
The Six Perfections

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We can begin with our usual meditation.

[*Tong-len meditation*]

It is very important to always begin our practice with the bodhicitta motivation. If we maintain bodhicitta or a good heart we will be much happier regardless of where we are, who we are with and what we do.

If we maintain an altruistic mental attitude or good heart within us, we can automatically reduce and prevent various negative states of mind. However, if our mental attitude is very self-centred or self-cherishing, then we will be very insecure and temperamental, easily losing our temper, or getting upset about any minor hardship that we face. If we are the sort of person who is easily upset or who is very vulnerable to everyday events, then this is a sign that we lack familiarity with a good heart and that we are very familiar with the self-cherishing mind.

We can learn a lot about Dharma practice simply by observing other people. For example, there are some people who normally have a good and calm nature, who are joyful and very broad-minded and always very happy. They also have a positive influence on others. Others admire them and enjoy their companionship because it makes them feel good and happy. When we observe such positive people, we should recognise that the main cause of their admirable qualities is their positive mental attitude and understand that we are also capable of cultivating the same positive mental attitude. We should be inspired by observing those people, knowing if we too cultivate the same mental attitude then we can be exactly like them - very calm, joyful, admired by others and able to benefit those around us.

On the other hand, there are others who are unhappy, unpredictable, short-tempered and very tense. Not only are they very unhappy and difficult people, but nobody wants to be close to them because they cause stress and unease to those around them. As we observe such negative people, we should be inspired to develop more control of our own destructive thoughts and emotions, otherwise we will end up exactly like them - unhappy and tense. As a result, people will try to steer clear of us.

Spiritual practice is not just learning a lot about Dharma; more importantly it is about putting into practice what learning and knowledge we have. After learning something, we need to go through the process of contemplating it over and over again, relating it to our own thoughts and deeds and recognising the benefits and relevance of putting it into practise. Our spiritual approach should not be simply gathering Dharma information, saying to ourselves, 'Oh this is this and this is this etc.', as if we are counting something, and then later on forgetting it altogether. Instead of this, it is important that we integrate our study into our practice, firstly internalising the knowledge by contemplating it not once or twice, but over and over again, and then making it our experience by meditating on it. If we do this, then we can gradually make progress in our practice.

In short, we have to try to direct our focus towards cultivating positive mental qualities, such as a good heart. The way to cultivate and develop positive qualities is by making an effort to familiarise ourselves with positive ways of thinking. We also have to try, as much as possible, to combat the opposite of these positive states of mind, such as anger and so forth. This is how we benefit from our practice. If we apply Dharma practice by utilising our own intellect, then we are implementing the Buddha's advice that we are our own saviour and protector.

We will now continue with the teaching.

(2'') Detailed explanation about outer things which are and are not to be given

(a'') How not to give outer things (cont.)

(4'') Inappropriate giving from the viewpoint of material things (cont.)

Last time we stopped at:

The *Bodhisattva Vows of Liberation* says:

Sariputra, if bodhisattvas give away their three kinds of religious robes, treating the one who asks for them as more important than themselves, they are not relying on few desires.

Hence, if renunciate bodhisattvas give away their three kinds of religious robes, they incur a transgression.

Here moral *transgression* refers specifically to a *renunciate* or an ordained person who does not possess any extra robes. In other words, it is a *transgression* if a renunciate who possesses only one set of robes gives them away.

(5'') Inappropriate giving from the viewpoint of purpose

Although the explanation here relates to the practice of giving in terms of the objects of giving, the recipients and the manner of giving etc., we can also apply the same knowledge to our other practices of benefitting sentient beings. We learn here how to properly serve others and what to do when we face certain critical situations when we do so.

The text is self-explanatory.

Inappropriate giving from the viewpoint of purpose is, for instance, when you fulfill a request for poison, weapons, fire or alcohol which is for harming either yourself or others; when you meet a request for things to play with and enjoy but which are associated with a prohibitive risk of accumulating the causes for taking a miserable rebirth; or when you satisfy a request for, or a request to learn about, pits and traps, ...

People use nets, traps and pits to catch animals.

... and so forth for the sake of hurting living beings.

It is inappropriate to give such traps to catch animals because they are harmful to other beings. Not only is giving harmful tools like traps inappropriate, but giving instructions on the skill of catching or hunting animals is also inappropriate if it is intended to harm other beings.

To continue:

This means that it is inappropriate even to give instructions about these things for the sake of bringing harm to the lives and resources of beings. Other examples are giving land or bodies of water when they are requested for the sake of harming beings that inhabit watery or dry areas; giving political authority over these or other places for the sake of bringing harm to the human inhabitants; or, when asked for such things by somebody whom you dislike, giving them instead to an enemy of this person.

(b'')) How to give outer things

You must give outer things if the timing is not prohibited by the Teacher with respect to the recipient, and if giving the gift to this person is appropriate and suitable. Moreover, if you as the giver are a person opposite to that explained above, and are stingy with regard to a text, you must give it to a person who asks for it and who wishes to understand it, even though you may not have finished using it. This is to say, if you have a second copy, you give that, and if you do not, then you should give the cost of having it copied out. If you do not have the money, you should definitely give the text away, thinking, "Though by giving this away I may be stupid in this life, it is all right; I will not acquiesce in my stinginess."

As to material things, you should give everything except those things listed above. If you are a ruler, and someone asks for others' children, wives, and so on, it is inappropriate to meet the request by separating each from their families, but you can give them as a whole together with the family dwelling and the like.

Even in Australia many aboriginal children were separated from their parents in the past. This is totally inappropriate.

Then the text continues:

Likewise, you must meet requests for things to play with that do not become a cause of taking a miserable rebirth; traps, etc. that do not hurt others; dry or wet places inhabited by living beings when no harm will come to the beings; and food and drink which do not have any bugs.

These lines make some reference to what has been explained before. It was said earlier that it is not appropriate to give things that are a cause of harm to other beings. However, it says here that if giving those things doesn't serve as a cause of harm, then giving them is appropriate. So, the text is now explaining the exceptions; sometimes it is appropriate to give things which are usually inappropriate to give.

It continues:

You should give even poison, weapons, fire, and alcohol if people ask for them in order to benefit themselves or others.

Then the text poses a question:

What should you do when you are giving material gifts and two persons ask you for something, one of whom is poor and the other of whom is wealthy?

The reply is:

If you are confronted by both of them right from the first and you are able to fulfill both of their wishes, you should do so.

If you are able to fulfil the wishes of two recipients – one poor and the other rich – who are requesting the same things at the same time, and *if you are able to fulfil both of their requests then you should do so.*

However:

If you are unable to do this, however, you should first think, "I will fulfill the wishes of the poor person," and work to give the gift to this person. So you should let the wealthy one know the situation, saying with soothing words, "My friend, I have already planned from the first to distribute this article to this poor person. Please do not think that I have spurned you," and then fulfill the wishes of the person who has no wealth.

As it says here, you have to prioritise your giving to the recipient who is poor, and you should explain to the wealthy person why you are doing this in an appropriate and skilful manner. It says here that you explain to the rich person how you have already decided to give to the poor

and apologise for not giving it to him. So you give it to the poor person but at the same time you do not displease the wealthy person.

Then it says:

I have written about the ways to learn these kinds of giving because they are extremely important for beginners who are keeping the bodhisattva vows. With the exception of some special cases I have explained all in accordance with the intended meaning of the *Bodhisattva Levels*.

Lama Tsongkhapa says here that the main reason why he is giving these detailed instructions is to guide beginner bodhisattvas.

(b)) What to do if you are unable to give

If you are overcome with stinginess when someone asks you for something, think as follows: "This material thing and I are definitely going to be parted by death; it will leave me and I will leave it. So I might as well take pleasure in giving this away and put it to good use, making a separation just as at the time of death. If I give this away, I will not have attachment to my wealth when the time comes for me to die. I will have no regrets and will give rise to feelings of pleasure and joy."

This is saying that if you are unable to give due to stinginess then you have to reflect on impermanence. It is inevitable that you will be separated from your possessions at the end of this life; your things will have to leave you and you will have to leave them. You should also reflect on the fact that if we are stingy or attached to wealth now, then we will experience great difficulty and suffering at the time of our death because of that attachment. However, if we are not attached or stingy then we will make good use of our wealth and possessions, and there will be no reason to feel regret, unhappiness and be disturbed at the time of death. Indeed, you will pass from this life in a joyful and relaxed state of mind.

Try to instil a motivation for giving by reflecting on the disadvantages of being stingy and attached to things in terms of experiencing suffering, and the advantages of not being stingy and attached in terms of finding more satisfaction and making good use of that wealth. If, despite this, you are still unable to give away something, then, as it says here, you should apologise and explain in a polite, honest and respectful manner the reason why you can't give the thing the other person asked you for. The text says:

If you are unable to give it away even though you reflect in this way, then inform the person who asks for it by means of the three things that they should know. This is described in the *Questions of Householder Ugra Sutra (Grha-pati-ugra-pariprcna-sutra)*, which states that you should say, "I am new to the practice of the Mahayana and am still a person of small ability whose roots of virtue are not yet ripened. Also, I am under the influence of an ungenerous attitude. Further, I have a strong grasping view of self and constantly conceive of a self and that which belongs to the self."

Then it continues:

"So, excellent person, please forgive me and do not make it difficult for me. I shall try to do just what satisfies your thoughts and the thoughts of all living beings." According to the *Compendium of Trainings*, this is to eliminate the further fault of each losing confidence in the other, but it does not get rid of the fault of stinginess, ...

By saying sorry and explaining the reason for your failure to give, the person who asked for the thing may understand your situation and won't be upset. Also, this may not cause any damage to the good faith and confidence that exists

between you. So, there are many benefits in saying sorry and explaining things to the other person in a courteous manner. This, however, doesn't mean that you have eliminated stinginess or that you don't have the fault of stinginess. As the text says:

... but it does not get rid of the fault of stinginess, a fault in bodhisattvas that is looked down upon. Still it seems that doing this prevents the cardinal transgression of not giving the teachings and wealth because of stinginess.

So *the cardinal transgression* here is a form of moral downfall which is called *pham.pa* in Tibetan. Because of your expressed regret and your confession of your inability to fulfil the wish of the recipient, you don't accrue *the cardinal transgression* or *pham.pa* of not giving the wealth of Dharma, which is one of the root bodhisattva vows. You are also not breaking this root bodhisattva vow because the breaking of any of the root bodhisattva vows is contingent upon the presence of the four fetters or four ever-binding factors or *kun.dkTri bZhi*. These are: not recognising the breach as wrong; not wishing to avoid it in future; rejoicing in it; and having no moral sense of shame or embarrassment.

Then it says:

Also, the *Compendium of the Perfections* states:

If you cannot give because your ability is so small
Though people come and ask you for something,
So as to not make them feel low,
Comfort them with gentle speech.

Henceforth when people come to ask for something,
Do your best not to make them feel low and despairing,
And clear away the fault of stinginess.
Earnestly strive to eliminate craving.

(c) Relying on the remedies for the hindrances to generosity

According to what is found in the *Bodhisattva Levels' Compendium of Determinations*, there are four hindrances:

1. The hindrance of not being used to generosity
2. The hindrance of declining fortune
3. The hindrance of attachment
4. The hindrance of not seeing the goal

(1) The hindrance of not being used to generosity

This means not being habituated with the thought of giving.

The hindrance of not being used to generosity is when you do not want to give to those who ask for something, even though you have material goods to give.

If we are habituated to or are familiar with the practice of giving (which is essentially a thought of giving), then this thought should arise spontaneously whenever we find an opportunity to give. The fact that we lack such a thought of giving, shows our lack of familiarity with generosity.

As the text says:

The remedy for this is to avoid succumbing to the shortcoming of not being accustomed to generosity by quickly becoming aware, examining the situation, and reflecting, "This shortcoming is definitely the result of my previously not getting used to generosity," and "Moreover, if I do not make this gift, I will dislike generosity in my future life as well." Then, be generous.

Essentially the instruction here is that in order to become familiar with the practice of giving, we must think about the shortcomings of not practising giving. Think about why we are not generous at the moment or we don't think of giving to others. It is because we have never familiarised ourselves with giving in the past. Therefore, if we do not make effort

to familiarise ourselves with giving, we will have the same stingy thoughts in the future and won't engage in the practice of giving. Just by reflecting on these points we can slowly instil a thought of giving, which we can then develop into the practice of giving.

(2) The hindrance of declining fortune

This refers to the hindrance of declining fortune such as poverty.

The hindrance of declining fortune is when you do not feel generous because of the sparseness of your resources.

It is very obvious that if we do not possess anything or if we are very poor, then even if there is an opportunity to give, we don't have the resources or anything to give. As a result, we cannot practice giving.

The remedy to this is to make a gift after you willingly accept the suffering of poverty, thinking, "During the time that I have been passing through cyclic existence I have not helped others and have experienced many unbearable sufferings such as thirst, hunger, and the like because of being under the control of something else—that is, my former karma. So even if I die from the suffering of this lifetime on account of my helping others, it is just better for me to be generous; whereas to turn away the person who asks me for something is not all right. Even in the absence of those resources, I will survive on some sort of wild plant."

Here again, it is important to reflect on the key point that the poverty that we experience now is the result of not practising giving in the past. Therefore, if we don't practise giving now, we will suffer from poverty in the future. In this way we are motivated to practise giving right now. Furthermore, we will also understand that it is worthwhile to accept some hardship, difficulty, and be prepared to take a personal loss as a result of the practice of giving. As the text says, as a result of giving all of one's resources, *even in the absence of those resources, I will survive on some sort of wild plant*. This is particularly important to the ordained or the renounced who live a simple and humble life with few needs.

(3) The hindrance of attachment

The hindrance of attachment is when you do not feel generous inasmuch as you have become attached to extremely attractive and excellent material goods that are to be given. The remedy for this is to quickly become aware of your shortcoming of attachment, and then to think, "This mistaken notion that thinks 'I am happy' with regard to what is by nature suffering will bring me suffering in the future." Understanding this, eliminate your attachment and give away your material goods.

The remedy for this is to quickly become aware of your shortcoming of attachment, and then to think, "This mistaken notion that thinks 'I am happy' with regard to what is by nature suffering will bring me suffering in the future." It says here that attachment gives us the wrong notion of an object as being a cause of happiness when in fact it is in the nature of suffering. When we are attached to something or somebody the pleasure that we feel seems like true happiness. However, it is not actually happiness but merely a reduced level of apparent suffering, which seems like a pleasurable experience. In Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, an example of a very itchy skin disease is used to describe this. A person who is infected with this disease feels good when he scratches the infected area, but in fact scratching only makes it worse. We won't go into more detail, but I think misunderstanding suffering as happiness is the major source of our unending suffering in our life. It's not that we want

suffering but because we mistake suffering for happiness that we continuously create the causes of the suffering we don't want.

(4) The hindrance of not seeing the goal

This means not seeing the result of giving.

The hindrance of not seeing the goal is when you do not have in view the benefit of reaching perfect enlightenment that is contingent on generosity, but instead consider the benefit of a great amount of resources and then give things away. The remedy for this is to quickly become aware of this shortcoming; then to consider how, in general, all conditioned things perish moment by moment and how, in particular, your resources perish and leave you; and then to fully dedicate the giving of any gift for the sake of great enlightenment.

If you give while merely considering the karmic result of generosity—resources and the like—you will obtain a large amount of resources, but you will not attain liberation, just as business people who give without any hesitation all their goods to others for a price merely get a profit, but do not obtain merit. Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas (Catuh-sataka)* says:

From making gifts to this person
I will get a great reward.
Such getting and giving are looked down on
As being like wanting profit in business.

(2") The generosity which is just mental

The generosity which is just mental means that after you go to a quiet place and then withdraw your mind inward, with a pure motivation and faith from the depths of your heart, you construct with your thoughts an immeasurably vast quantity of diverse gifts, and you then imagine that you are offering them to all living beings. This increases merit immeasurably with little difficulty and, moreover, is the giving of wise bodhisattvas, according to the *Bodhisattva Levels*.

This is the kind of practice of giving that I do most of the time, because I do not have much in the way of wealth and possessions.

The text continues:

Although it says in the *Questions of Subahu Sutra* that this is to be done by those who do not have wealth, it is appropriate for those who have wealth to do it as well.

Essentially, we notice here how in this section Lama Tsongkhapa shows us how to integrate the explanation of the practice of giving we have just discussed into our practice. What you find here is how to engage in the meditation of giving. It shows us how we should sit in a quiet place and calm our mind. Then we mentally create various things in accordance with the needs of all beings and offer those things to them. As it says here, by doing this practice of mentally giving, we can create an *immeasurably vast quantity of merit*.

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Edited Version*

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