
The Six Perfections

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

30 October 2018

We have just recited the refuge prayer through which we take refuge in the Three Jewels, distinguishing the path that we follow from a wrong path; and through which we generate the bodhicitta mind, distinguishing the path that we follow from an inferior or lower path.

When we recite the prayer, we should also reflect on its meaning. We should take refuge from the depths of our heart, recognising that the path we are following is the perfect one; and sincerely generate bodhicitta, recognising that the path we are following is the highest one.

We call bodhicitta motivation the heart of the Mahayana or Great Vehicle. Why is it called the Great Vehicle? We can explain the use of the word 'great' here from the perspective of whose purpose it relates to, and what goal we, as Mahayana practitioners, aspire to achieve. The bodhicitta motivation of Great Vehicle practitioners aspires to benefit all sentient beings and to achieve the unsurpassed state of buddhahood, a perfect state free of all faults and endowed with all excellent qualities.

Once again, reinforce your bodhicitta motivation of wishing to achieve the state of enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Then, think that, in order to achieve enlightenment, I will listen to this profound teaching and put it into practice. Here, you are making a resolution or promise to practise, so it is important that you actually practise it. It is crucially important that when you attempt to cultivate bodhicitta while reciting the prayer, you are sincere about taking that vow and holding it, from the depths of your heart.

We will now continue with the teaching.

(E) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS IN TERMS OF THE COMPLETENESS OF PATHS OR METHOD

This teaching helps us understand the significance or necessity of integrating all six perfections into practice – generosity, morality, patience, joyous perseverance, meditative stabilisation and wisdom.

Here, the text says:

The path – i.e. method – for not being attached to the resources that are your possessions is generosity, because you become free from attachment to your things by becoming habituated to giving them away.

So, the **practice of generosity or giving** is explained as a way to overcome attachment to the things we possess. When we speak of the practice of generosity or giving, the focus of the practice is to initially cultivate the thought or intention of giving. It is this thought of giving that counteracts or opposes our attachment to possessions.

As you read the text, contemplate its meaning carefully. You'll find that what it says is not simply a theory that

doesn't relate to you; rather it's something that will resonate with your life experience.

For example, when the text says that generosity is the remedy to overcome attachment *to the resources that are your possessions*, we can ask: why do we need to overcome attachment to our possessions? If we think about our life, we'll find that attachment has made us slaves to our wealth and possessions. We'll recall how sometimes we've undergone tremendous suffering and hardship because we were worried about possessions. Sometimes people have even suffered a heart attack from such worry. Whereas I've come across other people who have less wealth than they'd had in the past who say they are happier now.

Then the text says *becoming habituated to giving them away*. So if we habituate or get our mind used to the thought of giving, as that thought develops, it would become possible for us to readily give away our things to other beings. Essentially, the text is saying that the practice of giving is a way to overcome attachment to our possessions. We must overcome attachment by recognising it as a major source of suffering and contemplate this in relation to our life experience: how we suffer, go through hardship, and even sometimes become paranoid because of our wealth and possessions. We might then become motivated to take up the practice of giving, which, as we said before, mainly refers to cultivating and developing an intention to give, which will then lead to the actual giving.

Then the text says:

The method for restraining yourself from the distraction of trying to possess what you do not possess is ethical discipline, for when you maintain a monk's vows, you do not have all the distractions of making a living.

This refers to craving, or attachment to things we do not possess, and the distracting thoughts we generate in order to obtain those things. It says here that the **practice of moral discipline** is an effective way to overcome external distractions associated with satisfying our craving for the things we do not possess.

Obviously, one of the reasons we crave things we do not possess is that we are not content with the things we do possess. This leads us to go after various objects of distraction, which bring stress, tension, anxiety and so on.

Therefore, the text says, to overcome these outer distractions caused by our lack of inner contentment, we need to apply the remedy of ethical discipline, the perfection of morality. As it says, *for when you maintain a monk's vows, you do not have all the distractions of making a living*. This example shows how, if we follow or live the life of a celibate, there's less room for distraction because we have fewer needs. Why are there fewer needs? Because of the moral vows – monks are supposed to live a simple life by contenting themselves with just enough things to sustain them. So we can understand here the benefit of practising moral discipline in diminishing, in particular, the cause of all external distractions.

If we think about the meaning of *the method for restraining yourself from the distraction of trying to possess what you do*

not possess, we can see the importance of cultivating a sense of contentment and less desire, because, without it, we would be continually trying to possess more. In order to possess more and fulfil our desirous craving mind, we would have to continually worry about how we might gain those things. In other words, our mind would be filled with distractions. For as long as we do not try to overcome that desirous mind, it will remain distracted: as soon as we acquire one object, craving for the next object will arise.

If we look at our own experience, whenever we are unhappy, our mind wanders off to the outside world, as if it is going on a long trip. It will go everywhere, occupying itself with various thoughts and objects. If we think about how we feel when the mind finishes its trip and comes back to us, we will not feel good. We will feel exhausted, agitated and disturbed, as if the mind has brought back a lot of problems with it. Understanding our situation in this way helps us practise contentment and less desire and to live an ethical life.

We can draw inspiration from other people who live a noble life, such as some rich people who suddenly decide to stop making more money and instead focus on giving away their wealth to those in need. It seems like the sudden decision to do this is the activation of an imprint of a noble act of giving in the past. To observe such deeds is very inspiring; we should think of emulating them with whatever things we possess.

The text continues:

The method for not abandoning living beings is patience, because you do not despair at the suffering caused by the harm others inflict.

Here, the text implies that the **practice of patience** is the means by which we don't give up on benefitting other beings. As it says, one of the common conditions for us giving up on others is that of receiving harm from others, on either a mental or physical level. However, if we engage in the practice of patience – such as the patience of non-retaliation or remaining indifferent to harm from others – then when we receive harm from others, we will not alter our determination to benefit them. Therefore, the practice of patience is a way of not abandoning or giving up on others.

When the text says *not abandoning living beings*, what does *abandoning living beings* mean? It means losing love and a compassionate attitude towards them. When you lose your love and compassion for other beings, it is like you are abandoning them. As a bodhisattva or a practitioner who follows the bodhisattva's practices, you have taken an affirmation to benefit all sentient beings. So, to safeguard your vow to benefit other beings, it's very important to engage in the practice of patience.

Next it says:

The method to increase virtues is joyous perseverance, because you increase them when you joyously persevere at what you undertake.

So **joyous perseverance** here means taking joy in your virtuous practice. Of course, if you enjoy what you are doing, you will keep wanting to do the same thing because it delights you. Therefore, if we feel joy about our virtuous practices, we will naturally keep doing them

and hence increase our virtue. The opposite of joyous perseverance is laziness, which is the main obstruction to practising virtue.

The text continues:

The methods for clearing away obscurations are the final two perfections, because meditative stabilization clears away the afflictions and wisdom clears away the cognitive obscurations.

It says *the methods for clearing away obscurations are the final two perfections*. We may ask the question, isn't the perfection of wisdom enough to clear away or abandon all obscurations? If not, then what sort of obscuration does the perfection of meditative stabilisation clear away?

Here, when the text refers to the perfection of meditative stabilisation as clearing away or abandoning obscurations, the meaning is more in the sense of **suppressing** the mental afflictions. Whereas the perfection of wisdom is said to clear away obscurations by **uprooting** afflictions together with their latencies, imprints or seeds.

Under the topic of traversing the various levels of concentration, the text uses the term 'abandoning the mental afflictions of the desire realm' when talking of the abandonment of the meditator who reaches the first level of concentration. However, the meaning of abandoning the mental afflictions of the desire realm in this context is more in the sense of suppressing the afflictions, which means having prevented them from manifesting.

Thus the perfections are fixed as six in number. The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

Non-attachment to objects is a path;
Another is restraint from the distraction of obtaining them;
Not abandoning beings, increasing virtues,
And clearing away the obscurations are others.

This summarises what we have already discussed. We will continue to read the text, as the meaning is self-explanatory if we contemplate it with good concentration.

The following explanation produces strong conviction about the six perfections. In order to avoid being dominated by the distraction of sensual objects, you need generosity that is free from attachment. To prevent sensory experiences that have not occurred, you need ethical discipline that restrains distraction by things that are pointless [deeds that are wrong by prohibition] or counterproductive [deeds that are wrong by nature]. Given that there are a great number of living beings whose behavior is bad and who you are constantly in danger of meeting, you need a powerful conditioning to patience as a remedy for giving up on their welfare.

As a way to emphasise that **the practice of patience is indispensable**, the text points out here that you are expected to face continuous obstacles – there are living beings whose behaviour is bad and ill-natured, and the number of such beings is great. So *you need a powerful conditioning to patience as a remedy for giving up on their welfare*. Therefore:

In order to increase virtue in terms of the great number of actions and its practice over long periods of time, you need joyous perseverance that has the intense and long-term

enthusiasm that comes from reflecting on the benefits of virtuous actions, etc.

Again, the text emphasises **the practice of joyous perseverance**. It points out here how we need to cultivate and amass great amounts of virtue over a long period of time. So the practice of joyous perseverance is crucial. We should reflect on the benefits of accumulating virtuous actions to instil joyous perseverance within us.

The text continues:

In order to suppress afflictions you need meditative stabilization, and to destroy their seeds and the cognitive obscurations you need wisdom.

In fact the text actually uses the term *suppress afflictions* when talking about the **perfection of meditative stabilisation** – *in order to suppress afflictions you need meditative stabilization* – which we discussed before. But, *in order to destroy their seeds* – that is, the seed of the mental afflictions or afflictive obscurations, together with cognitive obscurations or obstructions to omniscient mind – you need the **perfection of wisdom**.

In short, this topic explains the bodhisattvas' practice, in terms of their motivation, and the deeds they engage in with that motivation. The bodhisattvas' motivation is bodhicitta, an altruistic mind of enlightenment, and their deeds are included within the six perfections.

(F) THE FIXED NUMBER OF PERFECTIONS BASED ON THE THREE TRAININGS

This section, *the fixed number of perfections based on the three trainings*, shows how, from the point of view of the threefold training of morality, concentration and wisdom, the number of perfections is fixed or definitive – in other words, the six perfections encompass the threefold trainings.

If we read the text carefully, we can understand this.

The nature of the training in ethical discipline [the first of the three trainings] is the practice of ethical discipline.

This indicates that the perfection of ethical discipline belongs primarily to the training in ethical discipline or morality.

The precondition of the training in ethical discipline is generosity, because once you have generosity that is indifferent to resources, you can properly adopt an ethical discipline.

The text is implying here that the perfection of giving is also included in the training of morality by saying that giving is a prerequisite, or leading cause of, the practice of ethical discipline.

The aid to the training in ethical discipline is patience, because the patience of not retaliating when scolded, etc. safeguards your properly adopted ethical discipline.

The next, the perfection of patience, is said to be an aid to the training in ethical discipline, so it can also be included in the training of morality *because the patience of not retaliating when scolded, etc. safeguards your properly adopted ethical discipline*.

Then:

Meditative stabilization is the training of mind [the second training, the training of meditative concentration] ...

So, the perfection of meditative stabilisation belongs to the training of mind or concentration:

... and wisdom is the training in wisdom [the third training].

And:

As for joyous perseverance, it is included in all three trainings, so the perfections are fixed at six in number.

So, the perfection of joyous perseverance is included in all three trainings.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

The Conqueror rightly presented six perfections
In terms of the three trainings: three are the first,
Two of the six are connected with the final two,
One is included in all three.

By a certain kind of excellent life you bring to completion either others' or your own aims; you practice certain kinds of trainings by possessing a diversity of methods, depending on which vehicle you are in. Understand in this way that the six perfections comprise and bring to completion the above perspectives on their fixed number—life, aims, the Mahayana, the methods, and the trainings. Reflect until you get a deep conviction about how the six perfections are the summation of all the key points of bodhisattva practice.

Furthermore, there are two causes of not initially transcending or rising above cyclic existence—attachment to resources and attachment to a home. The remedies for these are generosity and ethical discipline, respectively.

So, in terms of remedies for overcoming various hindrances to one's practice, they are all included in the six perfections. For example, it says here that the remedies for attachment to resources and attachment to a home are, respectively, the practices of generosity and of ethical discipline.

You may rise above these attachments once, but still turn back without reaching the end. There are two causes of this—suffering from the wrongdoing of living beings and becoming dispirited at the length of time you have pursued virtue. The remedies for these are patience and joyous perseverance, respectively. Once you understand how to sustain a disregard for all suffering and harm, as well as an enthusiasm which views even an eternity as though it were one day, you must practice them in various ways. If you do this, you will produce the patience and joyous perseverance that are capable of functioning as remedies to what causes you to turn back.

Thus, they are extremely crucial. Never mind the matter of the bodhisattva deeds, even with regard to present-day cultivation of virtue, there are many who start out but few who do not turn back after a while because (1) their forbearance for the slightest hardship is tiny, and (2) their enthusiasm for the path they cultivate is tepid. This is the result of their not putting into practice the personal instructions associated with patience and joyous perseverance.

There are two causes for letting your virtue go to waste even if you do not turn back after a while—distraction, wherein your attention does not stabilize on a virtuous object of meditation, and faulty wisdom. The remedies for these are meditative stabilization and wisdom, respectively. Meditative stabilization is a remedy because it is said that even virtuous practices such as repetition of mantra and daily recitations are senseless if your attention wanders elsewhere. Wisdom is a remedy because if you fail to develop the wisdom that fully delineates the topics in the collections of Buddhist knowledge, you will be mistaken about what to adopt and what to cast aside, even the obvious, and will then conduct yourself wrongly. This fixes

the number of perfections at six in terms of their being remedies that eliminate the class of phenomena that are incompatible with virtue.

The number of perfections is fixed at six based on the fact that they are the foundation for achieving every quality of a buddha.

Then it goes to the next topic.

This is because the first four perfections are preconditions for meditative stabilization, so through these four you accomplish meditative stabilization—the perfection of non-distractedness. Furthermore, when you cultivate insight based on this, you will know reality.

Fixing the number of perfections at six in terms of their being concordant with helping living beings to mature is similar in meaning to the third one [perfecting the complete fulfillment of others' aims] mentioned earlier.

I have explained here the noble Asanga's assertions as presented by the master Haribhadra [in his *Long Explanation of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Eight Thousand Lines (Abhisamayalamkaraloka)*]. It is extremely crucial to gain conviction about the six perfections.

Where the text says *wisdom that fully delineates the topics in the collections of Buddhist knowledge* – in this context, *Buddhist knowledge* mainly refers to the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness, which is the philosophical view uniquely presented in Buddhism.

We'll stop here tonight and continue next week from the next section on 'An ancillary discussion of the fixed order of the perfections', which is not that much. After that, the text goes into detail on each of the six perfections.

The topics we are studying here are not just for stimulating our intellect but are for practice. Studying and reflecting on these topics will benefit us because we can do our everyday practice more effectively. We can take small regular acts, such as feeding our pets, as the practice of the perfection of giving.

I am glad to hear that Maria is recovering well. So, instead of saying the six-syllable Chenrezig mantra, which I was thinking of doing, we will recite the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation* for her.

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

© **Tara Institute**