
Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

ཅུ་བཅུ་གསུམ་ལག་ལེན་སོ་བདུན་མ།

Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Tashi delek and greetings to all our Dharma friends.

As usual, we will begin with a short breathing meditation which will help to settle down all the agitated and distracted thoughts within our mind and bring about calm and peace. In the scriptures, there are about seven or eight sitting features for effective meditation practice. So of course, if you can adopt all these features in your meditation posture, that will be good. Otherwise, an especially important feature is to keep the back of the body straight. The benefit of this feature is to be able to do the meditation for a prolonged period, as well as added benefits in terms of maintaining concentration and so forth. In breathing meditation, we direct our mental focus just on the incoming and outgoing breath which helps to train and discipline our mind. Our mental attention is scattered everywhere, so in this meditation, we discipline or direct our mind to focus just on the breath. As we breathe in, we are aware, and we know that we are breathing in and then as we breathe out, we are aware and know that we are breathing out. The object is to keep our mental attention on the incoming and outgoing breath as much as possible.

We and all other sentient beings wish for happiness and to not experience suffering, in this as well as in future lives. What we now need to explore and find out is what the causes are for the happiness that we wish for, and the suffering that we do not wish for. Since we do not wish for suffering or unhappiness, we must abandon the causes of suffering. On the other hand, since we wish for happiness, we must create and accumulate the causes for that. The Lord Buddha advised that everyone is responsible for achieving their own happiness and avoiding their own suffering. The Buddha said that you are your own protector or master. Therefore, since we wish for happiness, it must occur to us that 'I must create the causes for happiness' and since we do not wish for suffering it must occur to us that 'I must abandon the cause for suffering'. There are causes for things to happen and it is due to causes that we experience suffering.

In the text we are studying, we find the kinds of causes that bring about suffering, and the text also gives us advice on how we can handle and cope with the suffering we experience as well as how to overcome the causes. We are up to verse 20 which reads:

20. *Though you conquer external foes, they will only increase.
Therefore with the militia of love and compassion
Subdue your own mind—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

This verse tells us that of all the obstacles, enemies, or threats that we face, the worst lies within us in the form of mental defilements such as anger, jealousy, desire and so forth. These defilements are our worst enemies and our worst threats. These are also the hardest or most difficult to win over. We learn here that just like extinguishing a fire, we can also destroy and extinguish these inner enemies. On the other hand, if we consider these inner enemies such as hatred, desire, jealousy and so forth, to be external obstacles or causes

of harm, we will then be waging a never-ending battle as we try to finish them off. If we defeat one external enemy, then there are two more that arise and then if we defeat those, then more arise. So, we will never be able to win over the enemy. We can observe for ourselves that even the most powerful and bravest person in the world is never able to win over all his enemies.

Rather than seeing the enemy as external and trying to defeat it with external means, we learn here that we should recognise internal enemies as the worst enemy of them all. We then find in this text that to defeat the inner enemy, we need to cultivate loving kindness and genuinely and sincerely wish for all other beings to have happiness and generate the compassion of wishing all other beings to be free of suffering. So, the text is saying that love and compassion are the means and weapon to conquer internal and external enemies.

Relating to the content of this verse, Shantideva's *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* gives an analogy of the ground being covered with prickles and thorns that are very difficult to walk on. It is impossible to cover the whole ground with material or leather to protect our feet. Likewise, it is also impossible for us to remove all the prickles and thorns from the ground. Therefore, Shantideva says, all we need to do is to simply cover our feet with leather. Similarly, meditating on love and compassion will be like covering our feet with leather to counteract all the enemies or the causes of harm to us. It says here that the best weapon or means of overcoming the external causes of suffering and harm is love and compassion.

The next verse of the text shows us that the causes of harm arise within our mind and how we can overcome this.

21. *Sensual pleasures are like saltwater:
The more you indulge, the more thirst increases.
Abandon at once those things which breed
Clinging attachment—
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

It says here that the *sensual pleasures are like saltwater*. Here 'sensual pleasures' refers to the form of pleasure that we experience when indulging the five sensory objects, like the beautiful forms that we can look at, beautiful sounds to hear, the pleasant fragrances, tastes and touch. However, none of these sensual objects has the quality to fully satisfy our mind. Sensual pleasure is like saltwater, it won't quench your thirst, and the more you drink, the thirstier you will become. Likewise, unless we control our desire for these sensual pleasures we will never be satisfied because they are like saltwater. The more you indulge in and experience them, the more you want to experience them and the more craving you will have for them. The advice here is to diminish our mental attachment or craving for these sensual objects by knowing that they will never give us full satisfaction.

Up to this point, the text has presented conventional or relative bodhicitta. In the subsequent verses, the text presents ultimate bodhicitta.

Here, 'ultimate bodhicitta' specifically refers to the direct wisdom of emptiness as gained by those on the Mahayana path of seeing and above. Therefore, we need to understand what ultimate truth means. The following verses will show us the benefits of gaining the wisdom of emptiness for ourselves and others in this life and in future lives.

'Emptiness' means things as they are. It is the ultimate mode of existence and reality, the final truth, the final reality and is not easy to understand. After achieving complete

enlightenment, the Lord Buddha remained in solitude for forty-five to forty-nine days, because he could not find suitable students to teach. The Buddha declared, 'Profound and peaceful, free from complexity, uncompounded luminosity – I have found a nectar-like Dharma. Yet if I were to teach it, no-one would understand, so I shall remain silent here in the forest.' This statement indicates the subtleties of the view of emptiness. Later, the Buddha began to teach on emptiness or the ultimate truth that he realised in a very skilful way. Initially, he taught emptiness on a gross level, such as the view of selflessness in terms of the absence of the autonomous or substantially subsistent self. Then he began to teach emptiness through the point of view of how things are dependent upon their causes and conditions. In this way, he progressed from presenting the gross level of selflessness to eventually presenting the subtle level of emptiness.

We also find in the life story of Je Tsongkhapa how at one point his main teacher on emptiness, Manjushri, began to impart the teaching on emptiness, and Je Tsongkhapa said 'I cannot understand it.' So, Manjushri stopped teaching and instructed Tsongkhapa to go and accumulate merit and engage in purification practices and to also continue studying all the great texts of the ancient Indian Buddhist masters. Accordingly, Tsongkhapa engaged in vigorous practices of accumulating merit, purifying negativities, and extensive study of major Buddhist literature, and through this, he found the ultimate view in the end.

So, it is vitally important that if we want to gain a precise understanding of emptiness, then we must start learning about it from the lowest level, which is the gross view of selflessness; just like climbing a ladder, we must start from the bottom. So first we must understand the view of selflessness in accordance with all the lower schools of Buddhist philosophy such as the Vaibhashika, Sautrantika and Chittamatra schools and finally get to Madhyamika. We must learn how the view of selflessness of each one of these schools is different from the view of the school above it. If we approach our learning in this way, there is a chance for us to understand the view of emptiness. Otherwise, it will be impossible.

The teaching on the view of emptiness or ultimate truth begins at Verse 22:

22. *Whatever appears is your own mind.
Your mind from the start was free from fabricated extremes.
Understanding this, do not take to mind
[Inherent] signs of subject and object–
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.*

There is an obvious gap between how things appear to our mind or how we view things, and how things exist in reality. Things appear to our mind and we grasp at them as having an inherent or independent existence from their own side. In reality, things do not exist inherently or from their own side, or in their own right. Because things do not exist in their own right, their existence is merely dependent or designated. However, if we observe how things appear to our mind, we find that nothing seems to appear as merely labelled or merely designated. Rather, in our mind, things seem to have a true existence, to have some concrete or real existence. This is a wrong notion of the way things are because if we look for them, we will not be able to find them. For example, if we think of ourselves as a person or I, we have some sort of idea of who we are, but when we look for that I or who we are, we cannot find it. All we will find is our body and mind but none of them is I or me or self. Also, none of the parts of our body,

like our head, our hand and so forth, is me or I. So, what is I? We cannot find it. In this way, if we search for the self, we come to a dead end. So, the I is unfindable. The next question is: Is this the view of emptiness? Of course, it is not.

What is emptiness? If that unfindability of I or the self is not the ultimate truth of our self, then what is? It is said that to gain an understanding of emptiness, we must have a clear picture of the opposite of emptiness. This is called the object of negation. When we say the word 'emptiness' – there is a notion of something that is actually empty. That is what is called the object of negation, and we must identify that to gain a knowledge of emptiness.

We hold the true mode of existence of the objects we perceive in everyday life as having some sort of intrinsic self-sufficient existence. However, even though an object appears to our mind, it is not easy to recognise it as the object of negation.

Yet there are some occasions when we experience a strong sense of I, and where the negated self can be more vivid. For example, when someone accuses you of being a thief when you have not stolen anything, you feel a strong sense of I, thinking 'How dare you call me a thief!' You have a strong sense of I, or the ego or the self. If we examine at that moment how the I exists to our mind, we will note that it seems to exist inherently, autonomously and truly. At that moment the notion of this self-sufficient and inherently existent I is very real and concrete. Just as we can catch a thief, we get a sense that we can also catch that truly existent self which is the object of negation as it appears and which we experience as being truly existent.

Some scholars use the example of the experience of a person who is about to fall off the edge of a very high building. At that moment, the person who senses the danger of falling off does not think about his body falling down, rather he feels 'I am going to fall', 'I am going to die', or 'I am in danger'. Some scholars say that at that moment, the kind of I or the self that the person experiences is an object of negation.

Having clearly identified the self that is the object of negation in the context of the view of emptiness or selflessness, you examine whether that is the way the I, or the person, or the self exists. If, upon investigation and fine analysis, you realise that the I or the self does not exist that way, you are gaining insight into the emptiness or selflessness of a person. You are realising that the person is empty of being an inherently existent self (which was the object of negation).

The selflessness or emptiness of all things is the same. Whatever the object you consider, the emptiness or selflessness of that object is that the object is empty of being an inherently existent self or that object is devoid of the inherent existence that appears to our mind. Just as we have found that the person does not exist in the way it appears to our mind, so too all other phenomena do not exist in the way they appear. This is a brief explanation of the concept of emptiness or selflessness.

We will leave tonight's teaching here. Thank you.

*Transcribed by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Kate Gomersall
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering*

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