
The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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We can practise a little bit of meditation as usual. First, take up a relaxed, comfortable and correct meditation posture.

As we have said previously, we must focus the mind internally, re-directing it away from being distracted by external objects. Rather, we bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards.

From within that state, place the mind single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath and take the coming and going of the breath as your meditation object. Then, meditate in that manner for a few minutes. *[Short pause for meditation.]*

Last time, we said that after having generated bodhicitta and having made a commitment to the Bodhisattva trainings, one has to subsequently take care that one's bodhicitta doesn't degenerate and that one's practice of the Bodhisattva trainings doesn't generate. We do this with the help of introspection and mindfulness.

The increase of one's positive qualities and the decrease of one's faults depend upon one's mind. This is an important point to consider.

To increase our positive actions and decrease harmful ones, we need to protect and control the mind. But how can we control our mind? Without knowing how to do it, to just say we should control our mind is just empty words. The way we control the mind is through introspection and mindfulness.

With the help of introspection, we can check up on the actions of our body, speech and mind (the 'three doors') to see whether they are positive, harmful or neutral and then adjust an action if necessary.

If we check up upon the mind to increase its positive aspects and decrease its harmful aspects, this will benefit us. This discriminating wisdom that we term 'introspection' can check up on the mind; then, when we recognise which mental states have arisen, we can make the necessary adjustment. As Atisha said, this benefits the individual.

Atisha said that mindfulness and introspection are our best friends, and it is important that we use those two mental factors to keep our mind under control. Otherwise, if we just let the mind run free, it won't take long for the mind to fall into harmful and destructive behaviour. This can happen very quickly – it won't take months [but minutes, hours or days] for one to start engaging in harmful and destructive actions that harm our own lives and bring us misery. Rather than taking such a course, we should develop the potential within

the mind for positive actions and change or oppose any harmful mental states.

The practice of meditation increases one's mindfulness and makes the mind clearer. Increasing one's level of mindfulness is beneficial to all aspects of one's life and will also benefit one's meditation. The stronger one's mindfulness, the clearer one's meditation will be.

Now we come to the fifth major outline or heading [in the text, *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*], which is the section on dedication.

When we practise the Dharma, when we engage in any Dharma action, it should always be preceded by a good motivation and followed by a good dedication. Before meditating, one generates the motivation to meditate in order to bring about happiness and well-being to all sentient beings. To be able to bring about happiness and well-being to all sentient beings, one needs to subdue one's mind, so one meditates for that purpose. Then, after the meditation, one dedicates for that aim.

When one practises dedication, first one needs to have an action or thing that can be dedicated; then one dedicates it towards a certain aim. The difference between dedication and prayer is that, for prayer, there doesn't need to be any substance that can be dedicated to the aim – it is just a prayer. But for dedication, one needs to have something that one can actually dedicate. The purpose of dedication is to make the merits one has created inexhaustible [i.e. to 'seal' the merit that has been generated].

So, when we practise meditation, we start out with an altruistic motivation, having the welfare of sentient beings in mind. When we practise meditation, it should be done on the basis of concern for the welfare of others. Also, the dedication is done with concern for the welfare of others. In such a way, one trains one's mind in the altruistic motivation of concern for the well-being and happiness of others – a Bodhisattva motivation. If we continuously practise in such a way, one's altruistic motivation will gradually increase until it reaches a limitless state.

Doubt may enter one's mind about dedicating one's merits for others: one may think there won't be any merit left for oneself! That is a valid doubt that can arise in the mind, but one need not worry, because dedicating the merits for others creates merit in return, so one actually increases one's merits by dedicating the merits for others.

The dedication of outer objects and of internal phenomena works differently. When we dedicate our merits [i.e. internal phenomena] for others, the way it benefits others is that we develop qualities within ourselves. With these qualities, we are able to benefit others in the future. But [dedicating our merits] does not mean that the resultant happiness of those merits will ripen in others. That is not realistic. What is realistic is that when one generates merits and dedicates them for others, the way the merits actually ripen in terms of

happiness for others is that one will generate qualities with which one can help others to be happy.

One cannot transfer the karmic result of one's actions to others. If that were possible – if one didn't have to accumulate one's own positive karma – we would already be well cared for, because we would get all the merits of all the Buddhas who dedicate their merits for us. One has to create one's own merit; then, through generating qualities because of this merit, one can make others happy.

If we dedicate outer objects such as money – for example, if we give it to someone else – that person can directly experience happiness from that money. This is the difference between dedicating outer and inner objects.

Now, we will do the verses dealing with dedication. Verse 37 of the text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* (Snow Lion Publications, New York 1997) reads:

*To remove the suffering of limitless beings,
Understanding the purity of the three spheres.
Dedicate the virtue from making such effort
To enlightenment –
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

The merit one is dedicating is the virtue from making 'such efforts to enlightenment' – which refers to the efforts in doing the Bodhisattva practices explained previously throughout our discussion of the text. Those are the virtues that one dedicates.

Here one can also include dedicating the virtue of others towards enlightenment. This is done by rejoicing in the virtues of others. One then dedicates the merits created by rejoicing in others' merits from making efforts towards enlightenment. We refer to the merits that we create by rejoicing in other people's merits the dedication of the merits of others. Otherwise, the question would again arise: "How can one dedicate other people's merits?" and we might think we didn't have to dedicate our merits any more because others would do it for us!

This is how 'dedicating the merits of others' is always explained in the texts. Dedication of the merits of others actually refers to the dedication of the merits that one creates by rejoicing in the merits of others.

So, one dedicates these virtues of self and others that arise from joyous and enthusiastic effort towards complete enlightenment in order to remove the sufferings of limitless beings. The merits are dedicated for the purpose of removing the suffering of limitless sentient beings, and the dedication is held [or sealed] by the wisdom that understands the purity of the three spheres.

If one dedicates one's merits for complete enlightenment in order to remove the suffering of all sentient beings and that dedication is combined with the wisdom that understands the purity of the three spheres then, within that dedication, both method and wisdom are complete.

This is significant, because by practising the unification of method and wisdom on the basis of the two truths

[the truth of cessation and the truth of the path], one creates the cause for the attainment of the two bodies of a Buddha – the form body and the truth body. When one dedicates in the manner prescribed here, one has both aspects of the path – method and wisdom – and, in such a way, the dedication becomes the cause for the two bodies of a Buddha.

So, the basis (the two truths), the path (method and wisdom), and the fruit (the two bodies of the Buddha) are complete with such a dedication.

The next verse in the concluding section after the dedication is:

*For all who want to train on the Bodhisattva path,
I have written The Thirty-Seven Practices of
Bodhisattvas,
Following what has been said by the excellent ones
On the meaning of the sutras, tantras and treatises.*

What Togmay Sangpo is saying here is that he has composed this text *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* following what has been said by all the excellent teachers in general, particularly by what has been taught by Atisha and his main disciples on the meaning of the sutras, tantras and treatises.

Within the sutras and tantras, many Bodhisattva practices are taught and commented upon in the various treatises, and so [this text accords with] what has been taught in those treatises on the sutras and tantras by Atisha and his two sons in particular and the great lamas in general.

The next outline or verse shows this practice to be stainless:

*Though not poetically pleasing to scholars
Owing to my poor intelligence and lack of learning,
I've relied on the sutras and the words of the excellent,
So I think these Bodhisattva practices are without error.*

Here, 'poor intelligence' refers to the intelligence one is born with and 'learning' is the knowledge that one acquires in this life. Togmay Sangpo is saying he has not brought any intelligence with him in this life and also has not generated any great knowledge through learning in this life. He also says he has not written something that is "poetically pleasing to scholars", but that because he relied on the "sutras and the words of the excellent," he is confident that the Bodhisattva practices he has explained are faultless, without error.

[In using these words], Togmay Sangpo is really showing humble conduct from his side.

Then comes the next verse:

*However, as the great deeds of Bodhisattvas
Are hard to fathom for one of my poor intelligence,
I beg the excellent to forgive all faults,
Such as contradictions and non sequiturs.*

This outline shows that the author is being humble about his qualities and asking for forgiveness. In the first line, "however" relates to what he said in the previous verse, that he was confident that the practices he had explained are pure Bodhisattva practices that accord with the

teachings of the sutras and the tantras. He has already made the statement that he is confident that what he wrote is unmistakable, but he makes an allowance in this following verse in order to practise humility. [He states that] because the great deeds of the Bodhisattvas are vast, profound and subtle, for "one of my poor intelligence" those deeds are difficult to fathom. Therefore, he proclaims that because he does not completely understand the Bodhisattva practices, "I beg the excellent ones to forgive faults" such as contradictions. What he means is that, in his text, he may have taught something contradictory – first saying one thing but later saying the opposite; or, that he may have taught something unrelated to the subject matter (e.g. a non sequitur).

Then comes now the fourth outline, the purpose of composing this text.

*Through the virtue from [composing] this [text] May
all living beings gain
Ultimate and conventional bodhicitta
And thereby become like the Protector Chenrezig
Who abides free from the two extremes of existence
and peace.*

[This verse is saying that], through the virtue generated from striving in the Bodhisattva trainings, may all living beings attain ultimate bodhicitta – the wisdom realising emptiness – and conventional bodhicitta – the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the welfare of all sentient beings. May they thereby become like the Protector Chenrezig, abiding free from the two extremes of existence and peace – free from the extreme of existence through achieving the wisdom realising emptiness, and free from the extreme of peace through achieving great compassion.

Ultimate bodhicitta is the antidote to the extreme of existence, while conventional bodhicitta is the antidote to the extreme of peace. By attaining these two bodhicittas, one will not abide within either of these two extremes and thereby become like the Protector Chenrezig. Here, Togmay Sangpo is dedicating his merits for all sentient beings.

Then comes the fifth outline or colophon:

*This was written for his own and others' benefit
by the monk Togmay, an exponent of scripture
and reasoning, in a cave in Ngülchu Rinchen.*

This last verse deals with the four excellences – the excellence of the text, of the purpose, of the author and of the place.

The text was *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* expounding upon the vast and profound Bodhisattva trainings. The purpose, or why the text was composed, was to achieve the purpose of self as well as the purpose of others. It was written on the basis of superior altruistic intention for the purpose of attaining benefit for self as well as benefit for others. The author is the monk Togmay Sangpo, an exponent of scripture and reasoning. The place where it was composed was the cave in Ngülchu Rinchen.

Next week, we will start the Lam Rim [or graduated path to enlightenment] – specifically, the intermediate Lam Rim by Lama Tsong Khapa. The actual title is the small Lam Rim by Lama Tsong Khapa, or the concise graduated path by Lama Tsong Khapa, but because there is another Lam Rim that is even more brief, this one is commonly referred to as the middle Lam Rim by Lama Tsong Khapa. The basic outline that I will follow is in that text.

[Our study of *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*] all went very well – thank you very much.

As was explained at the beginning, focus the mind inwards, not letting it wander off to external objects or be preoccupied by external objects. Then, from within that state, focus the mind single-pointedly on the sound of Shakyamuni's name mantra.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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Edited Version

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