
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga
Translated by the Venerable Tenzin Dongak

9 April 2003

We can meditate for a little while as usual. First sit in a proper meditation posture with your legs in a vajra position and your hands in the mudra of meditation and the body upright. Just adjusting the body is not enough. Having adjusted the body one then needs to change the mind. In order to meditate one initially needs to have a good motivation. The purpose of meditation is to lessen delusion. Meditation has the power to lessen delusions. To be able to meditate we first have to listen to instructions on how to meditate and take them to heart. One chooses one's meditation according to the delusion that is strongest within one's mind. By first identifying the delusion that is strongest within one's mind one then identifies the appropriate object of meditation that can counteract that particular delusion and then one absorbs one's mind into that object. Firstly one needs to identify the delusions within one's mind. The delusions within one's mind are the various mental states that agitate and disturb the mind and prevent the mind from being focused and concentrated.

If we look for the cause of unhappiness, even though there can also be external causes, the primary cause lies within because this lessens one's inner mental peace. One loses one's inner peace because of certain mental states. When certain mental states arise they agitate and disturb the mind in such a way to cause one to lose one's inner peace. Having lost that inner peace, by the mind being overtaken by disturbing thoughts, we then try to act upon those disturbing and that leads to further disturbing thoughts. The disturbing thoughts are intensified and multiplied. In such a way the mind completely loses any trace of peace or happiness. In order to obtain mental peace and happiness one needs to pacify disturbing thoughts within the mind. Without pacifying disturbing thoughts it is impossible for the mind to obtain peace. As long as the mind is under the control of disturbing thoughts it cannot obtain peace and happiness. The more one frees the mind from disturbing thoughts, the more the disturbing thoughts are pacified and the clearer and more stable the mind becomes, the more the clear nature of the mind, the luminous nature of the mind, can shine through.

In such a way one can confirm, through one's own experience, the benefit of meditation. There is no need to rely upon external recommendations about the benefits of meditation. By gaining experience through meditation one generates a new type of wisdom and one has confirmed for oneself the benefits of meditation. As the over conceptualising mind poses such a significant problem we meditate on the coming and going of the breath. This is a very easy method to pacify disturbing thoughts. It can counteract the process where one starts to worry about some small thing and that worry increases and leads to a chain of disturbing thoughts - one thought leads to the next and this totally agitates and disturbs the mind. In order to pacify this train of thought, the conceptualising mind, we meditate on the coming and going of the breath. Sometimes the conceptualising mind can be very frightening. By recognising the faults of the conceptualising mind - that as long as the mind is under the control of disturbing thoughts it won't experience stability and clarity and that the more disturbing thoughts are pacified the more clarity and stability will arise within the mind - one forms the determination not to let one's mind fall under the control of the disturbing conceptualising mind even for one moment. Bring the mind back home focusing it totally inwards, not letting it wander off towards external objects, but focusing it totally towards the inside. Within that state we focus the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath and at this time the mind should actually be absorbed into the coming and going of the breath. It should be absorbed into the object of meditation. It shouldn't be like watching an object as some type of form - the mind actually becomes one with breath. We can meditate in that manner for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*)

Please arise from your meditative equipoise. Last time we talked about how one shouldn't judge and criticise others on the basis of their external appearance. We said that someone might have a very poor appearance or, to our eyes, a displeasing appearance but we shouldn't judge a person just because of their outward appearance and point out their faults on the basis of their appearance. The actual qualities of the person lie within the person. We are not able to see their actual qualities. It depends very much on one's own point of view. If we look at the positive side of the other person and focus on their qualities that's what will appear to our mind and that is how they will appear to our mind. But if we focus on their mistakes and on their faults then that's all that will appear to our mind.

The other person might not have any fault from their own side, there might not actually be the slightest fault from their side, but if we look at them from our side with a negative mind that's how they will appear to us, full of faults. This becomes an obstacle to treating others with respect. On the contrary if we look at the qualities of the other person that will make it easy to be respectful to them and increase our respect for them. We shouldn't judge others and criticise them just because of their outward appearance.

It is very practical if we focus on the qualities of the other person because we ourselves will benefit because it opens our mind to gain experience from the other person. If we just focus on their faults or just perceive them as having no qualities and only faults then that door of generating qualities through the influence of the other person will be closed. One won't receive any benefit - one will only receive loss. This is what is meant when one says they are meditating on pure appearance. Meditating on pure appearance means focusing on the qualities of the other person, seeing them in a positive light, and that then has a beneficial effect on oneself - one receives the benefit of generating those qualities.

The next (part of the text) concerns giving up attachment to the households of benefactors, relations and friends. Verse 33 of the text *The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997) reads:

*“Reward and respect cause us to quarrel
And make hearing, thinking and meditation decline.
For this reason give up attachment to
The households of friends, relations and benefactors-
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.”*

What this is basically saying is that attachment to benefactors, attachment to relatives, attachment to friends and also their households, their possessions and so forth will cause our practice of listening, contemplation and meditation to decline. Therefore one should give up attachment to these things. The offerings that one receives from benefactors and so forth are seen as conducive conditions for one's practice. The attachment to these is seen as an adverse condition towards one's development.

Reward and respect can cause us to quarrel. For example, if out of attachment one praises someone else and not a third person then the third person feels left out and can start to quarrel with us. Alternately, if we are praised and because of our attachment to that praise a quarrel arises then that disturbs our practice of hearing, listening, contemplation and meditation. It is very difficult once attachment has arisen towards reward and respect. Once attachment has arisen towards the

households and the possessions of friends, relations and benefactors it is very difficult to get rid of that attachment. The example of a drop of oil that falls on a piece of paper is used to explain how difficult it is to separate attachment from its object. Once the oil has dropped, fallen on the paper, then it is very difficult for one to separate the oil from the paper. Likewise, once attachment has arisen for an object then it is difficult to separate the attached mind from its object. One shouldn't, therefore, let one's mind fall under attachment. If one's mind is under the influence of attachment that will cause one's practice of listening, contemplation and meditation to decline. If the mind is disturbed by attachment there will be no practice of listening to teachings, contemplating their meaning and then meditating on what one has understood through contemplation. Those three steps of hearing, contemplation and meditation are complementary. If one of them is missing, for example there is no practice of listening to teachings then the wisdom of contemplation and the wisdom of meditation won't arise. The wisdom of meditation depends upon the wisdom of contemplation and the wisdom of contemplation in turn depends upon the wisdom that arises from listening. The wisdom arising from listening won't be generated within the mind if the mind is under the control of attachment. So attachment strikes at the generation of wisdom. Therefore one should give up attachment to the households of friends, relations and benefactors lest the attachment cause one's practice of listening, contemplation and meditation to decline. By reflecting upon this Bodhisattvas make it their practice to give up attachment to friends, to the household of friends, relatives and benefactors.

The sutras talk a lot about this topic of giving up attachment to gain and to praise. It is important that one has small desires and knowledge of contentment. If one has a content mind it doesn't get attached to gain or praise. Praise also includes being shown physical respect by others. As a Dharma practitioner one needs to be sustained by others. If one receives offerings from others and they are very kind to the Dharma practitioner by providing them with offerings and the Dharma practitioner then praises the benefactor out of the motivation of attachment for gaining offerings that becomes an obstacle to one's practice. Similarly if one is attached to the offerings that one is receiving or if they become attached to the offering of respect and the respect that is shown by others this again becomes an obstacle to practice. Therefore, rather than being attached to gain and praise, one needs to be of small desires and to have a knowledge of contentment. If one doesn't have a knowledge of

contentment then shame won't arise within one's mind and without shame it is impossible to counteract negative emotion.

In Buddhism it is taught that one needs to be of small desire and practise contentment, having a knowledge of contentment. Some non-Buddhists then they say to the Buddhists, "Oh for you material goods and money is completely unnecessary." Some parents say to the children, "You're a Buddhists so you don't need much money". But actually we do need money because we need to go shopping. *(Laughter)* Practising less desire and contentment doesn't mean that one needs to give away all the possessions that one has. Sometimes there is the misunderstanding where people think that 'Oh, now I have to give away all my possessions'. That is not the meaning of practising less desire and contentment. What is meant is that one is satisfied with what one has. Contentment and the practise of small desire means that one lessens one's attachment towards the possessions that one has. On the one side one tries to be content with what one has and at the same time one lessens the attachment for the possessions that one has. That would be the practice of contentment and small desire. Practising contentment and small desire is important for ordained practitioners because without such contentment and small desire it will be very difficult to be an ordained practitioner. But not only is it important for ordained practitioners it is important every Dharma practitioner and for every person because if one's mind falls under the control of attachment that then causes lots of suffering to arise within the mind. For example, if one is separated from something to which one is very attached that causes great anguish and mental suffering. But if one is separated from something to which one is not attached, if someone who doesn't have attachment is separated from possessions of friends, it won't cause them any mental suffering and anguish. For example, a Dharma practitioner who doesn't have attachment can, when the time of death comes, die in a very comfortable manner because that person will not suffer if they are separated from possessions. Such a person won't suffer when separated from friends and relatives and such a person won't suffer when separated from the aggregates of this life because they don't have attachment. If a person has attachment for those three they will suffer a great deal when they die. Similarly, before that, if one has attachment for one's wealth that causes suffering to arise within the mind. It causes suffering for oneself and in such a way instead of the wealth being a conducive condition for happiness it has actually become a

conducive condition for suffering. Normally we regard wealth as a conducive condition for happiness, but if one has attachment to that wealth then it becomes exactly the reverse. What is supposed to be a condition for happiness actually becomes an adverse condition for happiness.

In order to experience happiness one needs to be mentally satisfied. Mental satisfaction arises through contentment. So if one is content with the clothes that one has, with the food that one has, then one doesn't have the feeling one lacks anything, and one is mentally satisfied and content that is the completion of happiness. The absence of attachment is the perfection of peace, the ultimate peace, which is actually quite contrary to the worldly view that says that in order to have happiness one needs attachment. The worldly view is that there is no happiness without attachment but in actuality the absence of attachment is the perfection of peace. Even though it is very difficult to rid one's mind completely of all attachment it is good to contemplate the meaning of that and at least try to lessen the attachment somewhat.

So do you have some questions?

Question: What advice would you give to someone who dies with strong attachment?

:

There is lots of advice regarding different topics but the issue is whether the advice is listened to and is practised. For example, a person can reflect on how everything is impermanent, but they might not want to do that. If it is a man who accepts future life then telling them how nice and beautiful the next life will be will help them to let go of the things of this life. One contemplation to do is to reflect upon the impermanence of all phenomena. It can also be good to advise the person to focus their mind inwards and not let their mind wander off to external objects but rather to collect their mind and focus it inwards and that this internal mind is their refuge. Explaining this to people who are about to die can sometimes be very beneficial. Even if during their lifetime they haven't really thought very much about refuge one way or the other and primarily focused on external objects, if, at their time of death one recommends to them to let go of external objects and focus internally on their mind and explain to them that their own mind is their refuge can be very beneficial.

I gave that advice to one acquaintance of mine who was very sick, and they found it really very beneficial. Finding out that the actual refuge, the actual help is, lies internally within oneself was, for them, a kind of revelation and then they were able

to die in a happy and peaceful way. Doing that type of meditation benefits people regardless of their religion. Of course different people practise different religions. Some religions are more focused during life on external help rather than internal help, but, at the time of death by collecting one's mind internally, focusing one's mind internally on one's refuge, usually benefits anyone regardless of their religion. One has to somehow find the mind and find a way of guiding the person to an internal contemplation of their object of refuge. If they are Buddhists one explains to them to focus internally on the Buddha and on the qualities of the Buddha and in such a way the mind will be protected from the attachment arising and one can die in a good manner. But if they are not Buddhists, whatever their refuge is, you somehow have to guide them to an internal reflection of their refuge. One can more naturally remember the objects of one's refuge at the time of death if one has practised some religion during one's lifetime. If one practises the Dharma during one's lifetime at the time of death it is easier and more natural to remember one's refuge. In such a way the Dharma practice that one does during one's lifetime comes to its ultimate fruition at the time of death. That's sort of the ultimate benefit.

Question: Did you say that if you haven't got a knowledge of contentment then that leads to shame?

If your mind is under the control of attachment it is difficult for shame to arise. If shame doesn't arise then one can't oppose the delusions, the disturbing emotions. If you are attached to gain and praise and because of that you are engaged in quarrels with others, then, at that time, there is no generation of shame and there will be no stopping the action. Shame is the thought that that action is inappropriate arising in relation to oneself. Consideration is the thought that the action is inappropriate in relation to others meaning the Buddha, one's teachers and so forth. Shame is the thought it is not appropriate for me to engage in this action because I'm a Dharma practitioner or because I am an ordained person. In relation to oneself, taking oneself as the reason, one thinks 'It is not appropriate for me to engage in this action'. Consideration is also the thought 'It is not appropriate to engage into this action' but it arises through remembering for example the Buddha and that the Buddha said it is not appropriate to do those actions and whatever benefit I now have comes about through the kindness of the Buddha so it would not be appropriate to engage in those actions. That would be consideration. Shame is when the thought arises in relation to oneself, 'It is not appropriate for me to engage in that action'. It

is said that it is easier for ordained practitioners to generate shame and consideration because of their vows. One thinks there is more reason. One has taken all those vows based upon what the Buddha said is appropriate and what is inappropriate, so that facilitates the generation of consideration and shame.

As was mentioned in the beginning, bring the mind back home focusing it totally towards the inside and then you place the mind single-pointedly on the name mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

Transcribed from tape by Gaye Lewis-Radcliffe

Edited by John Burch

Edited Version

© Tara Institute