
Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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When giving a Dharma teaching the benefits of the Dharma are taught first. Accordingly, in my talk last week we discussed the benefits of generating bodhicitta.

We are up to verse 10 of the *Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* which reads:

When your mothers, who've loved you since time
without beginning,
Are suffering, what use is your own happiness?
Therefore to free limitless living beings
Develop the altruistic intention-
This is the practice of bodhisattvas.

The verse asks us what is the point of striving for our own happiness and purpose when there are others who, just like our current mother, have been extremely kind to us since beginningless time, but who are deprived of the happiness they wish for and afflicted with the suffering they do not want? Is it right for us to ignore their situation and just work towards finding personal happiness? What is the use of finding personal happiness when all our mother sentient beings are enduring such miserable conditions?

In everyday life we despise those who do not support their loved ones and friends in a time of need. Our common-sense dictates that if someone is nice to us we should be nice to them. We have less regard for people who are not grateful to those from whom they have received help and support, particularly when they do not return the favour of helping those who helped them. This is what the verse is saying. We cannot just think of our own needs while ignoring the needs of all other suffering sentient beings who have been as kind to us as our own mother.

On the basis of this understanding, we do not want to just seek personal happiness, but we want to benefit all motherly sentient beings. Thus, we cultivate the intention to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all other sentient beings. This altruistic intention is called the awakening mind of bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is the thought of achieving the state of buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings. There are two main methods to cultivate this awakening mind of bodhicitta. The first is called the Sevenfold Cause and Effect method and the second is the method of Exchanging Self for Others. The first two lines of verse 10 refer to the Sevenfold Cause and Effect method.

The word 'mothers' in the first line refers to seeing all other sentient beings as being one's mother, who have shown us kindness and love just like our current mother. A mother's love, affection and care towards her children is quite incredible. All beings that are born from a womb or from an egg have mothers. Without depending on our mother's love and care we wouldn't have survived.

She breastfed us and took great care of us throughout all the stages of our development. The reason why she cares for and benefits us is because of her love for us. Otherwise, she might have abandoned us. In the same way, if we have love for our mothers, we will look after and take care of them. Therefore, if the love is mutual between parents and children, their relationship will be of benefit to both. Whether it is from the mother's side or from the child's side, if there is hatred instead of love, then there will be no mutual support and benefit for each other.

Generally, the close bond between parents and children occurs naturally because the kind of love that they have towards each other is borne naturally.

If you compare the love shared between a mother and her child and the love we share with others, we will notice that the latter is very biased. There our love is conditional on what the other person does for us, or their physical looks. The mother's love for her child on the other hand, is unconditional, impartial and unbiased. It is not subject to what the child does or how it behaves towards her.

One of the conditions that differentiates impartial love from partial love is the conduct or the appearance of the other person with whom we share our love. Impartial love does not depend on conditions. For example, the facial appearance of the person has got nothing to do with the impartial love, nor the conduct of the other person. Whereas partial love depends on how others behave towards you. In fact, when they behave badly towards us, we become angry with them.

Partial love has a limit and comes with pre-conditions. It is subject to the behaviour and conduct of the other person. Impartial love, on the other hand, has no such conditions and has no limit - it is not subject to the other person's behaviour and conduct.

Whatever the expression or conduct of other people, the impartial love for them doesn't change. Impartial love is based simply on the fact that the other person is a person like yourself, wishing for happiness and not wishing for suffering. Impartial love is not based on anything else.

We have great love and concern for ourselves. The basis of love for ourselves is simply because we want happiness and not suffering. Therefore, the basis of cultivating impartial love for all sentient beings means recognising that, just as you wish for happiness and not suffering, so too do all sentient beings. They are no different. They are the same as us in that they want happiness and do not want suffering. In this way, if we recognise all other sentient beings as the same as ourselves, it is possible to extend to all other sentient beings the same love that we feel towards ourselves - which is simply on the basis of wanting happiness and not suffering.

Pure love for others must arise simply on the basis of recognising other sentient beings as a person like yourself, knowing that they too have the same mind of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. When we have cultivated this kind of mental attitude, then whenever we look at others, we see them as no different from ourselves; hence we will love them unconditionally. For such impartial love to arise we need to stop any consideration of what they do for us, how they appear to us or how much

wealth they possess etc. We simply look at that person and let love arise on the basis of the fact that they are just a human being with a mind such as ours.

In other words, when we try to cultivate an impartial love, we need to distinguish the person from their conduct and character. With pure love we focus only on the other person as being a person. Focussing on the person's action, character and how they express themselves causes the love to become partial, and subject to being affected by desires, hatred and so on.

If we cultivate our love simply for the person themselves, regardless of their conduct and character, it is possible to extend our love towards any being. Then the love becomes impartial and inclusive of all sentient beings.

To cultivate this impartial love, we first need to cultivate a state of equanimity, a state of seeing all sentient beings as equal. Regardless of whether they are friends, enemies, or strangers, we need to see all of them as totally equal. Our normal mental attitude is one that classifies other beings into friends, enemies and so forth. This classification is purely a creation of our own mind because it is not as if our friends and enemies were inherently born as our enemies or friends.

We can also understand from our own experience that someone who was once an enemy can later become a friend and vice versa. People aren't indelibly stamped as a friend or an enemy. It all depends on our own mental perspective and the way we perceive that person. Their conduct and actions have nothing to do with how we perceive them as a person, regardless of whether they are friends or enemies. By reflecting on this we can cultivate a state of equanimity.

In this meditation on cultivating the state of equanimity we must overcome desire and attachment towards friends and hatred for enemies. We must cultivate the attitude that sees both friends and enemies as being completely equal. Having made all friends, enemies and strangers equal in our mind with the state of equanimity, we then proceed to the Sevenfold Cause and Effect method.

The first step is recognising all beings as one's mother. Of course, in this current life we have only one mother. Here we must see how all sentient beings have been our mother. To do this we have to establish the concept of life before and after and understand that this is not our first life. We had a past life and will have a future life. When we establish that we have a past life, then the same logic can establish that we have had a life before that. In this way we can infer that our life is infinite. By relying on this logic, we can understand that we had an infinite number of rebirths and hence we have depended on other beings who have given us life infinite times. So, this is how we can establish logically that in fact each sentient being has been our mother on infinite occasions.

It is not enough to simply have an intellectual understanding that all sentient beings have been our mothers. The understanding needs to be experiential. Doing a bit of contemplation and saying, 'Oh, that makes sense' is not enough. We must familiarise and accustom our mind to this understanding and develop it to the point where we experience it as fact. Then when we see any

single sentient being, we will see them as our mother. We must make ourselves so familiar with this understanding that we will experience all sentient beings as our mother. When we think about it from the point of view of our experience, we realise that recognising all sentient beings as our mother is not that simple.

Some people raise the argument that they can accept the fact that everyone has been our mother in countless lives and that they must have supported us. They say that it then follows that all sentient beings may have been our enemies in countless lives as well; they must have caused us a lot of suffering and harm. Therefore, they say, receiving love and kindness from others and receiving harm from them make the harm and love equal in that sense.

If we have to choose which logic to follow, we have to examine which is more beneficial. Is there any gain for us in seeing all sentient beings as our enemies? Or is there more gain in recognising all sentient beings as our mothers? This is something we have to analyse and decide for ourselves.

In this instruction on the Sevenfold Cause and Effect technique you begin to train your mind by first recognising all beings as your mother. When you have finished that, you move to the next stage of remembering the kindness of all other sentient beings. Following that, comes cultivating the thought of repaying their kindness. You then engage in meditation to cultivate loving kindness and a feeling of endearment towards all sentient beings. Next you cultivate compassion and then superior intention, and finally you actualise the result of bodhicitta. Through engaging in the Sevenfold Cause and Effect technique, stage by stage, we are able to generate bodhicitta.

We will return to this topic next week.

Thank you.

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