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# The Six Perfections

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Set the correct motivation and begin your meditation.  
[Tonglen meditation]

It's time to arise out of your meditation.

As ordinary sentient beings we cannot sit in deep meditative equipoise and at the time can listen to Dharma; we can't do both things simultaneously. Only fully enlightened beings can do that. That is why we have to come out of our meditation in order to listen to this profound teaching.

It is very important to cultivate the right motivation, the bodhicitta motivation. It is said that even if you cultivate the bodhicitta motivation of an awakening mind, for a split second, there is a tremendous benefit. It also has the benefit of purifying all negativities and at the same time accumulating enormous merit. Therefore, try to cultivate the awakening mind, the wish to achieve the full state of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, from the depths of your heart. Make sure that the motivation has no stain of self-interest or self-cherishing.

From today we begin teaching the section on How to Train in the Mahayana in General from Lama Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of Path to Enlightenment*<sup>1</sup>.

### III) EXPLANATION OF THE PROCESS OF LEARNING THE PRECEPTS

This has two subheadings:

1. How to train in the Mahayana in general
2. How to train specifically in the Vajrayana

Study the meaning of the term 'Mahayana' or Great Vehicle in your own time to find out the connotation of Great Vehicle.

#### A 'HOW TO TRAIN IN THE MAHAYANA IN GENERAL'

There are three subheadings under this heading:

1. Establishing the desire to learn the precepts of the spirit of enlightenment
2. Taking the vows of the conquerors' children after establishing the desire to learn the precepts
3. How to train after taking the vows

#### 1. Establishing the desire to learn the precepts of the spirit of enlightenment

In the discipline of individual liberation and in tantra it is inappropriate to study the precepts before you have first taken the vows

Those of you who have been studying for a long time will know what 'individual liberation' means., Here the discipline of individual liberation refers to the vows of individual liberation (Skt: *pratimoksha* Tib: *so.thar*

*sDom.pa*) such as the vows of novice monks and nuns, fully ordained monks and nuns etc. There is also reference to the tantric vows. When the text says 'it is inappropriate to study the precepts' it is saying that without first taking the individual liberation and tantric vows, it is inappropriate to study the precepts or instructions relating to those vows.

The text next comments on the vows:

but these bodhisattva vows are different. First you understand the precepts well and then, after you are trained in them, if you have an enthusiasm for taking them, you are given the vows.

If you just read the commentary it is quite self-explanatory. As far as taking the bodhisattva vows goes, however, it is different in that it is saying here that first you should study and understand the precepts and train in them well, and 'if you have enthusiasm for taking them, you are given the vows.' Here the text refers to taking the bodhisattva vows which are, unlike vinaya or pratimoksha vows, allowed to study before taking them. In fact, the text says that before taking the bodhisattva vows it is very important that you study the precepts related to the vows very well. The reason is that if you have really studied and understood them well, feeling strongly motivated and enthusiastic about taking the vows, your practice will be very stable.

Essentially when it says 'in the discipline of individual liberation', it refers to the vinaya or vows of individual liberation, and the tantric vows – it is not appropriate to study these vows before taking them. On the other hand, it is strongly recommended that you study the bodhisattva's precepts and vows prior to taking them.

In Tibetan the terms 'enthusiastic' literally means joyful effort, 'if you have an enthusiasm for taking them', connotes heartfelt joy in the bodhisattva's vows and precepts. After studying and learning those vows and precepts, and if you feel joyful, positive and inspired, then it says you should go ahead to take them. Indirectly this means that if you don't feel that way, it is not recommended to take the vows.

Then the commentary continues:

In this regard the *Bodhisattva Levels* says:

For persons wanting to take the ethical discipline vows of a bodhisattva you should make known in advance the fundamental precepts and the sources of fault for bodhisattva as taught here in the "Summary of the Bodhisattva Fundamentals" for the bodhisattvas' scriptural collection of the discourses. If after sincere investigation and intelligent analysis these persons are inspired, and if it is not because of being made to do it by someone else and it is not to compete with others, then know that these are reliable bodhisattvas. These persons should be given the vows of ethical discipline and should receive them in accord with the ritual.

If you read the actual text it is quite clear however you should take the time to reflect on the meaning of each line and word. For instance, when it says, 'If after sincere investigation and intelligent analysis,' it means that after you have initially studied the scripture by reading or by listening to the teachings, the next stage is to use your own intelligence to understand the depth of the meaning, particularly applying those points or advice to yourself.

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<sup>1</sup> Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path, Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee - Joshua W.C. Cutler, Editor-in Chief and Guy Newland, Editor.

You should see the benefits of applying this methodology of sincere investigation and intelligent analysis, and understand the shortcomings if you don't apply it. It is saying that if as a result of fully understanding them through using your own investigation and intelligence you feel motivated or inspired to take the vows and follow the precepts, then you should go ahead. That is the proper way of approaching the taking of these vows.

The passage saying 'and if it is not because of being made to do it by someone else' means that you are not taking on certain practices or precepts because you're being forced to or obliged by someone else. It should not be like that. It also says, 'it is also not to compete with others.' You must decide to do certain things on the basis of your own understanding, your intelligence and what your wisdom tells you, not because you see someone else doing them and do them too out of a sense of competitiveness. It is saying that it should not be like that. The text then says 'then know that these are reliable bodhisattvas. These persons should be given the vows of ethical discipline and should receive them in accord with the ritual.'

Then Lama Tsongkhapa continues:

This is a very good method because, if you understand the precepts, bring them to mind, establish a wish to train in them from the depths of your heart, and then take the vows, you will be extremely constant.

To explain the precepts both here and below would make for too great a burden of words, so I shall indicate them below.

## 2. Taking the vows of the conquerors' children after establishing the desire to learn the precepts

I have already established in detail in my Basic Path to Awakening commentary on the Bodhisattva Levels' chapter on ethical discipline

This commentary by Lama Tsongkhapa is available in English. In the past I have recommended that you read this text to learn more about the precepts and so forth; it is a good reference.

First how to take the bodhisattva vows, immediately after that how to guard against fundamental transgressions and transgressions which constitute minor infractions, and then how to repair vows if they degenerate. It is most definitely necessary that you read this before you take the vows, so understand them from there.

## 3. How to train after taking the vows

How to train after taking the vows has three parts:

- a) What the precepts are based upon
- b) How all the precepts are included in the six perfections
- c) The process of learning the perfections

When it says, 'what the precepts are based upon', they are based upon the six perfections. Then, 'how all the precepts are included in the six perfections' will be explained by the next subheading.

### a) What the precepts are based upon

There are limitless clear categorizations, but if you arrange the bodhisattva precepts by type, you can include them all within the six perfections

The six perfections are thus the great condensation of all the key points of the bodhisattva path. The four ways to gather disciples [generosity, pleasant speech, working at

the aims, and consistency of behaviour] are also included within these six perfections as follows.

Please list the six perfections.

*The perfections are generosity, morality, patience, joyful effort, concentration and wisdom.*

The four ways to gather disciples are included within the six perfections.

That generosity is included is obvious.

The four ways to gather disciples are:

Pleasant speech in giving instructions to disciples, taking the six perfections as the point of departure;

The second way of gathering disciples is included within the perfections.

working at the aims is establishing others in the aims of these instructions;

This third way to gather disciples is to teach or help the disciples to understand the teachings as well as inspire them to put their understanding into practice.

and consistency of behaviour is practicing just as the disciple does.

This fourth way to gather disciples is being 'consistent' in the sense that the teachers should also implement the same practices they advise others to adopt. The teachers need to be consistent with whatever advice they give to others to put into practice, that they also engage in the same practices.

The commentary continues:

Although it is true that the entire bodhisattva path is also subsumed under other condensations such as the two collections, the three trainings [ethical discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom], and so forth, these are not able to produce the understanding that the six perfections do, so the six perfections are the best inclusive set.

Name the two collections and the three trainings.

*The two collections are the collections of merit and wisdom. The three trainings are morality concentration and wisdom*

### b) How all the precepts are included in the six perfections

Explanation on how all the precepts are included in the six perfections has two parts:

1. A discussion of the main topic, the fixed number of perfections
2. An ancillary discussion of the fixed order of the perfections

The Bhagavan formulated a bare outline of the six perfections, and the holy Regent [Maitreya] produced certain knowledge of these by explicating in accord with the Buddha's intended meaning the key points of the rationale for formulating the perfections in that fashion. These explanations show that there is a fixed number of perfections. When you are convinced of this and astonished by it, you will understand the practice of the six perfections as the supreme instruction, so obtain such conviction.

A discussion of the main topic, the fixed number of perfections, has six parts:

1. The fixed number of perfections based on high status
2. The fixed number of perfections based on fulfilling the two aims

3. The fixed number of perfections based on perfecting the complete fulfillment of others' aims
4. The fixed number of perfections based on their subsuming the entire Mahayana
5. The fixed number of perfections in terms of the completeness of paths or method
6. The fixed number of perfections based on the three trainings

### (A) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS BASED ON HIGH STATUS

To fully complete the greatly effective bodhisattva deeds you need an immeasurably long succession of lifetimes.

This clearly implies that we may not be able to achieve the perfection of giving, moral ethics etc. in one single lifetime; rather we need to depend on many more lifetimes. In order to ensure that we make progress with our practice, we continuously need to find a life that has the four excellences, the causes of which are the practice of the six perfections.

Moreover, to attain quick success on the path within these lifetimes you need a life excellent in every aspect. Our present life is not excellent in every aspect but rather has only some of the aspects of full excellence; we do not make progress with it though we practice the teachings. You need a life that has four kinds of excellence: (1) resources to use [the result of the perfection of generosity], (2) a body with which you act [the result of the perfection of ethical discipline], (3) companions together with whom you act [the result of the perfection of patience], and (4) work that you are able to accomplish once undertaken [the result of the perfection of joyous perseverance].

The first excellence is relating to the **resources** we need for our life. Are good resources important for our life or not? Do you all want good resources? Yes. Having all the resources alone is not enough. Importantly you also need an excellent life or a **body** that is fit to enjoy those resources.

You also need **companions** or others with whom you can enjoy those resources. That is also important. The fourth is to **finish the task you have started**. Thus, the four excellences are excellent resources, excellent body, excellent companions and the excellence of completing any task once started. You can imagine how different our life would be if we had all of these four excellences.

Each of these four excellences can be accomplished through each of the first four perfections: the perfection of giving, through which we can achieve excellent resources; the perfection of morality (or moral ethics) through which we achieve an excellent body; the perfection of patience through which we achieve excellent companions; and lastly the perfection of joyous effort through which we are able to complete whatever work we start.

The commentary continues:

Since in many cases these four kinds of excellence alone may themselves become conditions for afflictions, you must not fall under the control of the afflictions

This passage highlights the point that even though we may have met with all of the four excellences, they too can turn into the source of mental afflictions unless we have cultivated a meditative concentration. It is important to ensure that good conditions do not serve to

increase mental afflictions. Hence the commentary says, *you must not fall under the control of the afflictions*, which is achieved as a result of the perfection of meditative stabilisation.

In order to prevent the excellences becoming a cause for increasing afflictions, we have to engage in the perfection of concentration which subdues all the mental afflictions. It is said that the benefit of meditation is decreasing mental afflictions.

As just the four kinds of excellence are not sufficient, you must also distinguish well, in regard to what to adopt and what to cast aside, precisely what things to do and to stop doing [the result of the perfection of wisdom].

This justifies the importance of integrating the perfection of wisdom into or practice. In relating the importance of developing the perfection of wisdom the commentary continues:

Otherwise, just as a bamboo or plantain tree dies after giving fruit, or a mule dies with pregnancy, you will be destroyed by the four excellences.

This reinforces the fact that without engaging in the practice of the perfection of wisdom, we will lose the advantage of having the four excellences, just like a bamboo or banana tree - if you peel off its skin you get nothing but skin and once it produces fruits it is of no use as it does not produce fruits again. It is important to relate this to our practice in order to understand why we need to practice all six perfections. Simply, if we want all four excellences, and we think of all the things we want in our lives, we will be motivated to engage in the six perfections. It is important to contemplate on each word and line found here and relate it to our practice. This is very effective.

The commentary continues with the perfection of wisdom:

The wise understand how these six - the four excellences, control of the afflictions, and knowledge of what to adopt and what to cast aside - are the results of earlier virtuous actions, and they strive again at steadily increasing their causes.

This says that if we cultivate the perfection of wisdom then we do not take for granted all the excellent conditions that we have found in this life. Whereas if we do not have the wisdom, we take it for granted and then as said here:

The unwise use the results of their earlier accumulations of virtue and exhaust them; as they do not increase them anew, they reach the brink of their future suffering.

Sooner or later all the excellences or good conditions will be exhausted and then we will fall into suffering. However, if we understand our situation through the eyes of wisdom, we will be encouraged to engage in practice even more because we will see that our excellent conditions are the result of our past virtuous actions, such as the perfection of giving. Since you appreciate the good conditions and know that they result from virtuous actions, you will be inspired to create more virtuous actions.

As we have discussed in the past, we should appreciate even small things like enjoying a cup of tea, and see it is as a result of our virtuous actions. As we enjoy that tea,

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we will also be inspired to create more virtuous actions. In this way the good conditions that we have found now motivate us to create the causes for more good conditions in the future.

I have been saying over and over again that you should not exhaust all your good karmas by simply indulging in the pleasures and not accumulating any more good karma. But it appears that my words go in one ear and out the other. Even though you have heard about the eight worldly concerns you have not worked to overcome them in practice.

The worldly attitude towards pain and pleasure is that normally we view pleasure as something that we desire while we try to avoid pain. In fact, we should reverse that attitude, welcoming feelings of pain but not pleasure. We should see that feelings of pain are symptoms of exhausting the result of bad karma so in that sense it is good; it also as a reminder to not accumulate any more bad karma. Conversely, we should recognise that experiencing pleasures is an indication of exhausting our good karma, so our only alternative is to accumulate more good karma. If we think along these lines, we develop wisdom in our practice through which we are inspired to practice virtue and abandon non-virtue.

In this way, whenever we find pleasure we see it as a result of our virtuous actions which should inspire us to engage in more virtuous actions. Likewise, as suffering and pain is something we want to avoid, and if we see it as the result of our non-virtuous actions, confronting suffering should instil in our mind thoughts of abandoning non-virtuous actions. To practise virtue and avoid non-virtues, the first key is having a genuine thought and determination to practice virtue and avoid non-virtue.

When you again produce these six in future lives, their production will not be causeless, or from discordant causes, but rather from concordant causes that are the perfections, fixed as six in number. Therefore, in this lifetime you must repeatedly habituate yourself to constant reliance on the six perfections because the superiority of the effects is commensurate to the superiority of the causes. A life with the four excellences constitutes temporary high status, whereas the ultimate high status, which consists of ultimate excellence of body, etc exists at the buddha level.

Here the text indicates the temporary outcome of the six perfections and the ultimate outcome of the six perfections.

Thus the *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras (Mahayana-sutralamkara)* says:

High status possessed of excellent resources and body,  
Excellent companions and undertakings,  
Not going under the power of the afflictions,  
And never being mistaken in activities

This passage summarises how the four excellences are the result of the six perfections. Recall that the perfection of giving is the cause of excellent resources, the perfection of morality is the cause for a good body, the perfection of patience is the cause for excellent companions and joyous effort is the cause for the success of all undertakings. Meditative concentration prevents the excellences from being soiled by the power

of the afflictions, while never being mistaken in activities is the result of the perfection of wisdom.

## **(B) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS BASED ON FULFILLING THE TWO AIMS**

When someone in such a life of high status learns the bodhisattva deeds, these activities are comprehensively categorized as two: those which fulfil your own aim and those which fulfil the aims of others. Therefore, there is a fixed number of perfections based on fulfilling the two aims.

This paragraph indicates that having found the four excellences complemented by the last two perfections of concentration and wisdom, bodhisattvas do only two things: achieve the meaning of one's own purposes and the meaning or purposes of other beings. These are the only two aims.

This section of the text is showing how in terms of fulfilling the two aims - one's own aims and the aims of other beings - all the practices are included in the six perfections.

To fulfil the aims of others you must first help them with material goods. Since no benefit will come from generosity accompanied by harmfulness toward living beings,

This first talks of the perfection of giving, which primarily refers to your wholehearted intention to give. When you have cultivated that kind of thought in the depth of your heart, you will naturally give whatever resources you have to others, thereby fulfilling their needs.

The commentary then says:

To fulfil the aims of others you must first help them with material goods. Since no benefit will come from generosity accompanied by harmfulness toward living beings, you need ethical discipline, ...

This indicates the necessity of the practice of morality or moral ethics, essentially based on the principle of non-harmfulness. Without integrating the principle of non-harmfulness (or thought of not harming others) then you cannot do the practice of giving wholeheartedly. Therefore, in order to serve others, in order to benefit others, the practice of morality is mandatory.

...toward living beings, you need ethical discipline, which has a great purpose for others in that it is the state of desisting from harm to others and the causes of such harm.

This refers to refraining from the ten non-virtuous of the body, speech, and mind. In this Tibetan version, desisting from harmfulness refers to the non-virtuous actions of the body, and the base of harmfulness refers to the speech, four of the non-virtuous actions of speech and so forth.

To bring this to its full development you also need patience that disregards the harm done to you, for, if you are impatient with harm and retaliate a time or two, you will not attain pure ethical discipline.

As we discussed before, this relates to the practice of the six perfections in order to benefit others. It is saying that in order to benefit others we need to practise giving and morality (which is the thought of abandoning harm upon other beings). The text says that in order to benefit others we need to practise patience. For example, if we receive

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harm from others and do not practise patience, i.e. do not tolerate any harm we receive from them and retaliate then instead of benefiting others we cause them harm. As such, the practice of patience is essential in order to prevent harmful actions and maintain our altruistic attitude towards others.

When you do not retaliate by practising patience, you prevent others from accumulating more negativities, because if you retaliate then they may retaliate back with more harmful actions. Whereas your act of non-retaliation may bring calmness in their mind and motivate them to create virtuous actions. Because of your practice of patience, it says here:

When you do not retaliate because of your patience, you prevent others from accumulating a great amount of sin and bring them to virtue by inspiring them with your patience.

Through this, when others observe your practice of patience, they may be inspired by it and through this, they may accumulate virtue. In this way, we can see here how our practice of patience helps others to achieve their great purposes. From this, we understand how the first three perfections of giving, morality and patience enable us to primarily benefit other beings. The text continues with the theme of how the six perfections are enough or essential to fulfilling one's own aims and other beings saying:

You attain your own aim, the bliss of liberation, through the power of wisdom.

Your own aim, which is state of liberation or nirvana, depends on the perfection of wisdom. Then it goes on:

Since you will not attain this with a distracted mind, ...

meaning you cannot achieve wisdom or insight if your mind is too distracted.

...you must set your mind in meditative equipoise by means of meditative stabilization,...

This shows that we have to rely on the perfection of concentration or meditative stabilisation to overcome all the distracted states of mind. And then:

obtaining a mental serviceability wherein you intentionally set your attention on any object of meditation ...

... refers to benefits of the perfection of concentration.

The commentary goes on:

since a lazy person does not produce this, you need joyous perseverance day and night that never slackens, so this is the basis of the other perfections.

Here a connection is made between the importance of generating joyous perseverance and achieving the state of concentration and wisdom. Without joyous effort, we can fall prey to laziness, and then we cannot achieve concentration and wisdom. So in this way, it summarises how the three perfections of joyous effort, concentration and wisdom are necessary to achieve one's own goals.

For accomplishing the two aims, then, the number of perfections is fixed as six.

In terms of fulfilling these two aims, one's own aim and of others, the number of the perfections is six. The text quotes *The Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* which says:

Those who strive for the aims of beings  
Work at giving, non-harm, and patience;  
And completely fulfil their own aims  
With stabilization and liberation, together with their basis

In these six there is no complete fulfillment of others' aims. The mention of "stabilization and liberation" differentiates between the two as (1) the stabilization of the mind on the object of meditation, this being the imprint of meditative stabilization, and (2) the liberation from cyclic existence, this being the imprint of wisdom. Notice that this does not mistake meditative serenity for insight. As this is so, those who assert that the meditation of fixing one's attention in an absence of conceptual thought is meditation on the profound are speaking of a meditation that is a single portion of the meditative stabilization that is one of these six perfections. You must attain certain knowledge of the six perfections in their entirety.

I chose to teach you this text because I want you all to actually read it and contemplate on its meaning. That is my main hope. The six perfections are the core practice of the Mahayana. So, it is good to study the depth and breadth of the meaning as much as you can, e.g. knowing the difference between giving and the perfection of giving and so forth.

*Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo  
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