
Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas

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Commentary by Venerable Geshe Lobsang Dorje

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual, we will do a few minutes of meditation by simply being aware of the incoming and outgoing breath.

[Pause for meditation]

We have been discussing the *perfection of joyful effort* – its meaning, the types of joyful effort and its benefits. Last time we stopped our discussion at the obstacles we face in generating joyful effort.

Laziness is the main obstacle to joyful effort. Because of laziness, we don't put enough effort into our practice. Laziness arises in different forms. There is the laziness of procrastination which stops us from making an effort. Even if we do make an effort, we procrastinate about it. We keep delaying, saying, 'Oh, I will do it tomorrow, or next month, or next year'. But we never find time to make an effort and we make all sorts of excuses. Another form of laziness is laziness due to low self-confidence or self-esteem which also hampers our effort. Sometimes we don't make an effort because we think we are not good enough, we can't do it, or that we don't have enough resources.

To overcome the laziness of procrastination, we need to become aware of the preciousness or value of our time. If we don't understand how precious the time we have at the moment is, we will be lured into laziness and will never make an effort. For this awareness of the preciousness of our time to arise, we should meditate on the impermanence of our life and everything around us. Everything is subject to momentary changes. We should also have an awareness that death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, and that death can come at any time. Once we realise that the time we have at our disposal is precious and not to be wasted, we will realise that we can't afford to waste any time. This can help us overcome the laziness of procrastination.

When we fall into the trap of the laziness of procrastination, it is not necessarily the case that we lose interest in or deliberately delay doing the things we are supposed to do. Rather, we become side-tracked by other activities. We call this kind of laziness the laziness of being attached to meaningless activities. This form of laziness traps us into activities that usually have no good purpose, and which waste our time. We must overcome this laziness, otherwise we will never engage in practice. If we become attracted to meaningless activities, we will always be preoccupied with them and as soon we finish one activity, we become attracted to another. Thus, we never find the time to do the things we are supposed to be doing.

We must manage our time well so that we don't end up spending all our time making a living. Of course, we must devote a certain amount of time to gathering the necessary material conditions, like ensuring we have food, drink and shelter and so forth. But at the same time, we need to understand that we shouldn't spend all the time and energy of our three doors of body, speech and mind on gathering material wealth because that doesn't guarantee happiness and satisfaction. Yet we think that if we have this and that

thing we will be happy, as if the material object or experience we seek is an absolute cause of happiness. This way of thinking about the material world – that it will bestow us with happiness and solve all our problems – is a delusion and we must overcome it.

For example, people identify happiness with having a certain amount of money, or a house, or clothes, or a car they like. They direct all their time and effort into acquiring these desired objects. However, we can observe that often when people have acquired all the things they dreamed about, they are not content and at peace with their life. As we have previously discussed, there is a verse which says that sensual pleasure is like salt water which will never quench our thirst, because the more we drink, the more we want to drink. Hence, we cannot direct all our time and energy towards material pleasure. Ironically, it appears that the more wealth people have, the busier they get.

We are not saying that material objects don't give us some sort of happiness or benefit. Rather, we are saying that the happiness or benefit they give are not lasting and ultimate. Some people save money and then spend it on travelling around the world. They keep travelling and earning to travel more because travelling gives them a purpose and pleasure. However, it is obvious it doesn't give them everlasting joy or a sense of fulfilling their ultimate purpose. If sensual or material pleasure is the ultimate or true happiness, then the more we had, the more joy and happiness we would have. In another words, our happiness would multiply with our money, wealth and worldly pleasures. But in many cases we find the opposite. People with a lot of wealth and money have a greater sense of insecurity and more fear and discontentment.

If we are deluded into thinking that all our happiness comes from material objects, then we will end up wasting our life simply seeking material pleasure and wealth. To overcome such a delusion, we need to educate ourselves on the true cause of the happiness we seek and the suffering we want to avoid. We can educate ourselves on this by meditating and reflecting on the law of karma and its result. We should also reflect on the unending suffering we go through and from where it arises. There are three types of suffering – the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. In particular, the all-pervasive suffering will never cease until we uproot our attachment or attraction to the pleasure of samsara or worldly existence. This is how we can counteract the laziness of being attached to meaningless activities.

Another form of laziness which impedes us from making an effort with our practice is the laziness of low self-confidence or self-esteem, when we say to ourselves, 'I can't do it.' When it comes to Dharma practice, we feel this way for several reasons. First, when we think about achieving complete enlightenment or buddhahood, we understand it as the final state endowed with the limitless qualities of the Buddha's body, speech and mind, where we are free from all faults. To achieve complete enlightenment, we have to engage in deeds which benefit all sentient beings, and we feel there is no way we can benefit numberless sentient beings. We say to ourselves that it impossible to achieve such a perfect state of limitless qualities and to benefit countless beings. Secondly, the scriptures mention that we must engage in all the bodhisattvas' deeds to achieve enlightenment, such as the giving of our limbs and body etc. Such a great self-sacrifice, as performed by the bodhisattvas, makes us feel discouraged. 'How can I possibly make such a sacrifice?' we might say.

Lastly, when we talk about benefitting all sentient beings, we will have to remain and take rebirth in samsara for a long period of time. Again, we may feel discouraged when we think about this. So, these are the three main reasons which cause us to feel discouraged.

Let's look into the remedies we can apply to overcome these three types of discouragement. The first type of discouragement arises when we think about achieving the infinite qualities of the Buddha's holy body, mind and speech in order to achieve complete enlightenment. We feel discouraged when we ask how we can achieve the limitless qualities of the Buddha. To remedy this, we should meditate on the suchness or ultimate reality of our own mind, understanding that it is no different from the suchness of the omniscient mind of a buddha. Both are the same in being empty of true existence. The differences between our mind and the mind of a buddha relates to immediate or temporary conditions. Our mind is temporarily afflicted with mental stains, whereas a buddha's mind is not. Nonetheless, by realising that we have the potential to penetrate the ultimate reality of our mind, which is the emptiness of true existence, we can see that we have the potential to uproot all the stains of mental affliction and its latency. In this way, we can gain the dharmakaya state of a buddha's mind.

We should also think of the fact that all the buddhas were once like us, overpowered by the mental afflictions of desire, hatred and ignorance. However, through working on their own mind, they eventually progressed to becoming bodhisattvas and, in the end, they reached complete enlightenment. So, why can't we? This helps us see that there is no reason why we cannot reach complete enlightenment, just like all the buddhas.

The buddhas possess infinite qualities, but there is no reason for us to feel discouraged and think that we cannot achieve those qualities. If we apply skilful methods, we can achieve those infinite qualities of enlightenment through accumulating an infinite amount of merit. For example, it is said that when we cultivate an altruistic mind of bodhicitta, aimed at benefitting all sentient beings even on a superficial level, we accumulate merit equal to the countless numbers of sentient beings. Thinking about this can give us hope and help us to overcome the discouragement of achieving complete enlightenment.

Regarding giving our body as part of the practice of the *perfection of giving*, we must understand that the Buddha never ordered anyone to give their body away in order to achieve complete enlightenment. He guided everyone according to their predisposition, interest and capability. As beginners, it is inappropriate for us to give away our limbs or our body. We need to engage in the practice of giving up things at our disposal; things which we can give happily. In this way, we make gradual progress in our practice, initially habituating ourselves to giving something small and then progressively giving larger objects. Eventually we may even be able to give our body. When we are ready to give away our body, it won't bring any pain or suffering, rather it will bring tremendous joy and delight to our mind. Prior to that stage, it is not recommended to give our body.

It was mentioned earlier that another cause of discouragement is that, to achieve complete enlightenment, we must benefit all other sentient beings and take rebirth and remain in samsara. To overcome this discouragement and to have the resilience to take continuous rebirths in samsara to benefit other sentient beings and reach enlightenment, we

need to train our mind and cultivate a positive mental attitude.

We can train the mind through meditating on the seven-fold cause and effect, such as recognising all beings as our mother and remembering the kindness of all mothers and so forth. Through training and habituating our mind like this, we can generate the spirit of a bodhisattva who vows to benefit other beings and who remains in samsara until the last sentient being is rescued. When we think like this, we can transform our mind into any kind of mental attitude. The kinds of thoughts we have are a matter of what our mind is familiar with. By thinking like this, we can overcome a sense of discouragement about achieving complete enlightenment because of this wish to benefit other sentient beings, and to remain in cyclic existence for that purpose.

We have talked about the obstacles to applying joyful effort. Now we turn to the favourable conditions or factors we can gather to generate this joyful effort. The lamrim teachings mention the four forces which are the favourable conditions for generating joyful effort.

The first force is called the *force of aspiration*. To cultivate this force, we need to reflect on cause and effect, how a virtuous cause will result in happiness and how a non-virtuous cause will result in suffering. Thinking of these, we develop an aspiration to create virtue and reject non-virtue. The second is the *force of stability*. Our practice will be stable if our Dharma knowledge is based on our own reasoning and analysis instead of simply blind faith. The third is called the *force of joy*. This is important because if we feel joy in what we do, we will never want to take a break. When children play, they never want to stop and there's never enough time to play. In this way, the force of joy is an important factor in making a consistent effort in our practice. The fourth is the *force of resting*. This means not overusing our energy and effort, which could lead to exhaustion and burnout. It is important to take a break and get some rest. At the same, it is also important to get back to our practice as soon as possible after resting.

This finishes the brief explanation of joyful effort so I will leave tonight's teaching here and will continue with the Perfection of Concentration and Wisdom in the coming weeks.

Thank you.

Transcribed by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Katherine Boland
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
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