
The Six Perfections

འདྲེན་ཐོག་གི་ཆོས་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

22 October 2019

As usual we begin with a short meditation, and with a proper motivation. [*Tonglen meditation*]

There's tremendous benefit in learning about meditation practice and engaging in it regularly. Meditation practice helps us to achieve mental happiness. As we all seek lasting happiness, that's the kind of happiness we need. So, it is important that we understand that meditation practice is an effective means to enhance mental happiness. Then, we will really appreciate its benefits and will be motivated to put it into practice.

We've heard a lot about the benefit of meditation practice in subduing the mind and making the mind more manageable, workable or serviceable. What does subduing or controlling the mind mean? Effectively, it means not letting the mind be overpowered by mental delusions or afflictions.

So, subduing the mind means eliminating mental afflictions. Once mental afflictions are overcome, we will have subdued our mind and gained control over it. We can understand this in the context of everyday life: when our mind is overpowered by mental afflictions, we go through unhappiness, pain and suffering. On the other hand, when our mind is free of mental afflictions and filled with calmness and happiness, we will find ourselves to be truly in a good and happy mood.

Obviously, if our mind is filled with too many external distractions and discursive thoughts, we can't have a calm and happy mind, because there is just no room at that time for happiness to occupy our mind. So, the only way we can find or enhance mental happiness is by getting rid of those discursive thoughts and creating a space for peace and happiness in our mind.

We need to understand that inner happiness is essential for our general wellbeing. For example, some people are used to occupying their minds with various disturbing thoughts. If they go on like this for a long time and don't find any mental rest, it could have a serious impact on their life. They might end up feeling frustrated, confused and even depressed.

So, through utilising our wisdom-knowledge, we can understand the benefits of practising meditation, such as in recognising those states of mind that are beneficial and those that are harmful, purifying negativities and defilements, and bringing positive changes in our mental continuum.

Generally, our valuation of things as being either good or bad is based on external objects, or something obvious to our perception. But, through wisdom, we can also observe things within our mind. Just as with external objects, we can recognise within us forces that are positive or negative. Once we identify and recognise these, our task is to enhance the positive forces and habituate ourselves with them and develop a positive state of mind.

It is said that if we think of the various mental traits, we will note that positive traits can be developed inexhaustibly. This

means that if we put in the effort, any positive quality within our mind can be infinitely developed.

However, there's a limit to the development and training of our body. As we age, our body decays and loses strength. We also know that, no matter how physically fit or agile an athlete can be, there is always a limit to what she or he can do. For example, if you are attempting a high jump, there's a limit to how high you can jump. But when it comes to acquiring and developing mental qualities and knowledge, even if we start at a late age – for example, after we turn sixty – we can still achieve a lot. We know of many people who have gone back to study at a late age and have been very successful in completing their courses. This is good news for us – when it comes to enhancing our inner values and qualities, we have more time, space and scope to strive for them.

Initially, it's important to recognise the need to shift our focus from looking outward to inward, in terms of knowing what's of value or of no value. Our usual focus is just looking outward – the things that we desire or believe to be the source of happiness, for example, are securing a good job and saving plenty of money. And when we talk about 'excellent qualities', we usually think of them in terms of external objects or visible qualities – such as a good external education, skills and living conditions. But while these things are good to have, we are saying here that these alone are not enough; we also need to cultivate good internal qualities. So we must initially direct our focus inward, specifically to our mind, and recognise the positive and negative forces within the mind.

Simply knowing what is good and bad from an external perspective is not a difficult task; anyone can do it. We can talk about education in terms of worldly or secular education, and spiritual or Dharma education. Of course, both are important and beneficial; we need both to go hand-in-hand in our lives. Worldly education mainly focuses on achieving external success, in terms of gaining qualifications, securing a well-paid job, and so on.

But, as I said before, external success alone is not enough for us to secure happiness and live a meaningful life. Worldly education and success must be complemented by spiritual progress. If we lose sight of spiritual practice and inner values, it's highly possible that our worldly success may even add to our problems, rather than solving them and bringing us more happiness and satisfaction.

When we undermine our inner values, what can happen is that the more external success and progress we make in life, the more our mental afflictions and defilements – such as pride, jealousy, competitiveness, and despising or belittling others – will increase. And the more mental afflictions we have in our mind, the more stress, tension, conflict and suffering we will experience in our life. The outcome will be that, in the end, whatever external progress we make due to our exertion and efforts will not bring us the happiness we seek, and our life will become meaningless.

So, we also need to make progress in terms of spiritual knowledge and practice. When we engage in spiritual practice, our goal is to counteract the mental defilements, such as pride, hatred and jealousy. Because these are the main enemy or obstacles to our spiritual practice, we need to recognise them as such, and direct our practice towards counteracting them. The more progress a spiritual practitioner makes in their practice, the more happiness they will find.

So, while we need to recognise the benefit of worldly education and success, at the same time, we need to understand the importance of integrating spiritual practice in our life. In short, we must try to do well both in our worldly and spiritual ventures.

Of course, when we engage in Dharma practice, it's important that our motivation is not corrupted – for example, learning Dharma to become famous, or to receive gifts, admiration or praise from others. If we do this, even though we may think we are engaging in Dharma practice, the 'Dharma' we practise will become a poison for us. Mental afflictions such as jealousy and pride make no discrimination in terms of whom they afflict; regardless of whether they are believers or non-believers, those who generate these afflictions in their mind, will lose their peace and happiness and will suffer.

The great Indian Buddhist master, Vasubandhu, said that we should not teach Dharma out of any of the mental afflictions, and that we should teach it perfectly in accord with the meaning of the sutras and commentaries. So, when teaching Dharma, we should not be biased in terms of highly esteeming our own view and holding animosity towards the views of others. That would be going against our Dharma practice.

(vi) How to train in the perfection of wisdom (cont.)

We will continue with the text:

The faults of not having wisdom ...

This specifically refers to the wisdom of emptiness. When the text says, *the faults of not having wisdom*, it sounds like there are beings who do not have wisdom. But there are no such beings. All beings possess some degree of wisdom. So the statement *the faults of not having wisdom* refers to those who possess so little knowledge, it's as if their little knowledge is equivalent to not having wisdom.

The faults of not having wisdom are as follows. Without wisdom, generosity and the other perfections are as if blind.

We came across the same point previously. Of the six perfections, the perfection of wisdom is considered to be like an eye, without which the other five perfections are blind, without a guide. Therefore, when we talk about making progress in the practice of giving, for example, technically that comes down to the *thought* of giving; this is defined as the meaning of giving. But developing the thought of giving depends on knowing the benefits of practising giving on the one hand – that is, finding wealth in the future, etc. – and the shortcomings of stinginess on the other. It is wisdom that enables us to know the benefits of giving and the shortcomings of stinginess.

So, to motivate ourselves in the practice of giving, we can see how the development of this practice very much depends on increasing our wisdom.

Similarly, we can understand the significant role of wisdom when we engage in and develop the other perfections of moral ethics, patience, joyful effort and meditative concentration. Developing all five perfections depends on developing wisdom.

For example, we can look at the perfection of joyful effort; by definition, this is the thought that takes joy or delight in engaging in virtuous practice. However, cultivating a positive inspiration to engage in practice depends on our understanding of the practice we are doing.

Likewise, if we are engaging in meditation, we need to have the wisdom to be able to recognise all the challenges we may face, and understand how to overcome all these challenges in order to make progress. Therefore again, it's obvious that this depends on wisdom-knowledge.

The text continues:

The Verse Summary of the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines states:

How could billions of blind people without a guide,
Who do not know the way, enter the city?

The analogy here is of a blind person who, in order to get to the correct destination, must depend on a guide. Without a guide, the blind person could not even see what is right in front of them, let alone the way to get to a distant city or town.

Once these five perfections lack wisdom, they are blind;

This refers to how, without wisdom, the other five perfections are like the blind person.

As they lack a guide, they cannot reach enlightenment.

The text continues:

Consequently, generosity and the other perfections do not become pure, and you do not find the correct view.

The implication here is that how even generosity, without the support of wisdom, may end up as a cause for rebirth in cyclic existence. When it says, *do not become pure*, that's what it means, *and you do not find the correct view*.

The Compendium of the Perfections states:

If those intent upon the final fruit are without wisdom,
Their generosity does not purify them. The Buddha said,
"Giving for others' sake is supreme generosity."
Other kinds of giving serve only to increase one's wealth.

This clearly shows the benefit of wisdom. For example, engaging in the practice of giving without wisdom doesn't yield much of a result. As it says here, *other kinds of giving serve only to increase one's wealth* – so this type of giving only brings a small benefit. This is like depositing your money in a savings account; the only profit you will make is the interest, which will be hardly anything. On the other hand, if you invested the money in a different financial venture, you could make a lot more profit. Similarly, if we direct our practice of giving towards the cause of achieving enlightenment then, as it says here, such a practice becomes *supreme generosity*.

The text continues:

And also:

Ethical discipline does not become pure
Unless wisdom's light dispels the darkness.
Ethical discipline without wisdom usually
Becomes sullied by afflictions through faulty
understanding.

As mentioned before, wisdom in the context of the practice of giving is important; but it's also important in the practice of ethical discipline. Without it, we cannot develop a good ethical practice. The text says *unless wisdom's light dispels the darkness* – wisdom's light enables us to see the benefit of practising ethical discipline, and the downfall of not practising ethics, and so forth. Without wisdom, our mind would be darkened by ignorance and delusion. Therefore, we wouldn't be able to engage in pure ethical discipline.

The text continues:

And also:

If your mind is muddled by the fault of erring intelligence,
You have no interest in keeping the virtue of patience,
You maintain a dislike for weighing merit and fault,
And are like an unworthy king who becomes famous.

Again, the text shows the need for wisdom in developing the practice of patience as well.

And also:

For adepts, wisdom is lauded as foremost;
Nothing else is as subtle or profound.
Without wisdom, you do not head straight for the mental path
That is unclouded by the defects of desire.

So, for adepts, wisdom is lauded as foremost – here, referring to the wisdom of emptiness – and nothing else is as subtle – there’s nothing more subtle or profound than this wisdom. Then, without wisdom, you do not head straight for the mental path, that is unclouded by the defects of desire – in other words, you won’t be able to achieve the perfect state of mind of an enlightened being.

The text continues:

And also:

Without maintaining joyous perseverance in wisdom’s ways,
Your view will not become pure.

Here, the “king who becomes famous” refers to an unworthy king for whom fame occurs once, but then declines.

Here, Lama Tsongkhapa illustrates how, without wisdom, your practice of the other perfections would become like that of an unworthy king.

The text continues:

You do not repel the darkness of delusion’s confusion as long as wisdom’s great light does not shine, but when it does, you cast away the darkness, so you must make an effort to generate wisdom with whatever capacity and strength you have.

The *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Like the dawning of the sun’s great light,
The enormous power of wisdom’s light arises
And the concealing darkness in beings’ minds
Is completely dispelled, only its name left behind.

Earlier, I was talking about how our mind is filled with discursive thoughts due to ignorance and delusions; these completely overshadow our mind, to the point where there’s no room for happiness or wisdom to arise. However, when wisdom, like the dawning of the sun’s great light, enters our mind, all this darkness is gone, completely dispelled, only its name left behind.

The text continues:

And also:

Therefore, with all the power at your disposal,
Work hard at the methods for producing such wisdom.

The advice here is that we must try to relate these instructions to ourselves – to see how our mind is filled with the darkness of ignorance, and that the only difference between our mind and the mind of the Buddha is that the Buddha’s mind has given rise to wisdom. It is saying here that if we strive and put an effort into developing wisdom, we can also develop this wisdom, and through that, be able to clear away ignorance.

The text continues:

What are the causes of confusion? ...

This relates to what was just mentioned about clearing away confusion or delusions in our mind to pave the way for wisdom to arise. So *what are the causes of confusion?*

... They are relying on bad friends; ...

There’s no real need to explain this. What is required here is that we focus on each of the causes mentioned, and think about whether they are true. So *relying on bad friends* is considered one of the causes, as well as *laziness; indolence; oversleeping*; etc.

They are relying on bad friends; laziness; indolence; oversleeping; taking no pleasure in analysis and discernment; lack of interest in the vast variety of phenomena; the pride of thinking “I know” when you do not; the major wrong views; ...

Generating *wrong views* can also impede our cultivation of wisdom.

... and being discouraged and thinking, ...

This refers to putting oneself down, and feeling discouragement or low self-esteem, thinking:

... “Someone like me cannot do this,” and thus not taking pleasure in relying upon the learned.

These are all causes of confusion. As a summary, there’s a quote from the *Compendium of the Perfections*.

The *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Laziness, indolence, and reliance upon bad friends,
Being governed by sleep, no feeling for discernment,
No interest in the Sage’s most sublime wisdom,
Inquiring under the influence of false pride,

Lacking the faith to rely upon learned persons
Due to attachment to self from feelings of inadequacy,
The great poison of false concepts which are wrong views
These are the causes of confusion.

The text continues:

Therefore, as the *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Serve and venerate a guru worthy of trust,
And study to achieve wisdom.

We need to focus on every word of this teaching: for example, when it says, *worthy of trust*, the implication is that you must not follow someone who is unworthy or unqualified. *And study to achieve wisdom* means that after relying on such gurus who are worthy of trust, one must study well, and develop an understanding of the Dharma.

The text continues:

Once you rely on a learned person, you must study in accord with your capacity, for if you do not, you will not produce the wisdom that arises from study and the wisdom that arises from reflection, ...

In Lama Tsongkhapa’s writings, we find this emphasis of combining study, contemplation and meditation together in an orderly manner over and over again. Cultivating the wisdom arising from meditation depends on cultivating the wisdom arising from contemplation, and this in turn depends on the wisdom arising from studying. The three must go hand-in-hand, in the sense that the focus of the three is the same. In our practice, we must contemplate what we study, and meditate on what we contemplate. So, initially, studying the Dharma well, and gaining the wisdom or understanding of the Dharma is vitally important for effective contemplation and meditation, and for further deepening and developing our wisdom.

... whereupon you will not know what to meditate upon.

Again the glorious Aryasura says:

Little study is like blindness – you do not know how to meditate.

Without study, what could there be to reflect upon?

Therefore, from the cause of making an effort to study

You meditate in accord with reflection and thereby gain vast wisdom.

The venerable Maitreya also says in the *Sublime Continuum*:

The conceptualizations of the three spheres
Are asserted to be cognitive obscurations,
While conceptualizations such as stinginess and the like
Are asserted to be afflictive obscurations.

Solely wisdom is the cause
Of their elimination, nothing else,
So wisdom is supreme. Study is its basis,
So study is supreme.

These verses emphasise how important it is to study the Dharma well, because the knowledge you gain through study lays the foundation for contemplation and meditation, which is necessary for deepening and increasing our wisdom, and thereby dispelling all ignorance and obscurations.

The first verse above from the *Sublime Continuum* is one of the main sources used in presenting the two types of obscurations – the obstructions to an omniscient mind, and afflictive obscurations – in the Mahamudra teachings.

When we take the meaning of the above verse literally, in terms of defining the two obscurations, it accords well with the Svatantrika-Madhyamaka view, but does not accord with the Prasangika-Madhyamaka view. However, the *Sublime Continuum* presents the teaching in accordance with the Prasangika view. It is said that, although the master Asanga was recognised as the founder of the Mind Only (Cittamatin) school, the commentary he wrote on the *Sublime Continuum* shows that he truly was a proponent of the Prasangika-Madhyamaka school. His Holiness the Dalai Lama interprets the above verse by saying that, even though the text uses the words *conceptualizations of the three spheres*, the implication is that it is the latency or tendency of *the conceptualization of the three spheres* that is an obstruction to omniscient mind or cognitive obscuration. Then *conceptualizations such as stinginess and the like are asserted to be afflictive obscurations*.

The words *solely wisdom is the cause of their elimination, nothing else* emphasise wisdom as the main remedy to both obscurations. *So wisdom is supreme. Study is its basis*. Having emphasised wisdom, the text then says that, in order to gain wisdom, it is necessary for us to study it well. Therefore, as it emphasises, studying is also supreme.

*Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

© Tara Institute