
The Six Perfections

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will do our usual meditation first.

[*Tonglen meditation*]

Please cultivate a proper motivation for listening to the teaching. The reason for listening to it is to fulfil our altruistic aspiration to achieve the state of buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.

With respect to the meditation which you have just performed, it is said that if you are doing the giving and taking meditation in conjunction with the breathing meditation, then you should exhale and inhale more forcefully with a bit of effort. You can imagine the outgoing breath of giving in the form of white light and the incoming breath of taking in the form of dark light. Normally when you do a breathing meditation, it is said that you need to breathe in and out gently and slowly, just as you normally breathe. You should not be able to hear yourself breathing in and out. There are of course a number of breathing meditation techniques, such as mentally counting the cycles of breathing, or simply focussing on the mindfulness of breathing in and out.

We will now continue with the lam-rim teaching on the following section:

2" An ancillary discussion of the fixed order of the perfections

This discussion has three parts:

1. The order of arising
2. The order in terms of inferior and superior
3. The order in terms of coarse and subtle

(a) The order of arising

When you have a generosity that is disinterested in and unattached to resources, you take up ethical discipline.

This section explains why the six perfections are listed in order of giving, followed by moral discipline, patience and so on. Giving is mentioned first because, as it says, *when you have a generosity that is disinterested in and unattached to resources, you take up ethical discipline*. Basically, this is saying that if you do well in the practice of giving, you will do well in the practice of moral discipline. It is not saying that the practice of giving is a prerequisite for practising moral ethics, nor is it saying that you have to practise giving in order to practise morality. It is saying that the practice of giving establishes a very sound base for the practice of morality. Giving is a sign of having less desire and reduced attachment which facilitates the practice of moral discipline. Conversely, attachment to and obsession with possessions leads to the various distractions that impede the practice of moral discipline. Then follows:

When you have an ethical discipline which restrains you from wrongdoing, you become patient with those who harm you.

Again, this is saying that if you do well in the practice of moral discipline, then you will also do well in the practice of patience. A firm sense of morality and restraint from wrongdoing, and harmful deeds in particular, will boost your ability to tolerate external suffering and hardship.

Then the text says:

When you have the patience wherein you do not become dispirited with hardships, the conditions for rejecting virtue are few, so you are able to persevere joyously.

This explains how the practice of patience leads to the practice of joyous perseverance. With patience, we are talking about not losing our spirit and determination in the face of any difficulty, such as receiving harm from others or hardships or the challenges we confront in our Dharma practice. If we practise the patience of non-retaliation or accepting hardship, then we don't lose our strength of mind or give up our practice easily. In this way, if we think about the benefit of patience in terms of maintaining our hope, our spirit and our motivation, we can see that patience is essential if we are to maintain our enthusiasm in what we are doing and develop joyous perseverance. Not only do we require patience and joyous perseverance to complete our Dharma practice, but they are also essential to achieve our mundane pursuits as well. Whatever our goal may be, it is very important to maintain our spirit and determination and persistent effort in order to achieve that goal. In other words, we need to be patient with hardship and suffering, and that patience makes it easy to persevere and maintain our effort. So, if we do well in patience then we will do well in developing joyous perseverance too. Then the text continues:

Once you joyously persevere day and night, you will produce the meditative concentration that facilitates the application of your attention to virtuous objects of meditation.

Obviously, this is saying that if we are able to maintain our effort in meditation practice then we can achieve results such as calm abiding. Here, *meditative concentration* refers to calm abiding, which *facilitates the application of your attention to virtuous objects of meditation*. This, in turn, makes your mind very serviceable so that if you direct it onto a virtuous object, it can just sit there single-pointedly, effortlessly and spontaneously for as long as you wish. So, we can understand how achieving such meditative concentration is dependent upon developing joyous perseverance day and night.

When your mind is in meditative equipoise, you will know reality exactly.

If our mind is in *meditative equipoise*, meaning in the state of calm abiding through the practice of meditative stabilisation, then *you will know reality exactly* which means gaining special insight through the practice of wisdom. So, it is saying here that the meditative state of calm abiding which one develops through the practice of meditative stabilisation facilitates knowledge of *reality* which refers to penetrative wisdom, specifically the special insight realisation of reality.

(b) The order in terms of inferior and superior

Each preceding perfection is inferior to the superior one that follows it.

This is quite clear. When you think of the list of the six perfections, *each preceding perfection is inferior* means that, for example, the perfection of giving precedes the perfection of moral discipline, so giving is inferior to morality or compared to giving, morality is superior. Likewise, morality is inferior compared to patience which means patience is superior to morality, and so on.

(c) The order in terms of coarse and subtle

Each preceding perfection is easier than the subsequent one to engage in and perform, so it is coarser than the subsequent one. Each subsequent perfection is more difficult than the preceding one to engage in and perform, so it is more subtle than the preceding one.

Similarly, the perfection of giving is coarse compared to morality because giving is easier to practise; morality is more subtle than giving because it is harder to practise than giving; morality is coarse compared to patience because morality is easier to practise than patience. So, patience is subtle compared to morality because it is harder to practise than morality. The same distinction between coarse and subtle applies to the rest of the perfections.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* says:

Because the subsequent perfections arise contingent on the preceding ones,
Because they are ranked as inferior and superior,
And because of their coarseness and subtlety,
The perfections are taught in order.

It is quite amazing to see how Lama Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise* expounds its subject matter in conjunction with a great many classical Buddhist scriptures. You rarely find any other lam-rim texts that refer to the great Buddhist classics in a similar fashion.

c" The process of learning the perfections

The process of learning the perfections has two parts:

1. How to train in the bodhisattva deeds in general
2. In particular how to train in the last two perfections

1" How to train in the bodhisattva deeds in general

How to train in the bodhisattva deeds in general has two subheadings:

1. Training in the perfections that mature the qualities you will have when you become a buddha
2. Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature

In terms of practice, the text has two very important themes or categories. The first is how to mature one's own continuum, which is presented under the topic of the six perfections. The second is how to mature the continuum of other beings which is presented under the topic of the four ways to gather disciples.

(a) Training in the perfection that mature the qualities you will have when you become a buddha

Earlier we studied all of the six perfections in a general sense. Now the text goes into detail about each one of the six, specifically relating to integrating them into our practice. This section has six parts:

1. How to train in the perfection of generosity
2. How to train in the perfection of ethical discipline
3. How to train in the perfection of patience
4. How to train in the perfection of joyous perseverance
5. How to train in the perfection of meditative stabilisation
6. How to train in the perfection of wisdom

(i) How to train in the perfection of generosity

This has four sections

1. What generosity is
2. How to begin the development of generosity
3. The divisions of generosity
4. A summary

If you think about it, the organisation of the outlines of the text is quite amazing. The structure covers everything you need to know in relation to a particular topic and does so in a logical way. Let us take a look into these four subheadings. The first is: What is generosity? We might have heard that word 'generosity' many times over. Do we know its meaning precisely? We need to know its meaning so as to be able to practise it. Without knowing what it is then we will find ourselves in confusion when it comes to practising it. Immediately after that the text then shows us the method to cultivate and develop the practice of generosity. Then it goes on to explain the different types of generosity, and finally it provides a summary of what has gone before.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has commented that in his dialogue with a lot of renowned scientists and other scholars he always finds room for questioning; he also finds that the kind of methodology they use for their presentations doesn't fully cover their topics or follow a sequential logical order. His Holiness remarked that he finds his formal training in the monastic educational system very effective in investigating and looking into things from various angles. You can find the same method, rationale and logic in this lam-rim too, which is a unique way of learning.

(a') What generosity is

Here there is this quote from the *Bodhisattva's Level*:

What is the nature of generosity? It is the intention accompanying bodhisattvas' disinterested non-attachment to all their possessions and their body and motivated by this, the physical and verbal actions of giving the things to be given.

Essentially, the practice of giving refers to a genuine thought or intention to give without having any attachment to or craving for the objects of giving. *Motivated by this ... giving* refers to the initial intention or motivation of giving. It also refers to *the physical and verbal actions of giving the things to be given*. Here *physical and verbal actions* refer to the mental intention which is a mental factor that is concomitant with the mind at the time of the occurrence of physical and verbal acts of giving, due to the force of the initial motivation of giving. Therefore, giving refers to the mental intention of the thought of giving which is an intending action, as well as the mental factor of intention at the time of the physical and verbal acts of giving, which is the intended action.

Lama Tsongkhapa explains the meaning of the above quotation as follows:

It is the virtue of a generous attitude and the physical and verbal actions which are motivated by this.

What is the nature of the practice of giving? *It is the virtue of a generous attitude*, indicating that giving refers to the thought or intention to give. As discussed earlier, *physical and verbal actions* refers to the mental intention, which is called intended action, at the time of the actual act of giving, such as any physical or verbal actions. The nature of giving, therefore, refers to the initial thought of giving or intention to give, as well as the intended physical or verbal actions of giving at the time of the actual giving action taking place. It should be noted that the intended physical or verbal actions refer to the mental factor of intention concomitant with the mind.

Bringing the perfection of generosity to completion is not contingent on removing beings' poverty by giving gifts to others.

The text continues by saying that the development or completion of the practice of the perfection of giving is not contingent upon eliminating all the poverty in the world. If that was to be the case then, then as it argues here:

Otherwise, since there still remain many destitute living beings, all the earlier conquerors [referring to all past buddhas] would not have attained perfect generosity. Therefore, the physical and verbal aspects of generosity are not the main thing; the main thing is the mental aspect. This is because you perfect generosity after you destroy your stingy clinging to all that you own – your body, resources and roots of virtue and you completely condition your mind to giving them away to living beings from the depths of your heart and, not only that, but also to giving to others the effects of this giving as well.

This is saying that the primary focus of the practice of giving is to cultivate, develop and perfect the thought or intention of giving. Therefore, the primary focus is on the mental level, overcoming stinginess and developing an intention to give from the depth of one's heart. The text continues:

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds says,

If generosity were perfected
By removing beings' poverty
Since beings are still destitute
How could past saviors have perfected it?

Generosity is perfected, it is said
Through the attitude of giving away to all beings
All your possessions, along with the effects of this
Therefore generosity is a state of mind.

Thus, the practice of the perfection of generosity entails generating in various ways the intention to give and steadily increasing this generosity, ...

This last sentence clearly shows us the meaning of the practice of giving or generosity. It clearly implies that the nature of the practice of giving is to steadily increase the thought or intention to give.

... even though you may not be actually giving away something to others.

It is not necessary that you have to own possessions in order to practise giving. As emphasised here, the most important element of the practice of giving is to cultivate

and develop a thought or intention to give to others wholeheartedly.

We have been doing the giving and taking meditation for quite a while now. This meditation is also a practice of giving, so we need to check whether this meditation is helping us to develop our practice of giving in terms of increasing our thought of giving. Has it increased your thought of giving? I doubt it. Again, we see here that the practice of giving means to increase our thought or intention to give to others. If the thought of giving or intention to give is developed, and it arises forcefully and strongly, then we will automatically give whatever possessions we have to others.

(b') How to begin the development of generosity

The text states:

Simply destroying all stinginess in regard to your body and resources is not the perfection of generosity, for stinginess is included within attachment and so even the two kinds of Hinayana arhats have totally eliminated it along with its seeds.

It says here that achieving the perfection of giving is more than simply overcoming the mind of stinginess or miserliness. It does this by pointing out here that *even the two kinds of Hinayana arhats*, the shravakas and pratyekabuddhas of the Lesser Vehicle, *have totally eliminated it along with its seeds*.

Stinginess or miserliness is regarded as part of desire or attachment, which the two arhats of the Lesser Vehicle have abandoned along with its seeds. In other words, they have uprooted it. Here, seed refers to a causal capacity to produce a concordant result or produce a result which resembles the type of the cause. We speak of the imprint or the latency of mental afflictions which is different from the seed of mental afflictions. The former is a cognitive obscuration and the latter is an afflictive obscuration.

What is required, then, is that you not only clear away stinginess's tightfistedness, which prevents giving things away, but also that you develop from the depths of your heart the intention to give away to others all your possessions.

Hence, the key to the practice of the perfection of giving is mentally developing and perfecting an intention to give, rather than simply overcoming stinginess. This section of the text also indicates the objects of giving, which is all of your possessions.

An intention to give, which is the nature of giving, is produced by overcoming any form of attachment or craving for the objects to be given. The objects of giving should encompass all your possessions and also that you develop the intention to fully benefit all beings *from the depth of your heart*. This explains the various components or the qualities of the practice of giving.

If we relate this to our own practice of giving, what is indicated here is that we need to make an effort to cultivate and develop a thought of giving. We need to ensure that our mental intention of giving is wholehearted and that the reason for giving is to fully and completely benefit all other beings. Our objects of giving should include all our possessions, not just some objects

but the objects we do not want to give away. Then the text continues:

For this you have to meditate on the faults of holding on to things and the benefits of giving them away. I shall, therefore, discuss these.

This shows how to cultivate the thought or intention of giving. Next, the text states:

The *Moon Lamp Sutra* (Candra-pradipa-sutra) says:

These childish people are attached
To this rotting body and to this
Rushing life-force, both of which lack independence
And are like a dream or a magician's illusion.
So these unintelligent beings do terrible things,
Fall under the control of sin,
And, carried away by the chariot of Death's Lord,
Proceed to unbearable hells.

Then Lama Tsongkhapa explains the meaning of this sutra by saying:

This says that you should stop attachment by viewing the body as unclean, life as rushing like a mountain cascade, both body and life as devoid of an independent self because they are under the control of karma, and both as false like a dream or a magician's illusion.

We need to overcome attachment in order to develop the practice of giving. Here the text explains a way to overcome attachment, such as an attachment to the body and an attachment to life itself. As mentioned here, we can overcome attachment to the body by reflecting upon the uncleanliness or filthiness of the body in terms of the content of the body. Likewise, reflecting on the transient nature of life, and the way it fluctuates and changes moment by moment, just like a waterfall flowing down a steep mountain, overcomes an attachment to life.

We also need to meditate on how both our body and life are simply a by-product of karma and delusions. They only exist in dependence on other phenomena and lack an independent existence in their own right, i.e. they lack an objective existence. The analogy *like a dream or a magician's illusion* is also very effective in overcoming attachment to the body and life and other seemingly attractive objects. Although we grasp at these things as true, in reality, they are false or deceptive. [The appearance of false things such as a horse in the dream is due to the effect of sleep; at a magician's show the appearance is due to the magician's mantra spell. Similarly, things objectively appear to have a substantial existence due to the effect of ignorance.]¹

False or deceptive implies that things don't exist the way they appear to the perception of our mind. Whereas if there is no gap between the appearance to the perception of our mind and reality, that is the way things actually exist, which reflects the true mode of existence of things. Even though things appear to our mind to have a substantial existence, reflecting upon the fact that our body and life lack an existence from their own side, and therefore lack an independent and substantial existence, and that it exists only by depending on other

phenomena, is very effective in overcoming attachment to our body and life.

The most important thing is that we have to learn the nature and meaning of giving in terms of our own practice and be very clear about what it means to develop our practice of giving.

We can transform the food and drink that we take every day by offering them to holy objects and saying dedication prayers into a practice of giving, and as a cause for the Dharma to flourish and benefit other sentient beings. [Practice is very important. If you don't practise, you will never develop. You can't just forget about practice, because you need to walk the walk by taking the initiative to practice. If you practise regularly such as making an offering before eating or drinking, then it will become habitual. The practice will come to you automatically whenever you eat or drink something. It will be that easy to create merit!]

You are aware there are countless numbers of other beings in the form of bacteria living inside our bodies. Their survival is dependent on our survival. This is a fact. Therefore, whenever we eat or drink something, we should first cultivate a motivation that we eat or drink in order to benefit other beings such as the bacteria in our body, [and also to sustain our precious human life to practise Dharma to achieve buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings]. Then, as the foods or drinks go down, imagine that these bacteria experience uncontaminated bliss. You then pray that at the moment you are benefitting these beings through an act of giving and that in future you will be able to please them by giving pure Dharma.

[Part of our motivation in partaking of food and drink also includes being able to sustain this precious human life. This is also very important. The only way to reach the state of buddhahood, if we truly seek it, is by relying upon a series of life forms, and the most suitable life form is the precious human rebirth. Therefore, it is important to think that we eat and drink to sustain and prolong our life in good health so that we can practise Dharma to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.] Likewise, as I have mentioned to you in the past, we can integrate all our everyday activities, such as sleeping, walking etc. into our Dharma practice. [In this way, we can understand that Dharma practice becomes a part of our everyday life and we can practise it along with our everyday activities.]

We will recite the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation* for Pat Geary's husband who is about to undergo surgery.

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Edited Version*

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¹ The material within these square brackets, and in subsequent instances were part of the teaching in Tibetan, but on Geshe Doga's advice were not translated on the night.