the type of thoughts that pertain to objects of the five senses. If your interaction with the environment increases thoughts that are connected with the five sense objects then that would be counterproductive to the meditation of calm abiding. If your interaction with the environment doesn't produce those conceptual thoughts then there is no problem when you meditate on calm abiding and they don't disturb each other. Was that what you wanted?

Questioner continues: What is the definition of calm abiding?

The definition of calm abiding is concentration that is held by the bliss of pliancy and can remain on the object

of meditation for however long the meditator wishes to and is free from the two faults of mental excitement and mental sinking. When one has attained calm abiding then, by just wanting to meditate on an object, the mind will focus on that object very naturally and clearly. When one tries to meditate in the beginner stages there is a problem of focusing the mind on the object in the first place and secondly keeping it there because it goes away. These problems disappear when one has attained calm abiding. With calm abiding the mind doesn't wander off disturbed by different conceptual thoughts.

Question: Geshe-la said once we have found our meditation object, we should not change it. But what happens for example if we learn something more from a teaching, for example seeing an object as gold and then learning to see it as light as well? Can we change the object from one meditation session to the next?

Geshe-la doesn't agree with the notion of having a wrong type of object. What is the idea of having the wrong type of objects? It was already stated that anything can be the object of calm-abiding. It can be that certain objects may be harmful to the attainment of calm abiding. What does it mean when we say the object is mistaken because it was already stated that anything can be the object of calm abiding. Regarding the changing of the object, in the context of doing specifically calm abiding meditation if you change the object, you first visualise it white and later you visualise it red, that becomes a disturbance. That's in the context of doing a calm abiding retreat. Atisha said if you have many types of meditation objects that also disturbs the mind. The mind should be placed on just one object. We all know how the mind can get agitated by a multitude of objects. If there are many objects of one's attachment the mind can get extremely disturbed by those objects. So it is recommended just to keep to one object.

Question: If one is practising calm abiding, is it better to focus on a deity or on the breath?

It's alright, it's OK to take a simple object but it's not better. It's alright to choose an easy object such as the coming and going of the breath. For example, according to the Abhidharma calm abiding is generated in dependence upon meditating on the coming and going of the breath, by taking the coming and going as the meditational object. This meditation is also recommended for people who suffer from over-conceptualisation. Of course one can change from a difficult deity to easy objects, such as the coming and going of the breath, but it is good to remember that you get less benefit by meditating on the coming and going of the breath than by meditating on the form of a Buddha. This occurs whether it is sutra or tantra systems. According to the sutra system, when one visualises a Buddha in front of oneself, even if one doesn't attain calm abiding, one still gets the benefit of one's continuum being blessed by the Buddha, by remembering the Buddha. This also becomes a preparation for the practise of tantra by familiarising oneself with this meditation on a Buddha. Pliancy can also be induced by meditating on the realisation of a

Buddha and that can be a preparation for the tantric system. Those in the tantric system are visualising oneself as the deity. Everyone has to practise tantra sooner or later anyway because one has to meditate on oneself as having already attained the result. By visualising oneself in the aspect of a yidam then you get the benefits of your continuum being blessed by that yidam, By remembering the Buddhas and deities you get the benefit of keeping the Buddha or the yidam in your mind. You also get the benefit of becoming closer to the yidam. Becoming closer to the breath doesn't have that benefit. If you take the Buddha as the object of your meditation then at the time of death it becomes very much easier to remember the Buddha.

Question: If you meditate regularly on your breath, because it is recommended for dispersing thoughts, can you then change to meditating on a visualisation of Buddha to achieve calm abiding? I'm not sure...they both seem to have a different purpose.

That's alright. In general the practice of meditating on the coming and going of the breath is a preliminary practice that places the mind in a neutral state. Before turning the mind on a virtuous object it is recommended to first bring the mind into a neutral state. From a disturbed state you first bring the mind to a neutral state by focusing on the coming and going of the breath, maybe counting for 21 breaths for example. Then, when the mind has become neutral and calm, one places the mind on the virtuous object one can conduct any other type of meditation such as trying to generate renunciation and so forth. For example, in the practice of patience if a person is very angry they first have to meditate on the coming and going of the breath in order to bring the mind to a neutral state and then they can meditate on patience. Of course we say that an angry person has to practise patience, meditate on patience, but practically an angry person can't really meditate on patience. First they have to calm the mind and bring it to a neutral state and then from that state go to patience.

As before focus the mind towards the inside, not letting it wander off to external objects, and then place the mind single-pointedly on the sound of the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OMMUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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