
Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

༄༅། །རྒྱལ་སྐྱེས་ལག་ལེན་སོ་བདུན་མ།

Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

17 March 2021

Good evening everyone, I hope you are mentally and physically happy and relaxed.

As usual, we will begin with a few minutes of breathing meditation together.

[Meditation]

We are up to the topic of the awakening mind of bodhicitta. There are two main methods to generate bodhicitta: the sevenfold cause and effect method and the method of exchanging self for others. Of the two, we have finished discussing the first one and we have started to discuss the second method of exchanging self for others.

Tonight, I am going to review what we covered in last week's teaching. Bodhicitta can be cultivated through both methods but the method of exchanging self for others is particularly important for our mind training and for meditation. Forgetting about the long-term benefits in terms of our future lives, we need to apply it to our welfare in this life. By applying this method, we can truly bring a positive change in our everyday life, by bringing more joy and happiness and so forth. So, it is very important and beneficial for us to train our mind with both of these methods for generating bodhicitta.

Equalising and exchanging self for others to generate bodhicitta.

As mentioned earlier, the method of exchanging self for others is the more effective and powerful of the two methods for generating bodhicitta. This we can understand by looking at the key difference between these two methods. In the sevenfold cause and effect method, we generate bodhicitta through cultivating love and compassion by recognising all other sentient beings as our mother. Just like our view of our current life mother, we recognise and acknowledge all other sentient beings as our mother, and as such, that we have received the same kindness, affection, support and care from them. In this way, we generate a great sense of gratitude towards all sentient beings and feel love and compassion for them, through which bodhicitta is the culmination. However, through the method of exchanging self for others, we cultivate love and compassion and remember the kindness of other sentient beings not only when they have been our mother, but even when they haven't been our mother. In other words, whether they have been our mother or not, we recognise the kindness of all other sentient beings at all the times.

The meaning of equalising and exchanging self for others.

As previously discussed, the meaning of the method of exchanging self for others is, in Tibetan, called *dag-shen nyam-je*. *Dag* refers to self, *shen* refers to others, *nyam* means

equal and *je* means exchange or replace. This is the method called Equalising and Exchanging Self for Others. To apply this method, we first need to cultivate a sense of equality between ourselves and all other sentient beings; for instance, meditating on how we are all the same and equal in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Just as we do not want suffering but want happiness the same is true for all other sentient beings. This is the meaning of 'equalising' – the equality between us and all others. Here the word 'exchanging' literally means to exchange the self for others in the context of the two mental attitudes of self-cherishing and cherishing other beings. Right now we all have self-cherishing with which we have an inborn love and attachment towards ourselves, towards 'I', and towards the self. So here 'exchange' means exchanging that self for others, or with others, so that instead of self-cherishing, we have the mind of cherishing others.

Why do we need to cultivate the mind of exchanging self for others?

To understand the reason why we need to exchange the focus of all our attention and care and love towards other sentient beings instead of our self, we must assess our situation up until now to find out why we are going around and around, and not able to find the happiness we want and avoid the suffering that we do not want.

Our situation is such that, at the core of our heart, we have a strong, self-centred, self-cherishing mind, always worrying us. Not only that, but everything we do is aimed at fulfilling and serving our self-purpose. Yes, we may be working very hard, but all our effort and resources are directed towards the interest of the self, not only in this life, but in previous lives; we have been doing that for an immeasurable number of lives.

The next question is: what have we achieved? Have we achieved happiness for ourselves? No, we have not achieved the happiness that we are looking for. We have to understand that as long as we hold that self-cherishing mind, we will never find what we are looking for. Therefore, we must change our focus and our attention from the self towards others. Otherwise, if we continue with our whole attention focussed on the self-centred mind, then accordingly, our actions will all be directed towards fulfilling the self.

If we continue like this in the future, we simply won't achieve what we want. This is the reason why we need to understand and change the focus of our love and our attention from the self to others. As far as what we seek in our life, in the immediate timeframe we want some sort of pleasure or joy in our everyday life. Likewise, in the long run, we all want everlasting happiness, which is also possible to achieve.

But right now, we have not accomplished happiness because we are holding the self-cherishing mind or self-centred mind within us. But if instead we have cultivated the mind of cherishing other beings and use it as the main force to drive our actions, then we can definitely achieve lasting happiness. The Lord Buddha Shakyamuni achieved such lasting happiness primarily because of his generation of love and compassion for all other sentient beings.

How do we cultivate love and compassion for all other beings?

We can cultivate love and compassion through training our mind. The most effective way to do that is by understanding the benefits of, and the reasons for showing love and compassion for others. Such an understanding must arise from our intelligent mind through applying various reasons. We can think of a great many reasons why all other sentient beings deserve love and compassion from us. For instance, *our very survival depends very much upon others*. In this current life, our mother gave birth to our life, and after birth we were dependent upon her enormous care, and support from others, including our relatives, friends etc. There are many strangers who have indirectly benefited us and made this life possible for us to survive. We can logically understand how, in this life, our livelihood is dependent on the help and support of others. If we consider our past life, as we have discussed previously, every time we took a rebirth we can understand how the mother who gave birth to us supported us and showed us care and affection. If we go back to the past, we can understand the enormous care and support that we have received from others; not once, but countless numbers of times.

Just as our livelihood is totally dependent on others, we can also think of all the *things that give us pleasure and happiness and joy* such as food and so forth. *All of this also comes from other beings*. If we think of a plate of rice, it comes from the effort made by so many people; directly or indirectly. Likewise, with any item we can think of which we find very useful or helpful to us in our life comes from so many other people, directly or indirectly. As much as possible, we need to apply a reasoning mind to recognise the kindness of other beings.

Why should we feel grateful to others?

Yes, we understand we have received support from others. The food we eat, the clothes we wear and so forth come from others and we depend on them. However, we can argue that we have paid money for those things; others didn't just give them to us intentionally to help or benefit us. The key point here is that the reason we need to feel grateful and appreciative of other beings' help and kindness is that their support benefits us and brings us happiness. So, on that basis alone, we should appreciate and acknowledge the kindness of other beings. I gave an example last time of how if we have a useful and precious object, we will hold onto that object and look after it with great care. Yet when we think about that object, it is inanimate and doesn't have any intention to help or to benefit us. We cherish that object and hold it as very precious simply because it is of value and benefit to us.

We can also argue that we should we feel grateful to other beings because, just as they are kind to us, we are also equally kind to them for the same reasons. That means we are equal. So why would we feel grateful to them for what they have done for us? It is because we have also helped them. Based on this kind of thinking, if we do not show love and compassion towards others, then the consequence will be that we would be isolating ourselves from other beings. But we don't want that. Rather, we want to have more friends and more people close to us

because good friendship and harmonious relationships with others secures more happiness and support for us. So, from this angle, if we stop loving others and isolate ourselves from them, then it is the same as destroying the cause of happiness for ourselves. Simply put, others are crucial in bringing happiness and joy to our life.

Another reason we might find to show more love and compassion towards others is to **think about the impermanent nature of everything**. Sooner or later, we will be separated from other beings around us because we are all subject to death. Since being alive and living together is of such a short duration, why not be more positive and helpful to each other? Harmony and friendship are very important factors for our own and others' peace and happiness. And the main cause for that is showing love and care and compassion towards each other. The awareness of impermanence, which is the nature of all things, is beneficial. This is something we need to understand, and we should contemplate that, not once but repeatedly. This way of thinking has a positive impact on our mind.

There is a verse from Shantideva's *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* that says, 'what need is there to say much more, just know the difference between a child and the Buddha in conducting their actions'. A child's actions have a selfish purpose, whereas the purpose of the Buddha's deeds is to benefit others. That is the fundamental difference between the two.

Taking adversaries as the path.

What follows after this in the text is training the mind with bodhicitta, with a focus on the practical application of the bodhicitta mind, such as dealing with the various obstacles that we face in our practice and transforming them into the path or a favourable condition.

If someone steals your things

Verse 12 of *The Thirty-seven Practices of a Bodhisattva* reads:

Even if someone out of strong desire
Steals all your wealth or has it stolen
Dedicate to him your body, possessions,
And your virtues past, present and future
This is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

This verse is saying that if any other beings, out of strong desire or a selfish mind, come and steal our things by themselves or who have made other people do it for them, the bodhisattvas' practice is to let them have those things. Not only do bodhisattvas let them have those things, but they give them all their possessions, even their own body and virtues.

The author of this great text, Gyase Tokme himself, put this into practice. His own practice was a testimony to his teaching. For example, at one time Gyase Tokme was returning from a ritual service in a town, carrying some offerings from the host. But on the way, a bandit robbed him of all those offerings. However, he said to the bandit, 'You can have what you have taken from me, and you can also have these things'. So, he gave the bandit all his belongings. Furthermore, he advised the bandit, 'don't go that way, go this way'. This was to ensure the bandit didn't go into the town where Gyase Thokme had been, because the bandit would get into trouble if the people there

recognised the offerings he had taken. So, not only did Gyase Thokme let the bandit steal those things but he gave the bandit even more and ensured that he didn't lose them or get into trouble for possessing them.

Whenever any adverse situations happen in our life, we must recognise that there is a cause for these situations to happen. One of the important causes is our own karma or the actions that we have created in the past. We must understand that if we have not created the karma, that event wouldn't have happened. For example, there should be a target for an archer to aim an arrow. If there is no target, he won't shoot. Likewise, if we have not created a karma, there is no cause for the result to arise. Adverse situations happen because we have created the karmic cause for them, and we must acknowledge this karmic fact.

So, we will leave the teaching here with a 'good night' to everyone.

Transcribed by Bernii Wright

Edit 1 by Cynthia Karena

Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering

Edited Version

© Tara Institute