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# Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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I'd like to begin by wishing everyone with the *tashi delek* greeting. I also hope that everyone is well and happy.

In last week's teaching, I quoted the Lord Buddha: 'Listen well to the teachings and then retain them'. This quote neatly summarises the right motivation that we should have for listening to teachings and how we should listen to them, that is, what sort of thoughts we should have whilst we are listening. In order to receive the full benefit from listening it is also important to habituate ourselves with the meaning of whatever we have learned.

Venerable Geshe Doga advises people to do a bit of breathing meditation before beginning the teaching. There is a good reason for that as the breathing meditation has specific benefits.

For our listening to be most effective, we have to ensure that we have a proper state of mind. If we carry some unhappiness and worry, then that can hinder effective listening. Similarly, if there are too many outer distractions in our mind, we cannot really engage our mind in the virtuous activity of listening to the teachings. Therefore, we do a breathing meditation which is very effective in bringing about a neutral state of mind, a state of equanimity within our mind. This neutral state or state of equanimity means it is much easier to engage in virtuous actions.

A breathing meditation not only helps us to study and practise the Dharma more effectively, but it helps us in mundane activities where it is also important that we feel mentally and physically relaxed and happy. For example, if our mind is overpowered or bothered by a strong force of anger or hatred, then whatever we do will not be enjoyable and our actions won't be effective. So we apply a breathing meditation to overcome any feelings of unease or restlessness we may have, which makes it easier to engage in our activities.

In particular, using our breathing as an object to focus on to settle our thoughts and our mind has many added benefits. This technique is simple yet very effective, and especially beneficial for beginners. Beginners find the main cause of distractions are external objects such as shapes, colours and so forth. Since breathing does not have colour or shape, it is a suitable object to focus on, in terms of **stabilising our mind** and **calming down all the distracting thoughts**.

The scripture says to apply the breathing meditation to dispel all of our distracting or discursive thoughts.

The third benefit, or the point of using breathing as an object of meditation, is that it is very good in terms of training our mind and **developing the familiarity of our mind with a given object**. As we know, the purpose of a meditation practice is to train our mind. That's why

meditation always involves the application of mindfulness, keeping the mind focussed on a given object, to familiarise and habituate the mind to that object. Sometimes this can be quite challenging because the mind keeps running away from the object and then we need to look for our object of meditation. However, the breathing meditation uses our own breath as an object, and breathing is something we are used to. As we are always breathing, we have no trouble in finding and recognising the object.

Other things we need to pay attention to when we meditate include our physical posture - how we sit at the start of meditation. We should not force our body into a posture that we are not used to. Whatever posture we adopt, it is important that we physically feel comfortable and relaxed. We also need to approach our meditation practice in terms of how we place our mind on the object. The way we hold the object has to be balanced. For example, a string of a violin needs the correct tension in order for it to produce the right sound. It has to be absolutely correct - the string cannot be too loose or too tight. In the same way, we should not be focussing or holding onto the object too tightly in our meditation practice because by doing that we may easily lose the object.

In other words, that will bring about the fault of meditation called 'excitement', which is like a distraction. And with that, we lose the object. In addition, our focus on the object cannot be too relaxed. If it is too relaxed then we fall into another fault of meditation called 'laxity or sinking', losing the clarity of the object, to the point that if we stay in that state of sinking for too long, we could doze off to sleep. Therefore our physical posture and mentally engaging the object have to be balanced.

It is important for our meditation, and also whatever we do in life, that we are effective and productive. We have to make sure that we are physically and mentally relaxed; we also have to make sure that our mind is not too influenced by outer distractions. Once we have stabilised our mind, it is easier to cultivate a virtuous state of mind. If we have a virtuous state of mind, then everything becomes virtuous, regardless of how we spend our time. Let us do a short breathing meditation together.

[Meditation]

To continue our teaching on the *Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, we are now up to the presentation on the stages of the path for the person of the great scope. The presentation begins with the teaching on the awakening mind of bodhicitta. Previously we have covered the teachings about the rarity and the meaning of the human life of leisure and endowments; death and impermanence; the law of karma or cause and effect; and the shortcomings of cyclic existence or samsara. Also, we have covered topics such as the importance of relying on the perfect spiritual guide, as well as taking refuge in the Three Jewels.

If you consider your own situation and the situation of all other living beings, then there is a universal truth in how we and all other beings wish to have happiness and do not want any unhappiness or suffering. When we consider the kind of happiness that we seek then of course we want the highest form of happiness. If we ask how long we want

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that happiness, then we all would want that happiness not to be just short-term happiness for two days or ten days; there is no doubt we would naturally wish for that happiness to be permanent.

On the other hand, when we think about the kind of suffering we are trying to avoid, we are not just trying to avoid great suffering but also the smallest forms of suffering. If we had a choice, we would try to avoid even the tiniest suffering.

We need to focus on the happiness that we seek and the suffering that we try to avoid and to understand that both are dependent on their own causes and conditions. Do we create the causes for happiness, and for avoiding suffering? Even when we desperately want happiness, we don't create the causes for it because we are ignorant of how to go about it. Even if we are not ignorant and we do know the right causes, somehow we undermine or don't create the causes for happiness.

When we investigate the purpose behind the various things that we do in our life, the purpose is the same for everything we do, which is to find happiness. It can be happiness in this current life, in terms of, for example, wanting more leisure, or it could be happiness in our future lives in terms of working towards finding a good rebirth. That may be the main objective of our actions. Or our objective could be the high level of happiness from the attainment of the state of liberation from cyclic existence. Or the aim of our actions might be to achieve complete or supreme enlightenment. But in all of this, in whatever we are doing, we can say that we are all seeking some form of happiness.

So, we can look into all these different levels of happiness, from within this life to the everlasting or permanent state of happiness that we can achieve. For example, those who have achieved liberation, such as the shravakas, or the hearers of the lesser vehicles, have achieved the permanent state of liberation from cyclic existence. The kind of happiness or bliss they have achieved is permanent and everlasting. However, is that happiness the supreme or highest form of happiness? It is not. So even though the shravakas have achieved liberation and the everlasting state of happiness, they have not overcome all of the mental obstructions such as obstructions to an omniscient mind. They may have accomplished some happiness for themselves, but they have not accomplished the ultimate or the perfection of happiness for themselves in the sense they have not accomplished the ultimate goal of their own welfare, let alone the ultimate goal of accomplishing the welfare of other beings. In other words, they have not reached the state of perfection in terms of their own welfare and the welfare of other beings.

So, who has achieved the state of perfection of fulfilling the welfare of oneself and of all other beings? The answer is only the fully enlightened beings or the buddhas. They have reached a state of perfection of all good qualities and attained the highest level of enlightenment, happiness and bliss. So, the next thing for us to think about now is, 'How can I reach that state of the highest enlightenment?' The answer is through perfecting all the bodhisattvas' deeds, such as the six perfections. We need to engage in the six perfections to reach enlightenment.

In order to engage in the bodhisattvas' deeds of the six perfections, it is necessary to be very courageous and determined to achieve the highest enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This is the bodhisattvas' spirit of the awakening mind of bodhicitta, which is well reflected in this prayer from Shantideva's text, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*: 'For as long as there is space and for as long as there are sentient beings, may I too remain and eliminate all beings from all the suffering and misery.' As indicated in this verse, we need to cultivate this state with courage and determination.

But is it possible to cultivate the high degree of spirit or determination of bodhisattvas, or the awakening mind of bodhicitta? If we think about and understand the potential or the basic nature of our mind, then we can see it is definitely possible. It is said that the nature of the mind is clear light or luminous, and all the defilements are adventitious or temporary. If we contemplate the meaning of this statement which is from a sutra, then we can understand that no matter how many afflictions there are, they don't pollute the basic nature of our mind. That is because the basic nature of our mind is clear and is luminous. These afflictions or defilements are not a natural part of our mind; they don't affect the nature of our mind and can therefore be removed from our mind.

There is a remedy to each of the mental afflictions. When we understand that there is a remedy for each affliction, that gives us an idea that the mental afflictions can be eliminated. Therefore, when we apply this kind of logic, we can establish that it is indeed possible to achieve the state of perfect and complete enlightenment.

There is no doubt that it is possible for us to cultivate the awakening mind of bodhicitta, therefore we should be motivated and try to practise training our mind to give rise to this awakening mind. Starting from this moment, we can try to direct our whole focus to make it a priority to cultivate and develop the altruistic mind of bodhicitta. With a bodhicitta mind, we are directing our attention towards how we can benefit other beings, and a person who devotes their life towards benefitting other beings, whether it be all their needs in this lifetime or finding a good rebirth in the future, will also be taking care of all of their own needs. So they don't need to worry about that. All of our wishes will be accomplished automatically with the practice of bodhicitta mind.

In some societies, some people work towards making a difference to their community, towards helping others; they always focus on that. As a result, not only are the needs of their family and friends fulfilled but as a by-product of looking after others, all of their own needs are also fulfilled and things take care of themselves. So it is important to recognise the tremendous benefit of cultivating a bodhicitta mind, not only for all other sentient beings, but it is also an effective way to accomplish our own aims.

Regarding the bodhicitta mind benefitting others, we hear quite frequently in His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teachings how the main source of all our suffering is our self-centred mind. The selfish attitudes that we hold within us, where we only worry about 'I', or just 'my own family', or 'my country', highlight divisions between 'I' or

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ourselves and others. And we hold strongly onto this self-centred or self-cherishing mind. His Holiness says self-centredness is the main source of all problems – on a personal level, on a community level, and on a global level. However, if instead of focussing on ourselves alone, we focus on all the other people around us, we see that fundamentally they are just like us.

No matter how much other people are different from us, they are all the same as us in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. So on the basis of that, we cherish other sentient beings and then direct our actions towards benefitting them. This is how we create a more peaceful world, a peaceful environment that brings us all, ourselves and others, more ease and happiness.

Bodhicitta is itself a cause to bring about all the levels of happiness that we talked about before. If we develop and cultivate a bodhicitta mind, we will not only find happiness in this life but also have a better rebirth in a future life. And through the bodhicitta mind, we can even achieve liberation from samsara. In fact, bodhicitta will lead us to the highest and most perfect state of enlightenment.

So what is a bodhicitta mind? How do we define a bodhicitta mind? A verse from Maitreya's text *Abhisamayalankara* or *The Ornament for Clear Realisations* says: 'It is the awakening mind that wishes to achieve the perfect and the complete state of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.' This is really the defining statement of bodhicitta, and the main cause of the bodhicitta is compassion. This definition indicates two components to bodhicitta or two aspirations: i) aspiration for benefitting other beings and ii) aspiration for enlightenment. Hence, bodhicitta is a primary mind which is concomitant with the two aspirations, aimed at the state of complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. It is rooted in compassion.

I want to highlight the benefits of the awakening mind of bodhicitta, which has the potential to accomplish the welfare of oneself and of all other sentient beings. To highlight the benefits of the bodhicitta mind, it is said that bodhicitta is a door of the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. A person who has generated the bodhicitta mind and entered the Great Vehicle is called a Mahayanist, or a follower of the Great Vehicle, in the sense that she or he has entered into the Mahayana path. It is like when you pass through the door, then you are inside the house – otherwise, you are outside the house. Likewise, bodhicitta is a gateway, an entrance door to the Mahayana path.

Therefore, someone who has not generated bodhicitta cannot be called a Mahayanist or a member of the Mahayana vehicle, no matter what other qualities or credentials they may possess. Essentially, the bodhicitta mind reflects the highly developed sense of altruism or the thought of benefitting others. Bodhicitta is really the core element of the Mahayana path. If we take into account the Buddha's stories and decide to follow in his footsteps, then we should begin our journey to complete enlightenment by cultivating a bodhicitta mind. Because of his bodhicitta mind, the Buddha was able to reach the final stage of enlightenment. Not only that, but after he achieved enlightenment, the Buddha taught the Dharma, consisting

of 84,000 teachings, to benefit all sentient beings, because of his mind of bodhicitta.

In the *Heart Sutra*, which the Buddha taught in the second turning of the wheel of the Dharma, there is a line that says: 'All the buddhas of the three times (past, present and future) have reached this complete and perfect state of enlightenment through perfecting the perfection of wisdom.' 'The perfection of wisdom' refers to the wisdom realising emptiness. That wisdom realising emptiness becomes a cause to reach complete enlightenment, because of the support of the bodhicitta mind, that is, by conjoining wisdom with the bodhicitta mind.

In other words, without the bodhicitta mind then that wisdom of emptiness is powerless in terms of reaching complete enlightenment. It is by the virtue of this bodhicitta mind, or the influence and the force of the bodhicitta mind, that makes this wisdom of emptiness a cause to achieve supreme enlightenment. As it is said in the sutras: 'All the buddhas of the three times reach enlightenment through the perfection of wisdom and bodhicitta.'

We will stop the teaching here, but before we finish, we can think of the virtuous merit that we might have accumulated here through giving the teaching from my part and listening to the teaching from your part. Imagine accumulating all that virtue and merit within us and as we recite this prayer dedicate this merit to: 'May the precious mind of bodhicitta that has not arisen, arise; may that which has already arisen not diminish but keep increasing'. So, we are dedicating the merit that we have accumulated here tonight towards developing and perfecting the bodhicitta mind.

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Edited Version*

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