
Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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Greetings to everyone. As usual we shall begin with a bit of breathing meditation together, so that we gain more training and familiarity with meditation practice.

Why do we practice meditation? It has a lot of benefits, not only long-term benefits, in terms of finding a better rebirth in the future and achieving liberation and so forth, and even in terms of this life, it is very useful for living a peaceful, happy and stable life. Then we won't be too susceptible to the changing conditions and circumstances of our lives.

When we examine the source of our ongoing problems and unhappiness in our everyday life, we find that the main source is not really external, rather, it lies within ourselves. We find that the main source is all the uncontrolled afflictive emotions that we continuously allow to arise within us, such as strong attachment and jealousy. All these afflictive emotions are the main source of our suffering. Furthermore, if we look for the cause of all these uncontrolled afflictive emotions which arise within us, we find that the main cause is our lack of control over our mind. Because of not having control over our mind, we find our mind always tends to wander off after external objects and this serves as a condition for afflictive emotions to arise within us. Meditation practice is a tool for training our mind so that the mind, instead of always wandering outside, will remain within us in peace and clarity. In this way, we will be able to reduce or manage any disturbing thoughts and emotions that arise within us.

It is not that difficult to understand what we are talking about here. If we think about it, we can easily understand how much the wellbeing of our own state of mind matters to us in terms of finding peace and happiness and living a more stable life, as well as being more successful, productive and creative. We understand that whatever we do and whatever activities we undertake, if we are in a very relaxed and peaceful state of mind then we can do it better and more effectively. Therefore, we can easily understand the benefits of having a calm and relaxed state of mind.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, we face challenges and difficulties when we engage in meditation practice. This is because, as we engage in meditation practice, we notice how much we lack control over our own mind. We will notice how our mind is easily distracted and how the various kinds of thoughts that arise within us are unstoppable. Whereas with meditation practice, we are trying to not be influenced or overpowered by all these thoughts which keep arising. It is normal for beginners to face these kinds of challenges and difficulties when they engage in meditation.

We should not give up on our practice because we are facing these difficulties. If we recall *The Bodhisattva's Way*

of Life, Shantideva says that there is nothing that will not become easier through familiarity. This is to say that if we find certain things very difficult initially, it is because we are not used to them. However, the same thing becomes very easy as we become more familiar with it and become used to it. Therefore, we should understand that even though we may find meditation practice very difficult, we should encourage ourselves by thinking that it will become easier if we practise and train ourselves over and over again.

Now we can do just a few minutes of breathing meditation.

If you find the meditation is very difficult or going badly, the early masters advised that we take a short break and do a few rounds of long and deep breathing in and out. This will be very beneficial.

To continue the teaching on the *Thirty-seven Practices of Bodhisattvas*, we are up to the topic of cultivating the bodhicitta mind. There are two main methods for cultivating the bodhicitta mind – the sevenfold cause and effect method and the method of exchanging self for others. We finished the first one, so now we will continue with the second method which is exchanging self for others. I will try my best to make it clear, but I will have to be concise.

In the text, **the method of exchanging self for others** is mentioned in verse 11 which reads:

All suffering comes from the wish for your own
happiness
Perfect Buddhas are born from the thought to help
others.
Therefore exchange your own happiness
For the suffering of others–
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

To summarise the meaning of this verse: in this current life we seek happiness every day. If we consider the countless number of lives we had in the past we can say that we have been continuously seeking happiness. So, since beginningless time we have been seeking happiness as well as striving very hard to find that happiness. But in our current situation, we see that we have not found that happiness, nor have we been able to avoid the unhappiness or suffering we have been trying to avoid.

On the other hand, if we consider the life of Shakyamuni Buddha, we can understand that the Buddha too would have looked for happiness and wanted to avoid suffering and strived towards achieving that goal. In the end the Buddha was able to find complete happiness and permanently avoid suffering. So, in this way, if we make a **comparison between ourselves and all the buddhas** or the fully enlightened beings, then one thing we have in common is that since beginningless time we have been trying hard to find happiness and satisfaction. The difference is that we have failed to find happiness, whereas all the buddhas have been successful in finding happiness. Therefore, it is important and necessary for us to understand how these differences between us and the buddhas occurred. Why have we failed to find happiness and avoid suffering when the Buddha succeeded in doing that? The answer lies in the different mental attitudes. In our case we hold a self-cherishing mind. We strive to find happiness mainly for our own self. Whereas all the actions

of the buddhas are motivated by compassion and the mind of cherishing others and directed towards benefitting other beings. This is the main difference between us and the buddhas.

Exchanging self for others means exchanging the object of our mental attitude of self-cherishing with the mind of cherishing others. This mind of cherishing others instead of self-cherishing doesn't mean in the sense of exchanging one material object for another object. Rather, what we are talking about here is that instead of cherishing and loving our self or I, we cherish others, love them, care for them and think of the needs of other beings.

When we **consider the difference between the love we have for ourselves and the love we have for others**, such as for those who are close to us (like our relatives), we find that our love for others is really based on what they do for us and how they appear to our mind. Therefore, our love for others, for our relatives and so forth, is biased or partial in that it is subject to what others do for us and how they appear to us. On the other hand, the strong love we have for ourselves is not conditional upon anything other than our desire for happiness and to avoid suffering. In that sense it is considered as love without limit.

As part of the training and meditation on this method of exchanging self for others, we first need to train ourselves in the **meditation on the equality of self and others**. In this meditation we reflect upon what are the things that are equal between ourselves and others. For instance, we are equal in terms of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. We are also equal in terms of being deprived of the happiness that we want and afflicted with the suffering that we do not want.

For example, if someone hits you or speaks harshly to you, then of course you won't like it because it harms you. In the same way, we have to understand that if we hit others or speak to them harshly, they will be harmed and they won't like that. That also demonstrates the equality of ourselves and others.

In the lamrim text, this is explained with an example of ten beggars, all of whom are experiencing the same level of poverty and starvation. If they come to you to beg for food, it will put you in a difficult position of giving food to one and not to others. Likewise, if we imagine there are ten people who are equally suffering from sickness, we can't choose to treat some and not others. So, through this meditation on equality, we have recognised that all other sentient beings are equal.

The next stage is to extend benefit and love to them. To cultivate this thought of benefitting or cultivating love and compassion for all other sentient beings, here we need to **recall the sevenfold cause and effect meditation**. As part of that meditation, we need to recognise all sentient beings as having been our mother and to cultivate a sense of connectedness and gratitude. In order to cultivate love and compassion for all beings, we must remember their kindness and what benefits we have received from them.

Just as how our current life mother and those who are close to us, like relatives and so forth, have been kind to us, we can **recognise all sentient beings as our mother** in the past and through this remember their love, kindness and care

towards us. In this way, we can cultivate love and compassion for them. Not only that, but we should also reflect on the fact that all the material possessions, and **necessary things that we have and which support us have come from other sentient beings**. We depend on others, whether directly or indirectly, for all our possessions, all the things we have; in fact, everything we have comes from them. That is another way of remembering the kindness of other beings. The clothes we are wearing and the house we are living in were made by others. Similarly, without depending on others, we cannot achieve any reputation or a good name. If we have any titles, or qualifications and skills that we think we have accomplished, they too are dependent on others; we can think like this to remember the kindness of other beings.

So, you can see how everything in our life is interconnected with others. A good example of how everything is interconnected is the rapid spread of the Coronavirus, from the original source of one person.

When we talk about cultivating **true love and compassion for others**, it should not be dependent on the other being reciprocating. We should not think that we will only extend our love and compassion to the other person on the condition that they reciprocate with their love, and their closeness. Regardless of whether others appreciate our love or not, it is important to understand that we show love to others because it is the most beneficial for ourselves and the best spiritual practice that we can do.

To clarify, let's take the example of a very valuable material object that we possess. We cherish it and are attached to it. Why? Because it is of great benefit and value to us. That's the only reason. We don't ask whether that object likes us or not, because the object doesn't have the capacity to like us and show interest in us. But we like it and show interest in it because we see it's of benefit to us. This is how we should love and cherish other beings.

We must see the value and benefit of this love and not have any expectation that other sentient beings will appreciate or acknowledge our love and so forth. As said before, we don't have any expectation that the material object we are attached to will like us, and anyway, inanimate objects don't have feelings. However, if we cherish other beings and love them, they are not like inanimate objects, they can share their love and friendship with us. For example, dogs and cats know how to reciprocate love and affection for their owners.

If instead of love, we hold hatred towards other beings then we are the ones who will be disadvantaged and end up becoming a victim of that hatred. Because of that, we end up suffering. **All other beings are, in fact, the source of our happiness and joy**. Therefore, if we show hatred towards them and cause them harm, we will be harming ourselves and destroying our own source of happiness. No matter how much wealth we possess, how expensive our cars are, those things have no ability to show us affection or love. We see many examples of people who are surrounded by a lot of material wealth, yet they are deprived of happiness; they are lonely and living a very sad life. Therefore, other sentient beings are the source of our own happiness, in the sense that if we generate love

and compassion for them, it can result in bringing more happiness into our own lives.

The other thing which is relevant here is to **contemplate the fact that all things are impermanent** in nature. This is to say that we won't be together with all the people we love and who we are close to forever. Sooner or later, maybe after seventy or eighty years, we will die, and we will be separated from them by death. Therefore, we should think about how to make the best use of our life whilst we are alive, which is a short duration when you think about the nature of the impermanence of life. One of the lamrim texts uses the example of a prisoner who is to be executed in a month. If he spends his short period of time left fighting with fellow prisoners, everybody will think he is crazy. Our life span is very short. If we reflect on this, it might be helpful for developing our own attitude towards other people, so that it is more friendly, loving and patient.

In short, what we find here is that whether our goal is to find happiness in this life or to find happiness in the future life, or even if our goal is to achieve the stage of buddhahood, the realisation of all our goals is dependent on all other sentient beings. Therefore, generating love and compassion for other sentient beings is an essential practice. Today we focus on generating love and compassion through the method of exchanging self for others. With this method we need to recognise the shortcomings of self-cherishing, and on the other hand, the benefit of cherishing other beings. Before we apply that method, we have to meditate and gain the realisation of the equality of ourselves and all other beings. All of these we must study; but study and learning alone is not enough, we must also contemplate and meditate on it. When we say 'meditate on it', it means we train ourselves, we familiarise ourselves by thinking and reflecting on this over and over again until we can experience and infuse our understanding with our feeling, and experiencing it. When we approach the Dharma in this way, of blending study and practice together, then we can find a lot of benefits, otherwise simply studying will not bring us the full benefits of our spiritual practice.

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