
The Six Perfections

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

23 October 2018

We have just recited the prayer for taking refuge, which indicates that we are Buddhists, and the prayer for generating bodhicitta, which indicates that we are Mahayana Buddhists. Accordingly, we should cultivate the bodhicitta motivation and begin our usual meditation of giving and taking.

[Tonglen meditation]

Review of key elements of last week's teaching

We covered some very important topics that should serve as guidelines for our future, such as the **type of future life that we should seek**. We learnt that we should seek a life in a higher rebirth which is endowed with the **four excellences**. We then learnt that we can, indeed, find such an excellent life by engaging in the practice of the six perfections.

At the moment we may not actually have practised any of the six perfections, such as the perfection of giving, because here the word 'perfection' specifically includes the three attributes of bodhicitta, the wisdom of emptiness and dedication. However, we do have the opportunity to engage in the practice of the six perfections. We can practise the perfection of giving which is to cultivate a thought of giving; the perfection of moral discipline which is to cultivate a thought of restraint from committing harmful actions; and the perfection of patience with facing hardship or receiving harm from others and so forth.

We are aware that sooner or later we have to leave this life and go to the next rebirth without any choice. If we ask, 'Do we have any choice about the next rebirth?', the answer is that we do not have any choice because rebirth is predetermined by the force of karma and mental afflictions. Therefore, it is important for us to recognise and be convinced that positive karmas will result in a happy rebirth and negative karmas will result in a bad rebirth.

As we learnt in last week's teaching, we should first try to understand why it is crucial for us to find a life with the four excellences, and then understand that we can indeed find such a life by engaging in the practice of the six perfections. It is said that the perfection of moral discipline serves as the primary cause for us to achieve a happy rebirth; the practice of giving is the main cause to ensure that we have good resources; the practice of patience is the main cause to ensure good friends and companions to share and enjoy those good resources, and joyous perseverance is the cause to be able to successfully complete whatever we start.

However, it's not good enough just to find a life with the four excellences, if we waste that opportunity and it ends up as a basis for even more mental afflictions. Hence, the need to practise the last two perfections - the perfection of meditative stabilisation, which is primarily to subdue or overcome the very gross or manifest form of mental afflictions; and the practice of the perfection of wisdom, which uproots these mental afflictions.

You have been doing the **meditation of giving and taking** for a long time. So it is important to check whether this meditation has increased your practice of giving at least on a

mental level. In this meditation, as the prayer that we chant tells us, we imagine giving our body, belongings, happiness and virtues to others. Along with that we are supposed to be reinforcing our sense of love and compassion for other beings.

It is important to focus on practices that are not only relevant, but which are within our capacity to actually integrate into our lives. In this way, whatever practice we do will become effective and beneficial. If we have conviction and faith in the working of the law of cause and effect, then we understand that our practices will yield results. As you have studied in the past, there is a type of result called a concordant result or a result similar to its cause, and it has two types: concordant with the causal experience and concordant with habitual patterns. Therefore, as a concordant result of your practice of giving in terms of habitual patterns, you will eventually be able to practise giving with ease, as thoughts of giving arise on a more instinctive level.

The meditation of giving and taking is primarily to train our mind to become accustomed to the thought of giving and taking. It is important not only because the actual act of giving depends on our thought of giving, but also so that the act of giving comes from the depths of our hearts. Therefore, it is important that we first train our mind thoroughly in order to be able to practise well. If our mind is not trained well with the cultivation of the thought of giving, then let alone giving our things to others, we would be too stingy to use them for ourselves. Sometimes we might give things to a person and then later on regret that giving, which could be because our act of giving did not come wholeheartedly from our heart.

On a day-to-day basis, we should remind ourselves about our spiritual practice. I frequently tell people who I meet casually or in my Dharma talks that each morning when you get up, you should try to cultivate the positive thought: **I will only do actions that benefit others and at any cost, I will not do any actions that will harm them.** You will find that cultivating such a positive state of mind is like the dawning of the sun dispelling the darkness of ignorance and confusion in your mind. It will make a huge difference to your experiences over the whole day. Whereas if you start the day with your mind filled with distractions and negative thoughts, then for the whole day you may experience a very confused and bewildered mind. Therefore, it is very beneficial to just to say to yourself every morning that 'benefitting other beings and not causing harm to them is my most important task.'

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that to remember the qualities of the Three Jewels, he recites this passage by Nagarjuna from *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* every morning, 'I prostrate to Gautama, who through compassion taught the true doctrine, which leads to the relinquishing of all views.' He follows this by saying, 'please grant me blessings.' It is essential to do this mind training practice on an everyday basis, in order to develop a positive habit and to habituate our minds to positive thoughts.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama also usually recites the same homage to the Lord Buddha before giving any Dharma teachings which His Holiness says is also a practice of one of his very important gurus, Khunu Lama Rinpoche. Likewise, I encourage you to think of benefitting other beings and not causing any harm to them every morning, as soon as you arise from your bed.

Last week, we talked about the six perfections. We should take note that there are **six opposites or six opposing forces relating to each of the six perfections**. The opposite of giving is obviously stinginess or miserliness.

We generally get the impression that Dharma teachings mainly focus on the future well-being of sentient beings, which may lead to people getting the wrong notion that maybe it is not relevant or beneficial to our present life. They may think that the Dharma is not meant to apply to bringing about happiness and overcoming various problems or hardships in this earthly life. But in fact, we will find that if we follow Dharma practice we will be able to achieve the higher goals of our existence and along the way, find that all our temporary or immediate goals are fulfilled automatically.

By following Dharma practice, we can directly experience immediate benefits from that practice, and we don't require any explanation to verify that fact. Because of this, the emphasis of Dharma teaching is on fulfilling higher and long-term aspirations of our existence, for which an attachment to, or too much worrying about our transient life can be an impediment. If we talk about the immediate benefits of engaging in the practice of giving, the benefits are very obvious, including removing poverty in the world and at a personal level gaining a good reputation and more personal friends.

The Lord Buddha said that initially you please and attract other sentient beings through your practice of giving. This advice is very true; it is a very effective way of benefiting other beings. Initially, through your practice of giving, you please them by alleviating their poverty or fulfilling their immediate needs. This will greatly please them, and they will become closer to you as if you have won their heart. Giving makes our resources or possessions a good cause for benefiting other beings, and in this way giving us a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment.

The opposite of giving is stinginess or miserliness, where let alone utilising our wealth and possession to benefit others, we even worry about utilising it for our own good. What point is there in being wealthy if we are stingy? The only good thing of having a stingy mind is accumulating material wealth *per se*.

The opposite of the practice of the perfection of moral discipline is immoral acts. More specifically the opposite of the moral act of refraining from killing is the act of killing; the opposite of refraining from stealing is stealing and so on. You can see how relevant it is for us to safeguard ourselves against all these immoral acts in order to secure our happiness and reduce suffering even in this present life.

The opposite of patience is hatred or anger, and we know how destructive and damaging that is to others and to our own lives.

The opposite of joyous perseverance or effort is laziness - let alone achieving our long-term goals we cannot even achieve short-term goals. The Lord Buddha said, 'If only you have effort you have all the Dharma, but if you have only laziness you do not have any Dharma.'

Similarly, the opposite of the meditative stabilisation or concentration is distraction. We know how it is important for us to have a calm and focussed mind if we are to be at peace and for our actions to be effective.

The opposite of wisdom is wrong or mistaken views which is a cause of a lot of confusion and ignorance, and as a result, brings a lot of suffering. We can talk about wrong

view in terms of the ultimate nature of things or in terms of knowledge of other truths such as impermanence. Therefore, the opposite of wisdom is really an ignorance with respect to the various types of knowledge.

In summary, last week we finished the discussion of how the practice of the six perfections includes all the practices related to achieving a higher rebirth or higher status. These six perfections subsume all of the practices related to fulfilling our own goals and the goals of other beings. I think we finished all of the detail related to fulfilling our own goals.

(C) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS BASED ON PERFECTING THE COMPLETE FULFILLMENT OF OTHERS' AIMS

Actually, the heading indicates that to fulfil the aims of other beings you need to engage in the practice of the six perfections.

You first relieve others' poverty by giving away material goods. Then you do no harm to any living being and, in addition, are patient with harm done to you. Without becoming dispirited you joyously persevere at helping those who harm you. You depend on meditative stabilization and inspire them through displaying supernormal powers and so forth. When they become suitable vessels for the teachings, you rely on wisdom and give good explanations, cut through their doubts and thereby bring them to liberation. Because you do all this, the perfections are fixed as six in number.

In terms of the object of giving, the text only mentions *giving material goods*. But indirectly, it also implies other objects of giving such as giving Dharma and giving fearlessness.

I encourage everyone to read the text and reflect on its meaning as you read. It is very important to understand the finer points, and also to see how the contents are interwoven together, such as the linkage between the practice of giving being followed immediately by the practice of moral discipline. Then the text says:

Then you do no harm to any living being ...

We understand here that the practice of giving is done in conjunction with the practice of moral discipline, which makes a sense. Otherwise, our actions may be at odds with each other: on the one hand you give and on the other hand, you cause harm. This doesn't make sense, does it? Therefore, when you practise giving, you should work towards practising moral discipline.

This part of the text can be taken to refer to the necessity of the practice of **morality** in order to ensure that giving is wholeheartedly done to benefit others and that there is no self-interest and exploitation of other beings whatsoever. You don't want the giving to be like someone feeding a pig for its meat. Then the text continues:

... in addition, are patient with harm done to you.

In addition, we need to engage in the practice of **patience**, particularly patience with the *harm* we receive from others. Without the practice of patience, we retaliate when others harm us and such harmful actions are against our ethical practice and principle of refraining from harmful actions.

Then it continues:

Without becoming dispirited you joyously persevere at helping those who harm you. You depend on meditative stabilization and inspire them through displaying supernormal powers and so forth.

As it says here, in addition to the practice of the first three perfections, we need to rely on the practice of *joyous perseverance* in order to be able to benefit those who harm us, as well as being able to cultivate and develop the practice of the perfections of *meditative stabilisation* and *wisdom*. The text is saying that through developing meditative stabilisation such as the state of calm abiding, we can achieve actual concentration (Tib: *bSam.ten dNgos.shi*) and then the various clairvoyant powers (Tib: *mNgon.shes*). By utilising the clairvoyant powers of higher perception, we can then benefit other beings more effectively and to a greater extent. Then it says:

When they become suitable vessels for the teachings, ...

When other beings have cultivated an aspiration for and admiration and faith in the Dharma, or when they become suitable vessels for receiving Dharma, you teach them Dharma and lead them to the state of liberation. The text then says:

... you rely on wisdom and give good explanations, cut through their doubts and thereby bring them to liberation. Because you do all this, the perfections are fixed as six in number.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

Through relieving others' poverty, not harming them,
Being patient with their harm, not being dispirited with
what they do,
Delighting them, and speaking well to them
You fulfil others' aims, which fulfils your own.

This verse, together with the one above, says that it is not possible to fulfil others' and your own aims without relying on the six perfections. Once you are certain about the way in which you fulfil your own and others' aims through these six perfections, you will have respect and deep admiration for the practice of them. Once you are certain about the way in which you fulfil your own and others' aims through these six perfections, you will have respect for the practice of them.

Here the text summarises how you will be inspired and feel motivated to engage in practising the six perfections because they have the potential to enable you to achieve all of your own aims and the aims of other beings.

(D) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS BASED ON THEIR SUBSUMING THE ENTIRE MAHAYANA

Here we see a summary of the bodhisattvas' practice of the six perfections in general. The text says:

You are indifferent to resources because you are not attached to those you have and do not pursue those you lack. Since you then have the ability to safeguard precepts, you adopt and respect ethical discipline.

There is an indication here of how the practice of giving can serve as an underlying cause to engage in the practice of moral discipline. *Indifferent to resources* means without attachment to any wealth and possessions which you already possess, *and do not pursue those you lack* means not craving to have more or to possess those objects that you do not possess. So, the text is saying that because of such a lack of attachment you *then have the ability to safeguard the precepts* or, in other words, a conducive situation to practise moral discipline.

The text continues:

You are patient with the suffering that comes from living beings and inanimate things ...

If you practise patience then you will never be discouraged in the face of any suffering you receive from *living beings* or from *inanimate* causes.

We know from our own experience that when we lack the practice of patience, we can easily become discouraged and give up on our practice by saying that it is too difficult or 'I am not getting anywhere with it.' When faced with pressure or hardship, we feel despair (Tib: *sKyo.ba*) and hopelessness, and then we just give up. It is the same with our practice. However, patience brings resilience to our practice, and so it is a very important element of our practice of benefiting other beings and not harming them. Then the text concludes with:

... and you are enthusiastic about whatever virtue you set out to cultivate, so you do not get dispirited by either of these. You cultivate a non-discursive yoga of meditative serenity and a non-discursive yoga of insight. These six comprise all the Mahayana practices through which you advance by the six perfections, for you accomplish these practices in stages by means of the six perfections and you do not need any more than these six perfections. The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

The entire Mahayana is summed up in
Not delighting in resources,
Reverence, not being dispirited in two ways,
And the yogas free of discursiveness.

Given this, it is a contradiction to want to enter the Mahayana and yet to reject the practice of the six perfections.

We will recite the *King of Prayers* for Wendy White's father who recently passed away peacefully. Before passing away he thanked people for saying prayers. Wendy White, as many of you know, has been closely related to Tara Institute for many, many years. So, we dedicate this prayer for the good rebirth of her father, and as an acknowledgement of the deep sense of loss and sorrow Wendy and her family may be going through.

*Transcript prepared by Bernii Wright
Edit 1 by Adair Bunnett
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© **Tara Institute**