

The Six Perfections

ལྷན་ཁྲིམས་ཆེན་པོ་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབས་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual we will begin with a short meditation. [*Tong-len meditation*]

Try to cultivate the proper motivation which makes a lot of difference to the efficacy of our practice.

Last week we discussed at length the benefits of developing the patience of accepting suffering. If we lack the patience of accepting suffering, then whenever we face any suffering or difficulties, we will loathe it and become very irritated or even angry. However, if our situation is favourable and pleasant and we like it, we then get attached to it and desire it.

As Dharma practitioners, we should be clear about what we should do and what we should not do. Whether we engage in meditation practice or any other form of Dharma practice, there are things we should do or accept, and things we should not do or reject. There is no point in being pretentious about our Dharma practice or appearing to be Dharma practitioners outwardly if we don't put this important point into practice.

Every event in life, good and bad, provides us with an opportunity to develop our practice of what to accept and what to reject. They give us an opportunity to practise the Dharma. When we experience suffering or any situation that we do not want, we should try to recognise that as being a result of non-virtue. This in turn should help instil the thought of refraining from engaging in non-virtues. Therefore, adverse situations serve as a cause to remind us of refraining from non-virtue. These adverse situations should also remind us to practise virtue because when we experience adverse situations we miss out on the joys and happiness of life even more than usual. Realising that happiness results from virtue, we should be inspired to practise virtue.

If we really apply this practice of adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues, then we will find that as we develop this practice, and as our minds become more familiar with the thought of adopting virtues, and abandoning non-virtues, we will find lasting peace, stability and clarity within our mind.

The more we increase virtues and decrease non-virtues, the more peace, happiness and stability will we find in our life. So, it is essential that our spiritual practice integrates the practice of adopting virtue and of abandoning non-virtue. We know the Lord Buddha clearly said to us that the ten virtues are what we need to practise, and the ten non-virtues are what we need to abandon. This reflects the fundamental teaching of the Buddha. If we put this teaching aside and try to engage in something else that we think is very profound and meditate on that, then we are deluding ourselves.

The practice of adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues is not only emphasised in Buddhism but is also advocated by all other major religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. You'll find that in the doctrines of all the spiritual traditions there are set guidelines as to what to adopt and what to discard. We need to adopt the ten

virtues, and discard the ten non-virtues because the ten virtues serve as a cause for yielding the desirable result of the happiness we seek, and the ten non-virtues serve as a cause for yielding the undesirable result of the suffering we do not want.

It is the same for all of us. Deep down we all have the desire for happiness, and the desire to abandon suffering and unhappiness. Yet the way we live our lives is quite the opposite; the causes we create are contrary to what we really seek in our lives. In other words, what we want and what we do are contradictory.

If we continue like that then there is no real hope of finding true peace and happiness. Even if we think we are following the Dharma and doing meditation practice, our daily actions do not accord with the Dharma teaching. I am simply saying that you should integrate the Dharma into your daily actions. This is how I try to live my life and I see it as my core Dharma practice. If we really want to gain some benefit from the Dharma and see positive change with our lives, we must integrate the Dharma into our everyday activities. The best thing I can offer to my close friends, which means all of you, is to tell you to put the Dharma into practise. I know I have been repeating myself over and over again, but I have a good reason to do so. However, if there are any among you who find what I say too noisy, I say simply close your ears. In fact, I note that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama quite frequently tells the public during his lectures that if they find his lecture too boring or deafening, they can simply cover their ears.

It's very important to remind ourselves about Dharma practice, because what we are lacking is the application of the Dharma to our daily thoughts and conduct. Through the practise of Dharma, we need to modify our daily thoughts and conduct. If we don't do that then what use is our Dharma learning! How can we expect the Dharma to benefit us and help us to achieve what we want if our thoughts and deeds run counter to the Dharma?

Now we'll continue with the text.

(b) Reflecting on the advantages of bearing suffering's hardships

Reflecting on the advantages of bearing suffering's hardships has two parts:

1. Reflecting on the crucial benefits such as liberation, etc.
2. Reflecting on the benefit of dispelling immeasurable suffering

I'll continue reading from the text which you will find very striking. It says:

(1) Reflecting on the crucial benefits such as liberation, etc.

Repeatedly make your mind steadfast, thinking, "I know that in the past while passing through cyclic existence I suffered for the sake of trifling desires and minor needs, yet I disregarded the many sufferings, undergoing a great deal of purposeless suffering that will in turn cause immeasurable suffering for me in my future lives. Given this, now that I know that I am engaged in virtue that will accomplish immeasurable benefits and happiness for myself and others, it is appropriate that I accept suffering a trillion times more than before - so of course I will accept sufferings smaller than that."

I won't go into this in detail, as the meaning is very clear. Essentially it is saying that in pursuit of very trifling, meaningless and minor purposes we sacrifice a lot. Not only

do we accept a great deal of hardship and suffering, but at the same time we accumulate a great number of non-virtues. Although the text is explicitly referring to the kinds of hardships and sufferings that we go through in association with our quest for trifling goals in the past and future lifetimes, this is also very relevant to our current life too.

The text continues:

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds states:

For the sake of my desires I have experienced
Being burned, etc., thousands of times in the hells,
But have not achieved either my own welfare
Or the welfare of others.

This quote from *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* really summarises the meaning of the preceding passage. When it says, *for the sake of my desires I have experienced*, the word 'desire' can imply that you are misled by the wrong path. It also refers to the desire relating to any of the five sensual objects like beautiful forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. To be more specific, out of craving for meat, people commit the act of killing of animals, out of attachment to wealth they commit the act of stealing, while lust can lead to sexual misconduct, and so forth. The word 'desire' incorporates all of this.

As result of the actions we create due to desire and attachment we experience *being burned, etc., thousands of times in the hells*. Basically, because of desire and attachment, we experience great suffering, such as of the suffering of the hell realms. Further, we *have not achieved either our own welfare or the welfare of others*. Let alone the welfare of other beings, the actions we have created out of desire have not even achieved our own purpose. Our actions have achieved nothing but a great amount of suffering!

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds continues:

This is not as harmful as that,
And it achieves great purpose,
So it is correct here only to delight
In suffering that clears away all beings' hurt.

When it says, *this is not as harmful as that*, Shantideva is referring back to the previous verse which relates to the great amount of suffering we have endured in the past to achieve worldly desires and mundane goals, and the great hardship we will endure in future lives in order to achieve small mundane goals. The amount of suffering we go through and accept in the pursuit of trifling purposes of the world is very great, but when it says here *this is not as harmful as that*, the word 'this' refers to the effort we put into our Dharma or meditation practice. Compared to the hardship and suffering we endure in our pursuit of trifling goals, the hardship and suffering we experience in our Dharma and meditation practice is very small. As it says here, *this is not as harmful as that. And it achieves great purpose*, which indicates that our practice doesn't make us suffer or harm us as much as the pursuit of mundane goals, and the effort we put into our practice does not entail a great deal of hardship. Moreover, the suffering we experience and have to tolerate in Dharma practice is very little, yet what we gain from the Dharma practice is very great. *So it is correct here only to delight in suffering that clears away all beings' hurt*. There are many benefits to ourselves and all other beings from our spiritual practice. Therefore, as the text says, *it is correct here only to delight*. This is saying that whatever the degree of hardship, or the suffering that we experience in our Dharma practice, it is worthwhile and something that we should delight in.

The text continues:

Thus, after you reflect on how you have previously created only hardship that did not accomplish any of your own or others' aims, uplift your mind, thinking, "Why am I not now bearing a suffering that achieves great purpose? Although I am suffering, how excellent that I have found something like this to do."

The effort we put into Dharma practice has the great benefit of achieving complete enlightenment. Realising this great benefit, we should think that it is worthwhile to confront and tolerate any hardship and suffering in Dharma practice. In the face of any obstacles in our Dharma practice, we should never feel despair. Rather we should feel more inspired and raise our spirits and courage.

This makes us reflect on our deeds and their outcomes. Are we are gaining enough benefit from the various things in which we invest so much of our time, effort, and resources and which lead to much hardship? If we are not really achieving our desired goals, then what is the point of doing the things we do? What is the purpose of our life? The purpose is undoubtedly to achieve happiness and eliminate suffering.

As we carefully examine our everyday mundane activities, we will develop a sense of distaste or renunciation because they even do not fulfil our own purposes. To quote the master Shantideva:

Although seeking to avoid pain,
They run headlong into suffering.
They long for happiness, but foolishly
Destroy it, as if it were their enemy.

This very popular passage from the Shantideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* says that even though beings have a strong wish to avoid suffering, they run after the causes of suffering. They have a strong desire for happiness, but out of ignorance, they destroy their happiness, as if happiness was their enemy. This may very well reflect our situation because it shows what we desire and what we do are contradictory.

The text continues:

Moreover, develop a fearless attitude toward hardship, thinking how you were misled by bad teachers to ignoble, purposeless paths whereon you endured ascetic practices such as leaping on a trident, sitting close to five fires, and the like. Also think how for the sake of inferior, mundane purposes you made yourself bear many sufferings in farming, business, and war.

Here, the purpose is to encourage us to overcome any hardship and suffering we face in our Dharma practice by recognising that our practice will result in achieving supreme enlightenment, fulfilling the true wishes of ourselves and all other beings. Hence, our Dharma practice has the most marvellous purpose, and we should definitely maintain our determination, courage, and motivation to practise at all times.

There are those who are *misled by bad teachers to ignoble, purposeless paths*, etc., believing that if they leap onto on a *trident* (a three-pointed steel spike) then they'll achieve liberation. As a result, they are able to tolerate a vast amount of suffering. Others say that if you engage in the ritual of fire, burning the tips of your five fingers, then you can reach liberation, and this involves tolerating the extreme pain and suffering too. Whether misled by teachers, or out of their ignorance, some people tolerate this sort of suffering but for no good reason or purpose.

If we look at farmers, we can see how hard they have to work to make their living – they have to work on the farm in extreme weather conditions, whether it's hot or cold or wet. Business people also have to work hard without any rest in order to make a living. The hardship we face in our Dharma practice is very small compared to the hardships people face to make a living in the world or for some inferior reasons. But our Dharma practice has a far-reaching goal and thinking along these lines should instil the courage and motivation to continue our practice.

Here there are guidelines for both worldly life as well as spiritual life. As it says, in worldly life you have to make a lot of effort, face hardships and problems to fulfil your wishes and dreams. If a farmer wants to have a good harvest he can't just say, 'Oh I own a lot of land' but then sleep all day. That won't achieve anything. Rather he has to go out and work in his fields to achieve a good harvest. Whatever activity we undertake, we have to make the effort to gather all the suitable conditions, one after the other, and try to overcome all the obstacles, and in this way we are able to achieve our goal.

I once watched a TV series about the life of an American farming family. There was a young couple with five children who owned a very big piece of land. The father and mother worked hard on the farm to support, care for, and educate their family. In the end the whole family became very successful, so the show (which went on for a long while) had a good ending. The hard work and endurance of suffering paid off in the end.

Sometimes we can be inspired when we learn about the life story of successful people who climb from the bottom to the top of the ladder of success. There are the stories of those who come from a very poor background, and through hard work have gone on to become very successful in their chosen field. There are very successful people who initially had nothing, so they started with small jobs, and then moved on to better ones and after that even better ones. Likewise, when we follow spiritual practice, we have to be very clear about the purpose of our spiritual practice which, compared with mundane works, is far higher and greater, because it is aimed at achieving our full potential and our own ultimate spiritual goal, as well as benefitting all sentient beings. We can be inspired to overcome problems and not lose our motivation and courage when we think about how people exert themselves and work hard in order to achieve their goals, even if those goals are mundane and small.

Therefore, we have to say to ourselves, 'Compared to that, the hardship I face in my practice is very minor, but the outcome is so great.' With this way of thinking, we will never lose our motivation, determination and courage when we face hardships or problems in our spiritual practice.

It can also be inspiring to learn about the stories of the early migrants in Australia who worked so hard and built this nation and began a new life for themselves.

The text continues as follows:

(2) Reflecting on the benefit of dispelling immeasurable suffering

Reflect well on the differences between short-term and long-term suffering, thinking, "A man who is to be executed is overjoyed when he is freed from execution by having merely his finger cut off. How excellent it would be if similarly, by means of this slight suffering of human hardship, I could permanently dispel the suffering of

limitless cyclic existence in general and in particular the suffering of miserable rebirths such as the hells, etc." If you do this well, you produce fearless courage with respect to hardship.

When you are doing the giving and taking meditation, you can reflect on the suffering and hardship other beings go through and take them upon yourself. Not only that, but you can think of the hardship and the suffering that you will undergo, and accept this suffering as taking on suffering of all other beings, including their future suffering. Then think, 'By accepting this, may all others be free from suffering.'

As a way to instil motivation and courage into your spiritual practice, think of the benefits and results of the spiritual practice that you do, which has the potential to stop lower rebirth, and achieve liberation from cyclic existence. So whenever you do a Dharma practice it has a very important purpose. For example, if you practise the act of refraining from killing, the benefit is that you prevent a bad rebirth. Likewise, if we refrain from the act of stealing, the result will be finding wealth and good resources in the future. Thinking like this is a way to help us understand that whatever the hardship or difficulty we go through in spiritual practice, or the effort we put into the practice, it is all very worthwhile.

The text continues:

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds says:

How is it unfortunate if a man who is to be executed
Is freed from that by having his hand cut off?
How is it unfortunate if by human suffering
You are released from hell?

(c) How it is not difficult to bear suffering if you gradually grow accustomed to it, starting with the small

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds states:

There is nothing whatsoever
That does not become easier through habituation.
So by becoming used to small harms
You will bear great harms as well.

Here we learn that whether something is hard or easy depends on our familiarity or our habitation with that thing. We understand that with habituation we can change anything. This gives us more inspiration.

The text continues:

After you have conceived the armor-like thought to accept suffering, you gradually blend it with suffering, starting with small sufferings. When you do this, you steadily increase your capacity to accept suffering.

This shows us that the best way to develop our practice of patience is to start with practising patience with things that are within our capacity. For example, if you are living with someone who has the habit of always speaking harshly to you, try to first make an effort to tolerate a few unpleasant words. From there you can move on to developing patience with speech that is even more harsh. Likewise, you can develop patience with respect to unpleasant bodily gestures that others show to you, starting from a small unpleasantness to bigger unpleasantness.

The text continues:

The *Compendium of Trainings* says:

Once you have first grown used to small sufferings, you will become accustomed to the difficult and the very difficult. For example, just as all living beings have the idea that suffering is happiness through the power of conditioning, so you maintain the idea of joy whenever

you experience suffering by becoming used to applying the idea of joy to these experiences.

As to how this comes about, the *Questions of Householder Ugra Sutra* states:

Free yourself from a mind that is like a piece of cotton.

Like a piece of cotton is easily blown about, the mind is easily disturbed or agitated when any disturbing thoughts arise.

And the *Array of Stalks Sutra* says:

Daughter, in order to destroy all afflictions you should develop a mind that is hard to defeat.

Thus, you need courage that is very firm and stable; you will not be able to accept suffering with a fragile mind.

If you initially develop a significant degree of courage, even great suffering becomes helpful.

The implication here is that the greater the challenges that we face, or the challenges that lie ahead, if we are already prepared in advance with a higher degree of courage then those great challenges will no longer be a difficulty. Indeed, that difficulty and suffering can be transformed into an aid to our practice.

The commentary continues,

It is just like the case of warriors entering a battle and using the sight of their own blood to increase their boldness. If right from the start you belittle yourself, saying, "I have never heard of such a thing, and even if I had heard of it, I could never do something like that," then even a small suffering becomes a cause for you to turn back from the path. It is just like the case of cowards who see others' blood and, fainting, fall unconscious.

If you get a chance it's good to read these lines out aloud. Just hearing them has a good effect. Just by saying *I have never heard of such a thing, and even if I had heard of it, I could never do something like that* we are undermining our own potential. Then *even a small suffering becomes a cause for you to turn back from the path*.

People have come to me and said they have problems with their son or daughter, and all day long keep saying to themselves, 'I have this problem. It's no-one else's problem but mine.' I tell them not to worry and they say to me, 'But I'm their mother and I worry about them all the time.' I tell them there's no benefit for you in worrying and there's no benefit for your son or daughter if you worry. Be there for them and help them. And they say, 'But my daughter or son is suffering.' I say, 'Worrying doesn't lessen their problems. Take a little holiday, go out for lunch, go outside for some fresh air. That's more beneficial than worrying.'

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