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# The Six Perfections

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual, we will begin with the giving and taking meditation. [*Meditation*]

Now, cultivate the right motivation, which is to achieve complete enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. Then think that it is for this reason that we are listening to this profound teaching and will put it into practice.

We understand that the meaning of joyful effort is having a genuine sense of joy or delight in whatever virtuous practice we do. When we engage in meditation practice, it is important that we place our mental focus on a virtuous object. However, it is not sufficient to just be able to retain that object of meditation. We should at the same time have a sense of real joy and delight in engaging in meditation practice.

## (c) Stopping discouragement or self-contempt

### (3) Stopping discouragement because wherever you are is a place to practice (cont.)

Now we continue with this line from the lam rim teaching:

Likewise, do not become discouraged even by being delayed in cyclic existence for an immeasurable length of time, ...

Then a few lines further on the text quotes *Precious Garland*.

Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* states:

When suffering, even a short time is hard to bear;  
What need mention a time that is long?  
But when free of suffering and joyful,  
What harms you over even endless time?

Bodhisattvas have no physical suffering;  
How could they have mental suffering?  
Out of compassion they feel distress for the world;  
Thus they remain for a long time.

So do not be discouraged,  
Thinking, "Buddhahood is far away."  
Always strive at these collections  
So as to eliminate faults and gain good qualities.

As I always emphasise, as we go through this text the most important thing is to relate it to our own practice. We must see in ourselves some sort of difference between when we study and gain knowledge about the Dharma, and when we don't study or we lack knowledge of the Dharma. In this topic, the emphasis is that whenever we engage in virtuous practice, not only should we have very positive thoughts, strong interest and great enthusiasm, but also a genuine sense of joy and happiness about our practice.

In practical terms, we need to ask ourselves where our thoughts, interests and enthusiasms normally lie. What kinds of deeds or things do we take a great deal of joy and pleasure in? We find that the answer is that it is all mainly related to something opposite to the Dharma or spirituality; we are not short of enthusiasm or taking joy and delight in engaging in negativities. The text is saying that we need to

prioritise Dharma or virtuous practices over those other activities.

Fundamentally, we all wish for happiness and do not wish for suffering, both of which depend on their respective causes. The cause of happiness is virtuous actions, whereas the cause of suffering and unhappiness is non-virtuous or negative actions. So it should occur to us that, if we wish for happiness, then we should also have interest in and be enthusiastic and happy about creating virtue. Likewise, if we do not wish for suffering, then we should not have interest in, be enthusiastic and take joy in creating non-virtuous actions. Hence, in order to bring more happiness and reduce suffering we must change what we take interest and joy in. Unless we change this, we cannot expect to see the change we want to see, which is to experience more happiness and less suffering.

As followers of the Dharma, we have to be aware that if we create any negative action it will result in suffering. Therefore, we should think, 'I must purify negative actions by engaging in a purification practice.' Similarly, as we always wish for more happiness, then we should always remember to create virtuous actions, knowing that this is really the main cause of happiness. As a way to increase our merit and virtue, we should remember to rejoice and dedicate our virtue and merit. In this way, it is very important that we put our Dharma knowledge into practice so that we acquire the benefit of the Dharma, in terms of enriching our life with happiness.

True Dharma is related to our own mind, our own way of thinking and our daily deeds. Therefore, when we talk of Dharma practice, we must think of applying it to our thoughts and deeds. Dharma practice means changing or amending our mental attitude and conduct, for example adopting the ten virtuous actions of refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct etc., and abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions of killing, stealing etc. in both thought and deed.

The reason we need to adhere to the right practice of karma - in terms of what to adopt and abandon - is because adopting what needs to be adopted will bring happiness and abandoning what needs to be abandoned will prevent suffering in our life. However, in order for us to be motivated to follow the right practice of karma we must gain a firm and definite conviction faith in the law of karma - positive karma results in happiness and negative karma results in suffering. Once we gain such a conviction faith, we will follow the practice of karma because we all have the natural tendency to wish for happiness and avoid suffering.

Then the text continues:

... "To become a buddha requires completing limitless collections of merit and sublime wisdom.

Essentially, the text is talking about the various causes of discouragement that impede our practice, and how to overcome them. One of the causes of discouragement will arise when we think about the enormity of the accumulation of merit and wisdom required to achieve the state of enlightenment, when we may feel, 'This is too much, I can't do it.' In order to achieve enlightenment, we have to complete the two accumulations of merit and wisdom, which subsequently serve as the primary cause to achieve a buddha's form body (rupakaya) and truth body (dharmakaya). The word 'completion' in the context of the *completion of the endless collections*, emphasises the necessity of perfecting the two accumulations of merit and wisdom;

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partial accumulation of merit and wisdom is not enough to achieve the state of buddhahood. If we truly understood the extent of the accumulations required to achieve complete enlightenment, we could easily become discouraged about seeking enlightenment, thinking:

... This is so difficult that I could not possibly do it."

Then, the text explains the way to overcome such discouragement:

First, motivate yourself with the desire to attain the goal of limitless buddha qualities for the welfare of the limitless beings you intend to help. Next, focus on remaining in cyclic existence for a measureless period of time and take the bodhisattva vows, thinking: "I shall accomplish limitless collections!"

These lines imply that there is no need to become distressed about accumulating enormous merit, for if you generate the spirit of enlightenment, and also take the engaging vows of the bodhisattva deeds - *the bodhisattva vows* - then you will constantly generate merit. It shows here the process of generating aspirational bodhicitta, followed by generating engaging or active bodhicitta through taking the bodhisattva vows. In this process, your mind is aimed at benefitting a limitless number of sentient beings in order to achieve the goal of limitless buddha qualities. To achieve that, you intend to accumulate limitless merit, even if it takes a *limitless period of time*. We then generate this kind of an aspirational bodhicitta and subsequently take the bodhisattva vows. Then the text continues:

Then, as long as you keep the vows, whether your mind is distracted by other things or not, asleep or awake, you will constantly accumulate merit as vast as space.

If you cultivate the spirit of enlightenment in such a manner *and take the bodhisattva vows* as mentioned here, then, *whether your mind is distracted or not*, or whether you are *asleep* or not, you are *constantly accumulating merit*. There is no reason to feel discouraged when you know that this is the way to accumulate merit.

Next, there is a quote from *Precious Garland*, the meaning of which has just been discussed.

The *Precious Garland* states:

Just as in all directions  
Space, earth, water, fire, and wind  
Are limitless, so, we assert,  
Suffering beings are without limit.

This is indicating that the number of sentient beings are as infinite or as limitless as space, water, fire, wind and so forth. Then:

With compassion the bodhisattvas  
Extricate these limitless beings  
From suffering and then determine  
To set them in buddhahood.

Those remaining steadfast in this way  
Properly make this commitment,  
And then, whether asleep or awake,  
And even when careless,

They constantly accumulate merit as limitless  
As living beings, for beings are without limit.  
Because of the limitlessness of this, know  
That limitless buddhahood is not hard to gain.

Those who remain for an immeasurable time  
Seek immeasurable enlightenment  
For the sake of immeasurable beings  
And accomplish immeasurable virtue.

Hence, though enlightenment is measureless,  
How could they fail to attain it  
Before long through a combination  
Of these four immeasurable ways?

This also indicates how the accumulation of merit becomes limitless and the sentient beings for whose purpose you accumulate merit is limitless. So, as the purpose of taking bodhisattva vows is directed to limitless beings, the merit you accumulate through it is also limitless.

Then the text continues:

It is most wonderful to think, "If only I could attain buddhahood in a brief time for the sake of living beings," because you are moved by the very intense power of your love, compassion, and spirit of enlightenment.

This sentence is saying that it is wonderful and praiseworthy if those, who, having cultivated a strong force of love, compassion and bodhicitta towards all sentient beings, and then moved by the force of love and compassion, generate an urge to achieve enlightenment as quickly as possible, in the shortest timeframe. When it says here, *it is most wonderful*, this could refer to bodhisattvas who engage in the tantric path. However, bodhisattvas don't engage in the tantric path from the beginning; they first cultivate and develop love, compassion and bodhicitta. Because of the intense and strong force of their love and compassion towards all beings they follow the quick path to enlightenment.

Then the text continues:

However, when you are not within the sphere of these motivations, and you see the necessity of a very long training in endless deeds and that much hard work is required, you might think, "If this is the case, who could possibly do it?" If you should then claim that you are seeking a quick path, you directly damage the engaged spirit of enlightenment and indirectly damage the aspirational spirit of enlightenment.

Those who choose the quick path are making a mistake because their rationale for following the quick path is that they think the sutra path is too difficult, as it requires accumulating an enormous amount of merit over such a long period of time. In other words, they lack the courage to follow the sutra path. Moreover, their way of thinking could directly damage their engaging bodhicitta and indirectly damage their aspirational bodhicitta.

As the text states:

Your capacity for the Mahayana lineage steadily weakens, and your enlightenment fades into the remote distance, for you have utterly contradicted what Nagarjuna and Asanga determined to be the Conqueror's own thought on how to increasingly strengthen the spirit of enlightenment.

Thus, since becoming discouraged and remaining so brings no benefit at all and only leads to further discouragement, understand well the methods for achieving enlightenment and uplift your mind.

In these lines, the text asks us if there are any benefits or advantages to feeling discouraged. There are none at all. If we feel discouraged and don't overcome that, then that can lead to further discouragement, eventually making it impossible or extremely difficult to come out of that state. Therefore, we need to realise that discouragement can be a great obstacle to achieving our goals; whether they be spiritual or worldly. So we should think of overcoming that discouragement, and the method is to reflect on something

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which will help uplift the mind. *So understand well the methods for achieving enlightenment and uplift your mind.*

When you do this, the completion of your aims is as if in your hand.

Rather than feeling hopeless and discouraged, we should direct our mind to what can be done to achieve our goal. As we do this, we will begin to see how we can achieve that goal completely. When we gain confidence about how we can achieve the goal, then, as it says here, we feel as though we have already accomplished the goal; *the completion of your aims is as if in your hand.* Then there's a quote:

The *Garland of Birth Stories* says:

Discouragement does not help to free you from misfortune,  
So, rather than torment yourself in sorrow,  
Develop stable proficiency in the required goals.  
Then even the very difficult becomes easy, bringing liberation.

So achieve what must be done by the indicated method  
Without making yourself fearful and unhappy.  
Support yourself with stability that has the brilliance of proficiency,  
Then, the achievement of all aims is in your hand.

This passage from *The Garland of Birth Stories* is very effective advice, and also very inspirational. I would encourage you to memorise these words so that you can easily remember this advice and its meaning whenever you need to apply it.

Saying *discouragement does not help to free you from misfortune*, this is something we have to say to ourselves. Sometimes we feel discouraged by not being able to achieve what we want to achieve, or not being able to have things that we want to have; whether that is in the form of knowledge, material objects, or whatever it may be. There is a desire and interest to have something, but for whatever reason we are discouraged from pursuing it, and we think we will not be able to accomplish it. As a result, we will feel despair and anxiety and even depression. That's what it is saying: *discouragement does not help to free you from misfortune or from your despair*, and it won't help you to come out of that despair.

*Rather than torment yourself in sorrow* means that you may be discouraged and suffering because you don't understand certain things, or you are unable to have certain things. In this situation, you need to recognise that the knowledge you want is not going to arise through feeling discouraged and doing nothing, nor is the thing you want going to come to you.

*So rather than torment yourself in sorrow, develop stable proficiency in the required goals* and focus on directing your attention towards achieving that. Educate yourself on how to achieve what you want to achieve. In this way, *even the very difficult becomes easy, bringing liberation.*

The next verse, beginning with *So achieve what must be done by the indicated method without making yourself fearful and unhappy* indicates that rather than being overwhelmed by a sense of discouragement, if we focus on how to achieve what we can do, then our knowledge will increase, and through this we will be able to get rid of discouragement. Then some positive thoughts about our ability to achieve the goal will arise, which is as if the goal was already in our own hand.

As we can see here in the *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path*, Lama Tsongkhapa cites the scriptures written by great and well-known early Buddhist masters; this is one of the hallmarks of Tsongkhapa's writings.

The text continues:

Arya Asanga says repeatedly that you have both to know well the methods of training in extensive practice without being discouraged and to not be satisfied with only minimal qualities.

As we direct our attention to learning the major scriptures, we will begin to find out more and more about the subject matter. However, this should not cause us to feel discouraged from learning more. Nor should this cause us to be satisfied with just a partial understanding. If we are not careful, this can easily happen with us. As we make some progress with our practice or we gain more knowledge, we inflate ourselves with a sense of pride. With this pride, we feel some sort of contentment, as if we have finished learning or have no more to learn. Such a false sense of contentment is an obstacle for our progress.

Then the text says:

At present you think, "I have reached a high level of the path," when you have produced a single approximation of a good quality; even if it is an actual good quality, it is only one aspect of the path. You are content to meditate solely on it. But then those knowledgeable in the key points of the path explain from within the guidelines of scripture and reasoning that it is indeed a fraction of virtue, but with just that alone you have not reached anywhere. When you understand what they have said, you become extremely discouraged. Thus, those who do not remain satisfied with just some portion of virtue, who seek higher distinction, and who are not discouraged even with the necessity to learn limitless trainings are extremely rare.

It says here that, amongst those who find out precisely what it takes to achieve supreme enlightenment, not becoming discouraged is very rare.

However, if we relate this to our practice, then as Lama Tsongkhapa said here, we are not one of those people. That is because at the moment we rather think that we are doing well in our practice and are satisfied with it. Not only is our knowledge very limited, but we are so satisfied with that limited knowledge that we cannot see anything beyond that, or the need to learn beyond that. Then, if we go outside of what we know and what practice we do, we will be discouraged.

For those who truly follow the path, the instructions given here are very real and the true practitioner will find them very effective and beneficial for making progress.

### **(b") Gathering the forces of the favorable conditions**

This section has four parts:

1. Developing the power of aspiration
2. Developing the power of steadfastness
3. Developing the power of joy
4. The power of relinquishment

### **(1") Developing the power of aspiration**

As it is said that yearning acts as the basis for joyous perseverance, aspiration here refers to yearning.

The Tibetan word for the first power - yearning - is *mopa* which is said to refer to aspiration, of *dunpa* in Tibetan.

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Then the text says:

The need to generate it is stated in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*:

My present destitution has arisen  
From my not aspiring for the teachings  
Both now and in the past.  
Who would forsake aspiration for the teachings?

The Sage declared aspiration  
The root of all aspects of virtue.

It then states how to develop aspiration:

Its root, in turn, is constant meditation  
On karma's fruitional effects.

This means that the way to develop aspiration is to meditate on how pleasant and unpleasant effects arise from virtuous and non-virtuous karma respectively.

In fact, this is exactly what I brought up earlier in this talk. In terms of our practice it is most important to aspire to practise karma, in terms of what to adopt and what to avoid. This aspiration is the root cause of developing virtue. Then, as a way to cultivate that aspiration, the text refers to the subject matter of knowing the results of positive and negative karma, or actions. Therefore, it is talking about the aspiration to adopt virtue or positive actions, and to abandon non-virtue or negative actions.

Then the text continues:

This is because it is taught that faith acts as the basis for yearning, so that the faith of conviction in the two types of karma and their effects will generate two kinds of desire: to eliminate non-virtuous karma and to adopt virtuous karma.

In order to generate an aspiration, we need to cultivate faith. Here, faith refers to a 'conviction faith'. There are two types of conviction faith relating to the cause and effect of good and bad karma: good karma results in happiness and bad karma results in suffering. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate this conviction faith in the infallibility of the causal link between these two karmas (good and bad karma).

The fact that we are very behind with our practice, or that we lack interest in our practice, is clearly because of our lack of conviction faith in the functioning of good and bad karma. Essentially, in order to generate such a conviction faith, we have to ask ourselves whether or not there is a cause for things and events to happen.

Of course, everything happens because of causes. For example, in order to reap a good harvest the farmers initially sow the seed, and thus create the causes. They sow the seed because they know that the harvest depends on the cause. The happiness we seek and the suffering we wish to avoid also depends on causes. So, to cultivate such conviction faith in karma we have to ask the question, 'What is the cause?'

If it were the case that there is a cause for everything, what is the cause for happiness? To go into more detail about the law of karma we should refer to the explanation of karma in the section of the small stages of the path. In Buddhism, the teaching on the law of karma explains how beings are born in different realms according to their individual karma, and that's how the idea of past and future lives comes into being. However, those who don't accept this doctrine of karma of course think that, 'everything is created by God', and that God's creation is absolute, which gives no room for any questioning.

We will finish at this point in the text:

Furthermore, you consider karma and its effects in general, and in particular, the causality underlying the benefits of the bodhisattva deeds and the faults of violating them. Understand these from the relevant sections of this text.

So, we will leave it here and do the Twenty-one Tara prayers for Venerable Jampa who is having an operation on Friday, and for Ingrid Sorum.

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