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## Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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For meditation practice to be effective, we should have a calm and peaceful mind. So, before beginning meditation practice or engaging in any activity, we get rid of anything that is troubling, bothering or distracting us by doing a short breathing meditation.

When our mind becomes calm and stabilised we generate the proper motivation or intention to begin our practice. The best motivation is to cultivate the bodhicitta mind, which is wishing for the complete enlightenment of all sentient beings. When we begin the practice with the motivation of bodhicitta our subsequent actions will be very wholesome.

So, let us begin with a few minutes of breathing meditation, calm our minds down and cultivate the proper motivation.

We are up to the teaching on generating the awakening mind of bodhicitta, which we said is an advanced or developed state of altruism – the thought of benefitting other beings.

All the buddhas in the past initially attained the state of buddhahood by engaging in the bodhisattva deeds and then, after attaining buddhahood, they performed the enlightened deeds of benefitting others. All this is due to the bodhicitta mind. Putting this to one side, we need to ask ourselves if a bodhicitta mind is relevant in our current life and, if so, how do we cultivate it? If we see a benefit, then naturally we will become motivated to try and generate a bodhicitta mind. For example, when a merchant sees that his trade is profitable, he is prepared to put in a lot of effort, without complaint. Similarly, it is important to understand the benefits of generating bodhicitta. If we understand, without any doubt, that bodhicitta is truly a source of great happiness and joy in our everyday life, then naturally we will be motivated to generate this mind.

In Maitreya's text, Ornament for Clear Realisations, one verse compares someone with a sharp mind to another with a dull mind, and how different they are in terms of investigating things. Beings with sharp faculties primarily use logic and reason when analysing things. For them, it is not enough to simply depend on the teachings of the Buddha. They must analyse things through their own reasoning and logic. We should also try to adopt the approach of those with sharp faculties in studying and practising the Dharma.

We understand the fact that we are all the same in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. However, even though we want happiness, we don't find it. On the other hand, even though we do not want to suffer, we experience it. For instance, we are subject to the suffering which relates to birth, aging, sickness, and death. Therefore, we must think about what we need to do to reverse our

situation now – that is, to find happiness and avoid suffering. Because everything depends on causes and conditions we need to think about the true causes and effects of happiness and suffering.

In his first discourse on the four noble truths the Lord Buddha taught about suffering first because we must first recognise true suffering. Then, the Buddha taught on the second noble truth – the true cause of suffering – so that we understand that we must eliminate the cause of that suffering. In this way, Buddha showed us how to uproot suffering.

So, what is the main cause of the various sufferings and unhappiness we experience in our everyday life? We will find that the main cause is related to the kinds of thoughts and emotions we generate – such as afflictive emotions in the form of anger, hatred, desire and so forth. We should think about what happens when we experience anger and hatred. How do we feel? Do we feel good? Of course not. In fact, when anger is present, we feel disturbed and agitated. In this state of mind we can harm not only ourselves but others as well. Anger can be a cause of harm or unhappiness for our family members and neighbours or even someone who has been helpful and kind to us and to whom we should feel grateful.

In the Guru Puja there is a line that says, 'The source of all downfalls is the self-cherishing mind'. This self-cherishing, self-centred mind is a kind of mental attitude which is only concerned about one's own wellbeing and not the wellbeing of anyone else. So, from this line we can understand that all the unwanted things or downfalls in our life are rooted in self-cherishing. This means that afflictive emotions, such as anger which brings us suffering, are derived from self-cherishing. We get angry because we cannot tolerate any harm and loss to ourselves due to the strong attachment towards ourselves.

Because of the strong attachment to the self or 'I' and holding onto self-cherishing, we easily lose our temper and are vulnerable to undesirable situations. The occurrence of undesirable things is like somebody hitting the 'I' or the self within us, and this we cannot tolerate. Whereas, if the same thing happens to a stranger, it doesn't really affect us because we don't have any attachment or feelings towards that stranger's 'I'. So, we can see that this anger is the immediate cause of our problem and that it is rooted in the self-cherishing or self-centred mind.

As much as possible, we should try to recognise the disadvantages of the self-cherishing mind. In order to overcome those disadvantages and to reduce the self-cherishing mind, we should train our mind with the practise of meditation. With this practice, we reflect on the benefits of cherishing other beings instead of reflecting on ourselves and our own needs. In this way, we replace the self-cherishing mind with the mind of cherishing others.

We must remember that, as human beings, we are gifted with an intelligent mind that can examine and investigate things. This wisdom knowledge is our best resource. Lesser forms of life – like animals – do not have the intelligence human beings possess, so they don't have the capacity to think about much, such as remembering their past or having a sense of judgment. Human beings can think about the past, future and present events of their life.

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Humans possess a brilliant brain and have the ability to analyse, think deeply and make decisions due to their incredible minds.

So, the power of our intelligence and the sense of discriminative wisdom human beings possess, is unique to human beings. If we compare ourselves with animals, in terms of the power of the sensory faculties, we are nothing special because the sense organs of some animals are much sharper than ours. Likewise, if we talk about our physical size and strength, we find that some animals are much stronger and have a bigger physical build than us.

The writings of Shantideva reflect a lot on his thoughts about the bodhicitta mind and its benefits, including those drawn from his own experience. Based on his own findings and analysis, he generated the bodhicitta mind by fully understating its meaning and benefits.

In *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, Shantideva says:

It is like the supreme gold-making elixir,  
For it transforms the unclean body we have taken  
Into the priceless jewel of a buddha-form  
Therefore, firmly seize this awakening mind.

Here, the bodhicitta mind is likened to an alchemic solution that, upon touch, can transform any metal into gold. Likewise, when the bodhicitta mind arises it can transform an impure or unclean body that is a product of karma and mental afflictions into the priceless body of a buddha.

There is another verse in *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* which says:

All other virtues are like plantain trees;  
For after bearing fruit, they simply perish.  
Yet the perennial tree of the awakening mind  
Unceasingly bears fruit and thereby flourishes  
without end.

This touches on the benefits of a bodhicitta mind by saying it is not like a plantain tree that dies after yielding its fruit. Like a bodhi-tree that produces leaves continuously, a bodhicitta mind produces inexhaustible results. The implication is that it is not like other kinds of virtue we accumulate, such as the virtue to find a good rebirth or even achieve liberation from cyclic existence. These virtues produce a result once, like the virtue which produces the result of gaining a good rebirth. But it does not produce that result again. However, the emphasis in the verse is that, with a bodhicitta mind, the fruit or the results that arise from that mind are endless.

Furthermore, *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* says:

Like entrusting myself to a brave man when greatly  
afraid  
By entrusting myself to this awakening mind I shall be  
swiftly liberated  
Even if I have committed extremely unbearable  
wrongs,  
Why then do the conscientious not devote themselves  
to this?

These lines mention the benefits of bodhicitta in terms of its power to purify the great force of negativities. By depending on the bodhicitta mind, we can immediately purify even heinous crimes, like the extremely negative

karma of murdering our parents and so forth. Relying on bodhicitta is like relying on a strong and brave person in the face of danger. Bodhicitta is regarded as one of the most powerful practices in terms of purifying negativities and obstacles and accumulating merits. Therefore, the first chapter of *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* begins with the presentation on the benefits of bodhicitta. So, we too begin with the benefits of bodhicitta before talking about how to generate it.

Just before we finish, I think I should mention that unfortunately our kind teacher Geshe Doga has been hospitalised due to some health issues. Venerable Geshe Doga has been a resident at Tara Institute for many years and, for so many people, is a special spiritual guide and the most kind and grateful guru. As far as I know, all the treatments are going well, and hopefully Geshe-la will be discharged from hospital in the next couple of days. However, it is important that we all pray for his quick recovery and long life and that we never be separated from him or from receiving teachings from him.

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