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# *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*

## Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Today is one of the major days in the Buddhist calendar – the day the Buddha descended from Tushita Heaven. (I'll say) just a little bit about the background to this day...when Buddha's mother died, she was reborn in Tushita Heaven – actually, it was the Realm of the 33 Gods. After the Buddha manifested complete enlightenment, he went to the Realm of the 33 Gods to teach his mother, and today (Lha Bab Du Chen) is the anniversary of the day he came down back to the earth.

We can meditate for a short while as usual. Please sit in a comfortable posture, preferably in the 'seven-point' posture, with the legs in the full or half-vajra position. Keep in mind that if you sit in the appropriate, comfortable physical posture and then place your mind in a positive and virtuous state, it will benefit you and you will experience happiness.

What we call the 'I' or the 'self' has a strong relationship with our body and our mind. If we think about it, we can never separate the self from the body and mind – they will always go together.

If we have a healthy body then the 'I' or 'self' is happy, and if we have a healthy, happy mind, the 'I' or 'self' is also happy. This is why it is important to subdue the mind through meditation, because if we subdue the mind then the 'I' or 'self' is also subdued; if, through subduing the mind, we achieve mental happiness, then the 'I' that accompanies the mind is also happy. This is the significance of meditation, which is good to remember.

Another important point is that everyone has the potential to attain mental happiness and eliminate mental suffering. We need to become aware of that potential. The mind definitely has the potential for mental happiness and development, and suffering can definitely be eliminated from the mind. Becoming aware of this potential within your own mind will immediately lift your self-confidence quite a bit.

While sitting in the appropriate, relaxed physical posture, bring the mind back home, focusing it inwards and not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts that distract it outside. Having focused the mind inwards and having brought it home, concentrate single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath.

When we try to meditate single-pointedly on the coming and going of the breath, it shouldn't be like the mind looking at the breathing, but rather like the mind entering the breathing and becoming one with it. So, we will meditate in that manner for a few minutes. (*Pause for meditation*).

We were saying that we have to subdue our mind. Which aspect of our mind has to be subdued? There are three – one aspect is grasping at the happiness of this life; the second is grasping at the happiness of cyclic existence in general, at samsaric perfection; and the third aspect is self-cherishing. These three aspects have to be subdued, and one shouldn't let one's mind fall under their influence.

The way one subdues one's mind was explained by Lama Tsong Khapa when he said that, first, one has to abandon negative attitudes and rely on positive mental states – one should abandon harmful intentions towards others and should develop the intention of wanting to benefit others. Then, one should practise contemplation – after having listened to the teachings, one should reflect again and again on what one has heard. Through contemplation, one will generate meditation. This is how one has to subdue one's mind.

Last time, we started to talk about the importance of abandoning negative actions and negative mental states and of generating positive, virtuous states of mind. This should be one's main practice. The main way to do this is to abandon or purify harmful intentions and harmful attitudes and develop a positive, beneficial attitude, an attitude of wanting to benefit others. Purifying the mind of harmful intentions and developing the intention to benefit others is the essence of all the paths. We have heard the teachings on how to do this, so therefore we have completed the step of listening.

Next, we must take what we have heard into our mind and analyse it with our own wisdom. We have to contemplate and investigate what we have heard. Then the importance of practising in the way that was explained to us will become very clear, and we will definitely understand why we have to abandon negativities and develop a beneficial attitude. Our meditation will develop very well from our having practised contemplation like this.

Last time, we mentioned that what one has to abandon is basically the ten non-virtuous actions, and what has to be practised or established is the ten virtuous actions. We discussed the ten non-virtuous actions and their opposite, the ten virtuous actions.

Even after one has abandoned those ten non-virtuous actions or started to practise abandoning them, it can happen that one will again in non-virtuous actions. Then one has to purify those negative actions and obscurations with the help of the four powers.

There is no negative karma or obscuration that cannot be purified with the four powers. The one good quality of negativities is that they can be purified. We can purify any kind of negativity with the help of the four powers. The four powers are: the power of the base, the power of repudiation or regret, the power of applying the antidote, and the power of the promise.

The first power, the power of the base or the power of reliance, refers to taking refuge and meditating on bodhicitta. The second power, the power of regret or repudiation, is very important. After having taken refuge and generating bodhicitta, one must generate strong regret for the actions one has carried out. It will be difficult to generate such regret without having contemplated karma and the various results that arise from non-virtuous actions. It is like the situation of somebody convicted of a crime who is then put in prison. That person will generate very strong regret for the action he or she engaged in, because he or she is experiencing the suffering of being in prison.

To generate strong regret, we have to contemplate the four results of negative actions: the ripening result, the environmental result, the result similar to the cause, and the result of doing the action again.

So one negative action creates four results, and by contemplating those four results, we can generate very strong regret for the negative actions we have created. It should be like a person who knows they have consumed poison.

If two people have both consumed the same poison, and one person has already died from, the other person knows that they are also about to die because they've taken the same poison. So, they will generate very strong regret for having taken that poison. But, since the poison hasn't yet taken effect, they can go to a specialist, a doctor who specialises in the treatment of this poison. After the doctor has done a diagnosis and check-up, he or she will prescribe a medicine or cure. If the patient takes the medicine in accordance with the doctor's instructions, he or she can be cured from the effects of the poison and does not have to die.

The point here is that, in the same way that this person still has

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time to cure him- or herself from the poison, we also still have the time and opportunity to purify our negative karmas, because they haven't yet taken effect. This is an important point to understand – one still has this opportunity, because those karmas haven't ripened yet.

So, after having generated strong regret, one has to rely on the third power, the power of thoroughly applying the antidote. Lastly, one has to rely on the power of the promise. Just purifying negative karma alone is not enough. One needs to also make a strong determination not to engage into those actions again, to stop those actions completely.

As I mentioned the other day, if you have any negative karma to get rid of, you have a storeroom for negative karma over there, in the corner – you can just put them all in there.

Some of you may be wondering, "What will Geshe-la do with my negativities?"! Geshe-la says that once, when he went to hospital, a doctor suggested doing some blood tests, and that Geshe-la needed to take care with regards to his blood pressure. The doctor was actually a bit shy about telling Geshe-la which things he shouldn't eat. There was this issue of Geshe-la being from Tibet and having a high blood pressure and eating many things that may contribute to high blood pressure. But the doctor was too shy to mention it. So he asked, "Who is going to tell Geshe-la about what he is allowed to eat and what he not allowed to eat?" You may be feeling a little bit the same with regards your negative karma!

We can purify all negative karma with the help of the four powers. This is very important to consider, because everyone wants happiness and doesn't want suffering. What are the causes of happiness and suffering? Everyone experiences suffering without wishing to, yet their suffering does not arise without a cause, nor does it arise from a dissimilar cause.

It is important to analyse what causes happiness and what causes suffering. Quite often, we continuously engage in actions that make us unhappy at the time and that we know will cause us future suffering. So, we need to analyse our actions and see which ones cause happiness and which cause suffering, particularly in relation to the ten non-virtuous actions – we must abandon the first of the ten non-virtuous actions, which is killing. We must stop killing other sentient beings, because the benefits are great. These many benefits are explained in the sutras – for example, meeting the Buddha's teachings again in a future life and so forth.

Taking the life of a sentient being is the greatest suffering that one can inflict on that being. If we think about it from the point of view of the kinds of punishment that might be imposed by a government, financial punishment would be easier, because of the three – our possessions, our body, and our life – the one we hold most dear is our life. The second priority is our physical body, and the third is our possessions.

If we lose some of our possessions, the suffering is not so intense. It is a bit worse if we get physically harmed. For example, if we lose our arm or leg or hand, that is worse than losing our possessions. But the worst suffering is that of losing our life, which we regard as our most prized, most important possession. So, taking away the life of a sentient being inflicts the greatest harm.

Therefore, immediately after we get up in the morning, we must generate the very strong motivation that: "Today I am not going to take the life of another sentient being". First thing in the morning, we must generate this very strong vow, this very strong determination not to take the life of another sentient being. Doing that is very beneficial, and may be the cause of future mental and physical happiness.

Having the very strong intention to stop negative actions, for example, the negative action of killing is very important. The stronger we develop the intention to stop a negative action, the

easier it will be to actually stop the negative action once we are in circumstances where we are likely to create those negative actions.

If, in the morning, we generate the strong intention not to kill anything during the day, then later in the day, if we are in a situation where normally we would take the life of another sentient being, the mind will automatically think it is OK to engage in that action. So, if you don't have the strong intention to stop that negative action, in such circumstances, you will start to think it is OK, and you will once again engage in those actions. But if from the very start of the day, we make a very strong intention to stop those negative actions, then even if we find ourselves in circumstances where we normally would do those actions, it will be easier for us to not do them, and we will therefore purify those negative actions.

The teachings say that this practice of abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions and developing and practising the ten virtuous actions is very special.

There was once a Geshe called Kamlungpa, who said, "In one's own mind, one has to abide in the ten virtuous actions, and one has to stop others from engaging in the ten non-virtuous actions." Someone who practises like that is a spiritual teacher. Someone who in his or her own mind abides in the ten virtuous actions and stops others from engaging in the ten non-virtuous actions is qualified to be called a spiritual teacher. It doesn't matter what the appearance of the teacher may be – whether he or she has long or short hair, whether he or she is well-dressed or dresses in funny clothes – that is not the point.

Someone who engages in the activity of preventing non-virtuous actions is a holy being. A person who practises pure virtue is qualified to be called a yogi. They are practising austerities. What are austerities? Austerities are practising and creating white karma.

So, you should all work on developing and subduing your mind. If you abandon harming others and have an attitude of wanting to benefit others, this is the root of peace and happiness for oneself and for the world. As mentioned in the *Abidharmakosa*, "A holy being is one who practises virtue". By practising the virtue of abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions, you can all become holy beings. One doesn't become a holy being by other people calling you a holy being. One only becomes a holy being through one's own practice.

This completes the path of the 'small' capable being. Next time, we will go on to the meditations of the medium capable being.

As explained at the beginning of the session, please sit in a comfortable posture and bring the mind home, focusing it inwards, and not letting it fall under the control of the disturbing thoughts, which try to distract it back outside. Then, concentrate single-pointedly on the name mantra of the Buddha.

*TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA*

*Transcribed from tape by Gaye Lewis-Radcliffe  
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