
The Six Perfections

འདྲེན་པ་ཆེན་པོ་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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As usual, ensure that you relax yourself physically first. (*Tong-len meditation*)

Once again, try to reinforce your motivation. If we consider the purpose of engaging in meditation, it is to develop and safeguard our inner qualities, particularly our inner peace and happiness. Our inner qualities are not like our external possessions; we can share our possessions with others, and also lose them due to external causes. But we cannot share our inner qualities, or give them to others.

When we think about it, the conditions that make us lose our inner qualities lie within our mind. Whenever we give rise to negative or discursive states of mind – the mental afflictions – that’s when we lose our inner qualities.

If your partner or friend is unhappy, you may feel sorry for them and want to help them. But it isn’t easy to help another overcome their unhappiness and mental suffering. While you may be filled with joy and inner peace – which you may wish to share with your friend who is deprived of it – you cannot share it with them.

What we are getting at here is that, when we talk about inner peace and happiness, or inner suffering, each person has to undergo their own, individual experience. There is a limit to the outside help one can expect. Each of us has to create the causes for bringing about our own inner peace. Then, having found that inner peace, we are responsible for safeguarding and maintaining it.

When we speak of mental and physical happiness in our life, the more important of these is mental happiness. We have discussed this in the past – how we can lack happiness, despite being surrounded by favourable conditions.

It is good to give some thought to whether we enjoy happiness or not, in terms of both mental and physical happiness, because that’s what we always seek in life. Possessing good physical health depends on the actions we undertake to achieve it; in fact, we have no shortage of knowledge of what we should and shouldn’t do to improve our physical health. We are doing quite well in terms of maintaining the health of our bodies.

Where we are lagging is in improving the health of our mind and thereby enjoying more inner happiness. In fact, inner happiness is more important for our wellbeing than outer or material happiness. When we talk about having a happy life, we are not so much talking about outer happiness, but about how much inner happiness we enjoy.

Therefore, it is important to see whether you have such happiness. If you do have it, you should acknowledge it, and remind yourself to feel positive about it and contented with it, recognising its value and cherishing it. If you recognise its value, you will maintain that happiness. Even in the face of any change in your circumstances, you will still remember the value of that happiness, and do whatever it takes to keep it.

For example, sometimes when we face an adverse situation, we become so mentally and emotionally entangled that we can easily lose what peace and happiness we have within us. It is important to always maintain our inner calmness, resilience and happiness. If we enjoy inner happiness, we will always find ourselves in a state of happiness, regardless of what we do, or where we go and who we are with.

On the other hand, if we lack inner happiness, it will be difficult for anything to make us happy. No matter what we do or acquire, or whatever success we have, somehow, inside, there will always be a feeling of emptiness. Deep down, we will feel that something, some favourable condition, is missing, even if we are surrounded by favourable conditions.

Therefore, the question of how successful we are in our lives should also be measured by our progress on a mental level – that is very important. When we develop a good mental quality, for example, we should feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Whereas if we measure our success only against our material or external development, no matter how much we develop along that path, there is no guarantee that we can say we are doing well and that we have become more satisfied, contented and happy.

If we look into the main cause that brings us inner happiness, as we always say, it is cultivating a positive mental attitude, such as a good heart towards others: developing love and compassion for other beings. We can understand this from our own experience of showing love and caring thoughts towards others.

The positive inner qualities, in the form of wholesome mental attitudes that we cultivate within us, counteract or reduce the mental afflictions, such as anger, pride and competitiveness, which serve as a source of unhappiness and suffering. The more we decrease our mental afflictions, the more inner peace and happiness we will experience.

This discussion is to remind us that the purpose of engaging in meditation practice is to overcome the mental afflictions and develop positive attitudes. When we understand how the experience of happiness or suffering depends on the various states of mind that arise within us, we will understand the benefits of meditation practice, because meditation practice enables us to get rid of states of mind that disturb us and destabilise our mental peace and happiness.

Meditation practice is the most effective tool we have for enhancing inner peace and happiness. This is because, when we engage in meditation practice we are directing our mind single-pointedly, with one-hundred-percent attention, on the meditation object. When the mind is fixed on the meditation object, the arising of mental afflictions will cease. While it’s not necessarily the case that we’ll overcome the seed of those mental afflictions through the meditation session, at least we will prevent afflictions from manifesting within our continuum. When there are no mental afflictions arising, it will leave our mind in a state of peace and happiness.

Meditation practice should also benefit us even when we are not meditating, such as during the post-meditation period, we are more aware or mindful of our thoughts and actions. As a benefit of our awareness and mindfulness, we will be more alert or vigilant, and able to recognise any mental afflictions emerging when we confront adverse situations.

This, in itself, is beneficial in reducing the influence of the mental afflictions on our thoughts and deeds.

As we said before, it is important to be clear about the purpose of meditation, which is to counteract mental afflictions. Therefore, as part of our meditation practice, we also need to have a good understanding of the disadvantages of mental afflictions.

For example, we should see how, the moment a mental affliction such as anger arises in our mind, we immediately lose our peace and happiness. One moment you're mentally happy, but the next, you lose your temper with your friend or partner. Therefore, we need to try and recognise the faults of the mental afflictions, and ensure that our meditation practice is always aimed at counteracting them.

In terms of benefiting others, there is no way we can act beneficially if we hold anger or hatred towards them. Even though tantric texts talk about transforming hatred as a means of benefiting others, it is almost impossible for us to do this. Anger is unlike other mental afflictions, such as desire or attachment, which have the effect of bringing people towards us, and in some ways enable us to benefit others. Anger, on the other hand, has the nature of destroying things.

As to the commentary, last time we finished under the heading:

(c') The divisions of ethical discipline

(3') The ethical discipline of acting for the welfare of living beings (cont.)

The ethical discipline of acting for the welfare of living beings means that you focus on the welfare of eleven sorts of living beings, and then accomplish their aims in this and future lives in a suitable manner and without wrongdoing. Since I have already detailed these in my *Basic Path to Awakening*, you should definitely read that over and over again.

As I mentioned in the last session, you should discuss the eleven modes of accomplishing the welfare of other beings in the next group discussion session. I will let you know the timing of the discussion night. As usual, Denis will coordinate the discussion night and Ross could prepare more on the list of eleven and some subdivisions within it. You can also refer to the section of the perfection of moral ethics in other lam-rim texts, such as *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*, which mentions the eleven benefits.

To continue:

Therefore, since the rules of the vows of individual liberation are one aspect of the precepts for renunciates who have taken the bodhisattva vows, they are not set off apart from the precepts for bodhisattvas.

Also, within the three divisions of ethical discipline, the ethical discipline of restraint – the actual rules of the individual liberation vows or the practice of engaging in what is to be adopted and rejecting what is to be cast aside that would be associated with these vows – is initially very important even for bodhisattvas, so train in this.

The Bodhisattva Levels' Compendium of Determinations states:

Among the three aspects of ethical discipline, the ethical discipline of restraint includes and reaches to the other two; when you are bound by it and safeguard it, you will be bound by the other two and safeguard them as well, and when you are

neither bound by nor protect it, you will not be bound by the other two nor safeguard them. Consequently, it is said that if bodhisattvas' ethical discipline of restraint degenerates, all their vows degenerate.

These lines emphasise the importance of observing the ethical discipline of restraint or vows [of individual liberation] by stating that if we abide by this moral ethic of restraint, we will also be abiding by the other types of moral discipline. On the other hand, if we don't observe this ethical discipline of restraint or vows, then we will also be degenerating or weakening the other two types of ethical discipline.

So, when we engage in the practice of ethics, we must engage in the ethical discipline of restraint or vows which serves as the basis or foundation on which we are able to develop the practice of the other two ethical disciplines.

The text now continues; the meaning of this text is quite clear if you read it:

If you think that the vows of individual liberation are for *śravakas*, and if you cast aside their prescriptive and proscriptive rules and say, "There are other precepts, bodhisattva precepts, to train in," then you have not grasped the key point of the bodhisattva training in ethical discipline, for it is often said that the ethical discipline of restraint is the basis and source of the next two types of ethical discipline.

This paragraph clearly implies the importance of observing the vows of individual liberation, even for a bodhisattva, to the point that, for anyone to think a bodhisattva precept is something other than observing the individual liberation vows, that indicates their lack of understanding of the key practice of the bodhisattva precepts.

Furthermore, the principal aspect of the ethical discipline of restraint is abstaining from deeds that are wrong by nature.

Here, the *deeds that are wrong by nature* refers to deeds that are called in Tibetan *ka.na ma.to.wae.le* – deeds that are wrong or negative *by their nature*, meaning whoever commits those deeds, even if they are a renunciate or ordained, is committing a moral transgression. By contrast, there are certain deeds that we call prescribed vows (or codes). When those who have taken such vows transgress them, they only accrue a misdeed, while others who don't possess these vows won't accrue a misdeed, even if they commit the same deed. So that's the meaning of 'wrong by nature'.

Moreover, it is taught in all the vehicles, higher and lower, that this abstention from deeds that are wrong by nature is the abstention from the ten non-virtues, which comprise the crux of the major faults of the deeds that are wrong by nature.

The text is emphasising that, if you go into detail regarding the ethical discipline of restraint, the main discipline is that of restraining from deeds that are negative and wrong by nature, such as the ten non-virtuous actions.

You must correctly restrain yourself physically, verbally, and mentally by not allowing a flicker of mere motivation for these non-virtues.

Here, the text further emphasises the importance of refraining from any deeds that are negative or wrong by nature, primarily the ten non-virtuous actions.

Technically, when we talk about the ten virtues or non-virtues in Tibetan, we don't use the term karma or action,

which in Tibetan is *le*. Hence, it is not accurate to say ten virtuous or non-virtuous 'actions'. In fact, the term action or *le* or karma primarily refers to the mental factor of volition or intention.

If we look at the list of the ten non-virtues or negativities, there are three of body – physically refraining from the act of killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Then there are four verbal: refraining from lying, slandering, harsh speech and idle gossip; and three of mind – mentally refraining from covetousness, harmful thought and wrong view. We have come across this topic many times in the past.

So when we talk about Buddhist ethics, refraining from the act of killing is taught first. We can understand why it is listed first, because we can all understand how precious life is for everyone. There is no more harm that we can cause to another than bringing an end to their life. This is followed by no stealing – again, for all of us, our wealth and possessions are also very important to us, so refraining from stealing is the next important ethical practice. Refraining from sexual misconduct is also important for the wellbeing of ourselves and others.

In terms of moral practice, here we are not just talking about not committing, for example, the act of killing – although, of course, it is very important that we do not commit an act of killing, as not killing is a virtue. However, what is pointed out here is that we cultivate the intention to refrain from engaging in the act of killing – this is the true meaning of this practice of ethical discipline. With such a thought or intention of restraint, our act of refraining from or avoiding misdeeds makes more sense, and our practice of moral ethics yields more benefits. When the text says *by not allowing a flicker of mere motivation for these non-virtues* it means that, even on a mental level, we have no thought of engaging in non-virtue.

From one perspective, when we think of the practice of morality or ethics, the challenge is not so much our lack of ability to engage in ethics. Rather, the challenge for us is to put some effort into understanding what the practice of ethics truly means – which is bearing a sense of moral restraint within our continuum all the time. For example, in terms of refraining from the act of killing, for most of us, there is little need for us to engage in killing. Likewise, there are other wrong deeds we don't need to engage in. Rather, here we need to understand what the ethical discipline of, say, refraining from killing means, as well as cultivating awareness of the shortcomings of committing such non-virtues. Recognising the shortcomings of the non-virtues is the key, and we have to develop this understanding.

Otherwise, we may consider ourselves a Dharma student or spiritual practitioner, but in fact lack a constant, conscious awareness of Dharma practice, such as refraining from non-virtues. Instead, we may have thoughts of wanting to commit non-virtues, and may regret being unable to do certain non-virtues. So, in reality, the way we live our life may contradict our spiritual or Dharma practice.

The text goes into the benefits of observing ethical discipline. This is something we can all easily recognise. If we talk about the peace, stability and safe environment of a country, obviously where there are rampant acts of people killing each other, lying to each other and stealing things, nobody will feel a sense of peace, freedom and happiness. On the other hand, in a country where people adhere to the rule of law and order and the principles of non-violence and compassion – where there is no killing or acts of violence –

there will be peace and stability and everybody can feel free to do things without fear and threat.

The text continues:

The *Compendium of the Perfections* says:

Do not let these ten paths of action degenerate;
They are the path to the joys of high status or liberation.

Here, *high status* refers to higher rebirth as a human or celestial being. And *liberation* refers to either liberation from cyclic existence, or the liberation of complete enlightenment. These two lines are really saying that those who want to find the joy of a good rebirth as a human being in the future should follow the practice of the ten virtues. Likewise, those who wish to achieve liberation from cyclic existence or complete enlightenment should also follow the ten paths of virtuous action.

By maintaining these you reach your goals, which are
Special contemplations wherein you think of helping beings.

So, having established oneself on the right path leading to the desired goal, one can then benefit others and help them find the same path and the same result.

Correctly restrain your speech, body, and mind;
The Conqueror said, "This, in brief, is ethical discipline."
This is the basis that comprises all ethical discipline,
So train in this restraint.

The term *basis* here refers to ethical discipline as a basis for achieving all the excellent qualities. In some other scriptures, such as Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, 'ground' is used as an analogy to explain the benefits of moral ethics for growing all the excellent qualities. They all refer to the same thing.

The text continues:

The master Candrakirti also explains the practice of the perfection of ethical discipline as abstaining from the ten non-virtues in the chapter on the perfection of ethical discipline of his *Explanation of the "Middle Way" Commentary*, and such explanations also occur in many sutras such as the Sutra on the Ten Levels. Therefore, if you initially train your mind in such restraint as presented above, you easily accomplish the remaining two types of ethical discipline.

(d') How to practice

You practice the three types of ethical discipline in association with the six supremacies and the six perfections. When you practice in association with the six perfections, the generosity of ethical discipline is establishing others in ethical discipline after you have stabilized yourself in it. The remaining perfections are as presented before.

(e') A summary

Not to weaken and to increase steadily the spirit of enlightenment is the basis of the bodhisattva deeds – it is the root of engaging in deeds of ethical discipline and so forth.

Here, the text is saying that engaging in the bodhisattva deeds, such as the deeds of ethical discipline, is the paramount cause of developing the spirit of enlightenment or bodhicitta – which is like the root – and also of preventing it from degenerating.

It is also the best way to desist from harming any living being.

As part of our practice of ethical discipline, we commit ourselves to not causing any harm to other beings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often advises people to make a pledge or resolve: 'If I am not able to benefit others, I will at least not cause any harm to them'.

Aspire to practice the ethical discipline of those at high levels and then train your mind in it.

Here, we are talking about the practice of ethical discipline as part of the bodhisattvas' practice at a very high or advanced level. As it is too difficult for us at the moment to apply this high level of ethical discipline in practice, we can at least practise through aspirational prayer - by sincerely aspiring, wishing and praying that one day we may be able to follow all the practices of ethical discipline at high levels.

Sincerely learn right now what to adopt and what to cast aside, starting with the ethical discipline of a beginning bodhisattva. In particular, each day frequently exercise an attitude of restraint with respect to what you know about deeds that are wrong by nature such as the ten non-virtues - and deeds that are wrong by prohibition. Among these also strive again and again to apply an attitude of restraint toward the fundamental transgressions of the vow to which you are committed. Once you do this, you will be able to complete the bodhisattva training in another lifetime as a causally concordant behavioral effect, with little difficulty and with little suffering. However, if you neglect these things now, you will be continually tainted by very grave faults and transgressions, and moreover for many lives you will be unable to learn the bodhisattvas' trainings. So from now on strive at these practices.

The great Lama Tsongkhapa has summarised very well the essence of ethical discipline in this section. So it is good to read and reflect upon the contents of this last paragraph.

We will leave tonight's talk here, and next week we will go on to the topic of developing patience.

*Transcript prepared by Su Lan Foo
Edit 1 by Mary-Lou Considine
Edit 2 by Sandup Tsering
Edited Version*

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