
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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

30 April 2003

We can meditate a little while as usual sitting in a good meditation posture.

As we have said, meditation means to establish positive mental states. The purpose of meditating is to establish positive patterns in the mind and to make it clearer, more stable, more peaceful and pliant. As long as one's mind is unsubdued, one will find it difficult to attain happiness. Therefore, if one wants happiness, one has to subdue the mind. In particular, one has to regain control of the mind from the [influence] of disturbing thoughts.

When the mind is under the control of the disturbing thoughts, its power and energy are dispersed, so one can become easily discouraged and easily give up. The great Bodhisattva Shantideva said that a mind under the control of the disturbing thoughts is weak, and that such a mind has an adverse effect on us. If we are sick, we can't use our body effectively. Likewise, if our mind is under the control of the disturbing thoughts, it is similar to having a physical affliction.

[To practise breathing meditation], you have to first remove the mind from external objects, and focus it internally, bringing the mind home. Within that state, place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath. So, first you have to completely focus the mind internally and leave it in that state for some time. Then, when you find the mind trying once again to escape towards external objects, focus it single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath.

One has to give the mind an object on which to meditate. 'Mind' cannot arise without an object [of engagement]. Here, the object we give the mind is the coming and going of the breath. When we place the mind on the coming and going of the breath, it shouldn't be like a subject looking at an object; rather, the mind becomes one with, or enters, the breathing. *[Pause for meditation.]*

As we said earlier, the purpose of meditation is to acquaint the mind with positive states. There are both virtuous mental states and [non-virtuous] unsuitable mental states. Virtuous mental states are those that give us happiness when they are generated. Unsuitable mental states are those that cause suffering and take away our happiness when they are generated.

If our mind is accustomed to unsuitable mental states, it can appear as if those mental states are an integral part of our mind. For example, if someone is acquainted with the mental state of anger, or attachment, or pride, it can appear as if those mental states are an integral – rather than an adventitious – part of that person's mental makeup. To such a person, the idea of reducing or

getting rid of that unsuitable mental state would seem impossible.

In reality, mental states such as anger are not of one nature with one's primary mental consciousness. The primary mental consciousness is pure in nature and abides within a clear and calm state, so adventitious mental disturbances are not of one nature with one's main mental consciousness. The basic fundamental mental consciousness is untainted by the different types of stains, and therefore can be purified of them. For example, because anger is not an integral part of the mind, one can free one's mind of anger. Likewise, because attachment is not of one nature with the mind, one can free the mind of attachment. The same goes for pride and the other delusions.

We can directly observe through our own experience that positive ways of thinking oppose unsuitable, harmful ways of thinking. For example, it is impossible in one mental continuum for love, compassion and aversion to arise simultaneously in relation to the same object. We cannot feel compassion and aversion simultaneously towards the same object. At the moment when we generate anger towards an object, that anger takes away the opportunity for love to be directed towards the object. Likewise, whenever we feel strong love for an object, we do not feel anger towards it.

This shows us that love and anger are incompatible or mutually exclusive. Whenever one has love for an object, at that time, the basic consciousness is manifestly present within one's continuum. If anger were an integral part of one's mind, then whenever the basic consciousness was manifestly existing in one's continuum, all those mental factors that were an integral part of the mind should also be manifest. But anger is not always present when our mind is manifesting consciousness – for example, whenever we have love for an object. This proves that anger is not of one nature with the mind; it is not an integral part of the mind. It also shows that you can give the boot to anger *[laughter]*!

We can see, through our own experience, that the more familiar the mind is with positive and wholesome mental states, the less familiar it will be with unsuitable and harmful mental states. This is a sign of [our intrinsic] Buddha nature. The more we increase the power of our love in the mind, the less will be the power of our aversion and anger. Through this process of developing positive states of the mind and strengthening them, we can overcome unsuitable and harmful states of the mind and develop [or transform] the mind.

Therefore, when one is experiencing anger, instead of feeding the anger, one should redirect the mind towards a positive object and reverse it away from anger. One should redirect the mind towards a positive object – in this case, meditating on love and compassion, which then acts as an antidote to the anger.

Likewise, whenever one's mind is afflicted by attachment and one experiences suffering due to this

attachment, rather than feeding the attachment, one should focus the mind on an object that counteracts the attachment – the impurity of the object of attachment. By meditating on impurity, one counteracts attachment, because attachment feeds on the attractive and beautiful appearance of the object. However, by reflecting upon the impurity of an object, such as another's body, and contemplating the insides of that body, starting from the toes and continuing to the crown of the head, one will counteract the appearance of the object as being attractive and pleasant. This will pacify one's attachment.

Making use of one's Buddha nature in such a way becomes the practice of meditation. When one experiences different mental delusions, rather than feeding them, one should redirect the mind to meditating on the antidote – a positive mental state that directly counteracts that delusion. Of course, because the mind is strongly acquainted with harmful mental states, one may temporarily displace anger, for example, by generating love for the other person, but may find that soon afterwards the anger arises easily again. So, one can feel great love and affection for a person, but the mind may soon revert back to aversion and anger.

[In this situation, one has to again recollect the positive aspects of that person.] Attachment and aversion are based on the appearance of the object. If the object appears disagreeable and undesirable, one generates aversion. If the object appears likeable and desirable, one generates attachment, which can increase one's love for that object. It all depends on how the object appears to the mind. Therefore, if one generates anger and aversion due to the object appearing as undesirable and disagreeable, instead of feeding the aversion, one has to recollect the positive aspects of the object and again generate a view of the object in a likeable aspect. The more likeable the object appears to us, the more love we will generate for it, and that love will then counteract the anger.

Of course, one may make the object appear too likeable. So, if one generates desire for the other person instead of love, this can be counteracted by the meditation on impurity – this counteracts the appearance of the object as desirable. In this way, one does not need to be a prisoner of attachment and desire. By knowing the psychology of the mind, by knowing the way the mind functions, we don't have to be a prisoner of the different harmful mental states and we don't have to experience the suffering given to us by those harmful mental states. Rather, we can counteract those mental states with the individual antidotes. If one experiences anger, one should generate the mind that directly opposes anger – love and compassion. If one experiences a state of attachment or desire, one meditates on impurity, which directly counteracts those mental states.

By investigating one's own mind, one can choose the meditation one has to do. There is no need to ask a Lama what type of meditation you should do – you just have to investigate your own mind and then choose the appropriate meditation. If the Lama has clairvoyance, he

or she will be able to give you an appropriate meditation for you, but if the Lama doesn't have clairvoyance, it becomes difficult.

The verse (see verse 36 of the text *The Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997) reads:

*In brief, whatever you are doing,
Ask yourself "What's the state of my mind?"
With constant mindfulness and mental alertness
Accomplish the welfare of others –
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

So verse 36 deals with accomplishing the welfare of others using mindfulness and mental introspection.

Now, having previously outlined the five categories of Bodhisattvas' practices, they can be summed up as follows: whichever of the four activities – standing up, walking, sitting down or sleeping – you happen to be doing, you should always investigate the state of your mind. You should exert constant mindfulness and introspection, looking at whether the mind is in a virtuous or non-virtuous state. If it has fallen into a non-virtuous state, bring it back to a positive and virtuous state. Accomplishing the welfare of others is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

I have already explained the three characteristics of proper mindfulness. Even though there are many types of mindfulness, proper mindfulness first of all has to be introduced to the object. Mindfulness is in the nature of not forgetting the object, so mindfulness is a mental factor that doesn't forget about the object, it is remembering the object. To be able to remember an object, one has to first be introduced to it. One doesn't remember an object with which one hasn't had contact.

Therefore, proper mindfulness has the three characteristics of first of all having been introduced to the object; then its nature is that it doesn't forget the object; and its function is to prevent distraction and mental wandering.

One should always be mindful of one's three doors of body, speech and mind day and night. Mental introspection is an investigative mental factor that checks up on the activities of the three doors –whether they are positive or harmful, virtuous or non-virtuous, suitable or unsuitable.

Mindfulness is like the king that employs the two ministers of mental introspection and conscientiousness. First of all, mindfulness becomes aware of a harmful, negative action. Then, introspection analyses the action. Finally, one is able to stop the action with conscientiousness. It is said that one needs to have [these three factors in order to transform one's mind].

To maintain pure morality, one needs to control the mind with mindfulness. One needs to restrain the three doors of body, speech and mind if one wants to practise pure morality. If, through mindfulness, one finds that one is engaged in a negative, harmful action, one needs to turn away from the action. One needs to restrain one's body, speech and mind, and stop any negative action.

This is how one can practise pure morality. Pure morality depends on having control of one's mind, protecting one's mind, and the way one protects one's mind in the first place is with mindfulness.

If the mind has already taken a harmful direction, one needs to restrain it from continuing in that harmful direction. One needs to reverse the mind from that harmful direction back to a positive state. So, we have these two practices of controlling the mind and restraining the mind. Controlling the mind means preventing it from going into a non-virtuous direction, which one does with mindfulness and mental introspection. Restraining the mind means to turn the mind turning it back towards a positive state if it has gone into a non-virtuous direction, and this is also done with mindfulness and introspection.

Controlling the mind with mindfulness and introspection becomes very important because we may be temporarily able to refrain from a non-virtuous action. You might find you are able to turn the mind around temporarily from a non-virtuous action, but if you subsequently don't control the mind with mindfulness and introspection, it will again go in that non-virtuous direction. Therefore, in order to have proper restraint, one needs to have proper control of the mind, and proper control of the mind comes about through mindfulness and introspection.

We can finish here for tonight. I think we have one or two more Wednesdays left for this text. So, even though we were supposed to start the Lam Rim next Wednesday, that might be delayed for one or two Wednesdays. Then I will start the Lam Rim.

Do you have some questions?

Question from student (not audible on tape), accompanied by laughter.

Answer: No, I'm not a Buddha. That's not how a Buddha looks [laughter]. I have strong faith in the Buddha, so during whatever activity I engage in – be it sitting down, standing up, walking or sleeping – I am never separated from my faith in the Buddha, and that's very beneficial for me.

Question from another student.

Answer: Introspection is an investigative mental factor that investigates the rest of the mind. For example, during meditation, introspection would investigate whether you have still hold the object in sharp focus, whether your mind is still on the object. [Or it might investigate] whether an action is suitable or unsuitable – it is this type of discriminative awareness, a type of wisdom.

Further comment from same student.

Answer: Once one has strong anger, it becomes difficult, because anger doesn't listen. Even though you say "Stop!" [to yourself], the anger doesn't stop. It's similar to saying "Don't do it!" to a naughty child – the naughty child will still do it! The child doesn't listen. Anger is similar in that it doesn't listen just because you may have said "Stop!" to it.

However, through slow and continued practice and familiarisation with applying the antidote, one will gradually be able to oppose the anger. To stop the anger, one has to oppose it with an antidote.

It is difficult to oppose the delusions if the delusions have become strong, but even if we can apply the antidote for only one or two minutes – if you meditate on love for only one or two minutes but feel it has not had a strong impact, it did not rid your mind of anger – this doesn't mean that there was no effect.

It's similar to putting a drop of cold water into a pot of hot water. If you don't have extremely sensitive instruments, you won't be able to recognise any difference in the temperature, but that one drop of cold water will definitely bring about a very slight reduction in the temperature of the hot water. If you continued to put drops of cold water into the pot, after some time it would become discernibly cooler and will reach the point of becoming completely cold. Likewise, one shouldn't think that when one applies an antidote and it doesn't have a very strong, visible effect that it has had no effect. By continuously practising slowly but steadily, one will definitely bring about a change of mind.

Question from another student.

Answer: No, we don't say that it is a good state of the mind. Nevertheless, some benefit does come about through some instances of attachment. Anger doesn't bring the slightest benefit, but attachment can bring some benefit. For example, people who are materially well off may not have much love and affection, but they may still practise generosity on the basis of attachment, so some benefit comes about through the force or attachment. With anger, this won't happen.

It is understandable that we find it difficult to oppose attachment because attachment appears to us as our friend – it seems to give happiness. Proximity to the object of attachment seems to give us happiness, so we want to continuously be close to the object. So, because attachment appears to be a friend, one finds it difficult to oppose. So, in a way, attachment is actually the strongest affliction.

As explained at the beginning, bring the mind back home, focusing it totally within and then 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

© Tara Institute