
The Six Perfections

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will begin with our usual meditation on giving and taking.

[Tong-len meditation]

Make sure you reinforce your motivation for studying and practising the Dharma.

As much as possible, we need to habituate our minds with the thought of benefitting others and having a good heart towards others, while at the same time preventing any harmful or ill thoughts about others.

When we talk about integrating the practice of what to accept and what to reject, the key is cultivating a beneficial mental attitude towards others and getting rid of harmful thoughts towards them. For example, the meditation of giving and taking, which we have just performed, is about familiarising ourselves with the thought of giving and taking, through which we develop a good heart and rid ourselves of harmful thoughts.

By observing other sentient beings from the perspective of happiness, in our meditation we mentally give them the happiness they are lacking. Likewise, by observing all other sentient beings from the perspective of suffering, we mentally take their suffering upon ourselves in our meditation. Through training ourselves mentally with these thoughts of giving and taking, we habituate our mind with the thought of genuinely wanting other sentient beings to be happy and free from suffering.

I often say that our mind and our body always accompany us like inseparable friends. When these two are in a good state we are happy, and when they are not, we are unhappy. I frequently say that saying 'I'm happy' or 'I'm unhappy' simply reflects the state of our mind and body. For example, if our mind is disturbed and unhappy, we say 'I am not happy'. So, if we want physical and mental happiness, we need to ensure we practise good hygiene to protect our mind and body, and understand that it is we who are responsible for taking good care of our own mental and physical wellbeing.

The next question is, what do we need to do to take care of our mind and body? Physical hygiene primarily depends on the right external conditions that contribute to the physical health of our body. At the same time, there are other external conditions which are harmful to our physical health. So, in order to maintain a healthy body we need to understand what is good and bad for our health, and be responsible for meeting the right conditions, while avoiding the bad conditions.

Likewise, if we talk about our mental health or our happiness on a mental level, then within our mind we need to recognise the things that bring peace and happiness, and those that bring unhappiness and suffering. As we observe our experiences, we will note that the main cause of mental peace and happiness is cultivating a positive mental attitude or a virtuous state of mind.

As I mentioned earlier, if the mind that always accompanies us is positive and virtuous, then we will naturally be happy and peaceful, and if the accompanying mind is negative and restless, then naturally, we will be unhappy and restless too. Since we all want mental happiness, we must be responsible for our mind and take control of it, and that means making an effort to familiarise ourselves with positive mental attitudes.

Of course, this all sounds very good – it's not all that difficult to understand what is good or bad or beneficial or harmful for mental and physical hygiene. At the same time, of course, we must also put that into practise. For this we need to know what that practice is.

First of all, we need to correct our usual way of thinking. Our usual perception of unhappiness and suffering is that it is always derived from external causes and conditions. In fact, that is not the case at all; rather, our unhappiness and suffering primarily derives from our own mental attitudes and ways of thinking. The harm we inflict on ourselves is much greater than the harm caused by others. Furthermore, we don't have much control over the outside world in terms of the harm it can do to us. However, we do have the choice of changing our mindset – we can protect ourselves from harm by overcoming the mental, bodily and verbal actions that are harmful to the good hygiene of our mind and body. For example, harsh speech, negative body gestures and negative mental attitudes can damage our relationships with others to the point that even those who are close to us will become distant and their love for us will turn into hatred.

We know that having a good circle of friends and caring people around us makes a huge difference to our happiness and wellbeing. As said before, the single most important factor that affects our life and relationships with people is the state of our mind. If our mind is unchecked and unbridled, it will easily be filled with disturbing thoughts. As a result of that, our level of stress, tension and anxiety increases, which in turn makes us unhappy and miserable.

We will then become very susceptible to afflictive emotions such as anger and so forth. Overpowered by anger, we will cause much harm to others and harm ourselves as well. We need to understand that if we harm other beings, we are also harming ourselves. With this kind of understanding we will be more cautious about our actions, and more motivated to stop those actions that harm others because they are harmful to ourselves too. Likewise, if we benefit others, we will also benefit ourselves. This way of thinking is an effective and practical way of becoming kinder and more supportive, rather than being careless and harmful.

Sometimes when we think of cultivating a beneficial attitude or good heart towards others, we feel it's too difficult to put into practice. However, if we understand the reason why we should be kind and considerate of others' needs, that it is for our own benefit and interests, we will be more inspired and likely to be kinder and more helpful to others. Of course, we should also consider the needs of other beings by thinking that, just as we only want benefit and no harm, so too do all other sentient beings want happiness and no harm. On the basis of this reality, we cultivate a sense of consideration and empathy towards other beings. At the end of the day, a mental attitude that shows empathy, respect and care for others reflects honesty, fairness and positivity. When we cultivate such a mental attitude, we will find ourselves feeling positive and happy.

(a') What ethical discipline is (cont.)

We now continue with the text. Last week we left at this sentence:

Hence, whether all living beings in the external world are freed or not freed from harm makes no difference in this context; the practice of ethical discipline is just the habituation within your own mind to the attitude of abstention which turns away from harm to these beings.

Moral discipline, as defined here, refers to a sense of restraint and turning one's mind away from harming other beings. Rather than referring to freeing other beings from harm, when we talk about achieving the perfection of moral discipline, we are talking about perfecting our own moral sense of restraint, and we do this by habituating ourselves with it in our mind.

To continue:

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds says:

Where can beings such as fish be sent
Where they will not be killed?
So it is said that by attaining an attitude of abstention
You perfect ethical discipline.

This summarises the way to achieve the perfection of moral ethics. The perfection of moral ethics doesn't mean actually eliminating all the harms in the world. If that were to be the case, it says here, then it would be impossible to achieve. It is impossible, for example, to find a place where sentient beings such as fish will not die. The practice of moral discipline is the restraining of harmful thoughts about other beings, and becoming familiar with this sense of restraint. The text then continues:

Although ethical discipline does indeed have three divisions [the ethical discipline of restraint, the ethical discipline of gathering virtue, and the ethical discipline of acting for the welfare of living beings], it is explained in this context as the attitude of abstention in terms of the ethical discipline of restraint, the principal division.

This indicates that of the three types of ethical discipline, the ethical disciplines of gathering virtue, and acting for the wellbeing of living beings, do not by nature or identity involve a sense of restraint or abandonment.

Then:

Moreover, in terms that include motivation, it is the ten abstentions that eliminate the ten non-virtues;

The ten non-virtuous actions are generally considered to be the ethical discipline of restraint in the sense that they involve refraining from engaging in non-virtuous actions. When it says, *moreover, in terms that include motivation*, this refers to the three mental non-virtuous actions. The words *that include* refers to the other seven which are the three non-virtuous actions of the body - killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct - and the four non-virtuous actions of speech, lying, slander, harsh speech, and idle gossip. So the ten non-virtues by their nature belong to morality in the sense that they involve restraint. The three non-virtues of the mind are the motivation and the other seven are the actions.

The text continues:

... and in terms of what it really is, it is seven abstentions, which are the nature of the actions of body and speech that abstain from the seven non-virtues.

In terms of practice, morality means making an effort to restrain or safeguard our mind from heading in the direction of engaging in actions that harm other beings, mainly the seven non-virtuous actions. And then:

Candrakirti's *Explanation of the "Middle Way" Commentary* (*Madhyamakavatahabhasya*) says:

It is called ethical discipline because it does not acquiesce in the afflictions, because it allows no sins to arise, ...

The practice of moral discipline prevents our mind from falling under the influence of mental afflictions such as harmful thoughts. Mental afflictions are the source of sinful or negative actions. If we are under the influence of mental afflictions such as anger, then it is very difficult to prevent harmful or negative actions. The Sanskrit term for 'morality' is *shila*, which connotes coolness. Hence the text says.

... because it is coolness since it quells the fire of regret, or because it is that upon which the excellent rely since it is the cause of happiness. Moreover, it is characterized by seven abstentions. These are motivated by three qualities - non-attachment, non-hostility, and correct view.

These three qualities are the opposites of the three non-virtues of mind. Then:

Therefore, ethical discipline is explained as the ten paths of action in terms that include motivation.

(b') How to begin the cultivation of ethical discipline

As a person who generates the spirit of enlightenment and then promises to train in the bodhisattva deeds, you have promised to endow all living beings with the ornament of the ethical discipline of the perfect buddhas; therefore, you must accomplish the aims of all beings.

Here, *therefore* is a reference to what was said before, which is that the bodhisattvas' purpose in cultivating the bodhicitta mind is to establish all sentient beings into perfect ethical discipline, endowing them with *ornaments of the ethical discipline*.

In this regard you must first develop the strength of your own pure ethical discipline, for, if your own ethical discipline is impure and degenerates, you will fall to a miserable rebirth and will therefore not even achieve your own welfare, never mind the welfare of others. Hence, once you begin working for the welfare of others, value highly your ethical discipline. You need to sharply focus on safeguarding it and restraining your behavior. Do not be lax.

Basically, it is saying here that if you cannot achieve your own purpose, then you will have no hope of achieving the purpose of other beings. The indication here is that you need to practise morality, which is refraining from the ten non-virtuous actions, not only for the sake of accomplishing the purpose of others but also for the sake of accomplishing your own purposes. For example, if you don't practise morality then you will take a bad lower rebirth, such as a rebirth as an animal. Animals hardly have any capacity to benefit others, as all they can think about is their need to overcome hunger and thirst in the immediate timeframe.

The text then states:

The *Compendium of the Perfections* states:

Those who strive to endow all beings
With the ornament of the perfect buddhas' ethical discipline
Initially purify their own ethical discipline;
With pure ethical discipline they develop powerful strength.

And also:

If you cannot achieve your own welfare with faulty ethical discipline,
Where will you get strength for the welfare of others?

Therefore, those who strive for others' welfare
Do not relax their devotion to this.

Moreover, such pure ethical discipline is based on the practice (just as prescribed) of what to adopt and what to cast aside. This, moreover, depends on a strong and stable attitude of wanting to safeguard your ethical discipline. Consequently, develop a desire to safeguard your ethical discipline by meditating for a long time on the grave consequences of not safeguarding it and the benefits of safeguarding it.

With respect to the first, the grave consequences of not safeguarding your ethical discipline, the *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Therefore, see the unbearable fright and
Eliminate even the smallest thing that should be eliminated.

Thus, once you are frightened by the grave consequences of your misdeeds, you strive to abstain from even the small ones. Think as explained earlier about the grave consequences of the ten non-virtues, the coarsest factors incompatible with ethical discipline.

The text now goes on to give instructions on the shortcomings of not practising moral ethics, and the benefits of practising moral ethics.

With respect to the benefits of safeguarding your ethical discipline, they are as explained earlier and as set forth by the glorious Aryasura in his *Compendium of the Perfections*:

In Tibetan the renowned Master Aryasura is known by names such as Mabo, dPa'bo and rTa dbYang. He was called ma bo because of his deep veneration and respect for his parents; dPa 'bo means a courageous one or bodhisattva and rTa dbYang means 'melodious one'.

Then:

The divine substances, the resources of humans in which to delight, and
The supreme bliss and supreme tastes which are the wonders of the deities –
Does anything more marvellous come from ethical discipline?
Even the buddhas and the teaching arise from it.

This says that the benefits of practising moral ethics include obtaining *the divine substances, the resources of humans*, but that these benefits are nothing to be amazed about because, as it says, *even the buddhas and the teaching arise from it*.

Further benefits of ethical discipline include:

Furthermore, in dependence on ethical discipline
your mind-stream progressively develops; ...

Through the practice of ethical discipline we will be able to eliminate all outer and inner mental distractions and conceptualisations, and thereby progressively bring about a calmer mind with more positive qualities. Having overcome all outer distractions, the practice of morality establishes a firm basis on which to accomplish meditative concentration, which will enable us to eliminate the coarse level of inner mental distractions and conceptualisations. Then, having overcome the coarse level of inner distractions and conceptualisations, that meditative concentration establishes a firm basis to bring about a discerning wisdom which enables us to eliminate subtle levels of inner distraction and conceptualisation. Hence, the development of meditative concentration and wisdom is dependent on the foundation of the practice of moral ethics.

The text continues:

... your training becomes the same as that of the *mahasattva* bodhisattvas, who have a compassionate nature; and you attain the pure sublime wisdom that eliminates all the seeds of wrongdoing. When worldly ornaments adorn the very young or very old, they make these persons seem ridiculous and therefore ugly. But no matter who has the ornament of ethical discipline – old, young, or in-between – it delights everyone; thus, it is the best of ornaments.

Here the text illustrates the excellent qualities of moral discipline through the use of analogies. It says here that the ornament of ethical discipline beautifies whoever wears it regardless of their age, whereas ordinary jewellery doesn't beautify children, and the very old will be a laughing stock if they wear it.

Then:

The pleasant fragrance of ethical discipline's good name spreads in all directions, whereas other pleasant fragrances must follow the direction of the wind and are thus limited.

Ordinary fragrances spread only where the wind goes, however the fragrance of moral ethics spreads in all directions.

Furthermore:

A lotion scented of sandalwood, which relieves the torment of heat, is prohibited for renunciates, but a lotion which protects against the torturous heat of the afflictions is not prohibited and is appropriate for them.

Similarly, a sandalwood lotion is not appropriate for everyone. For example, it is inappropriate for renunciates because it goes against their vows. However, the lotion of moral ethics suits everyone, including renunciates.

Someone who copies the outer appearance of being a renunciate but who has the jewel of ethical discipline is superior to others.

This emphasises that where there is a person who is a renunciate or ordained person by virtue of outer symbols or appearance, and another renunciate, who is actually adorned with the jewel of ethical discipline, the latter one is the superior renunciate. So, we can understand here that renunciates are not measured by outer possessions such as wealth, but by their jewel of ethical discipline.

Then comes this quote:

The *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Ethical discipline is the path of special attainment,
Achieves equality with those of compassionate nature,
And has the highest nature of pure sublime wisdom.
Free of flaws, it is called the best of ornaments.
It is a pleasant fragrance throughout the three realms,
And a lotion not prohibited for a renunciate.
Even those who copy appropriate attire, if they have ethical discipline,
Will be superior to other human beings.

This is basically a scriptural source that supports what was explained before.

Please read the text!

*Transcript prepared by Mark Emerson
Edit 1 by Sandup Tsering
Edit 2 by Adair Bunnett
Edited Version*