
The Six Perfections

འདྲེན་པ་ཆེན་པོ་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

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Try to produce a good motivation by cultivating a genuine aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment in order to benefit all sentient beings. Then think that this is why we are listening to this profound teaching and resolve to put it into practice.

In our everyday life, it would be wonderful if we always tried to prevent any harmful thoughts arising, and always generated and maintained a very kind, beneficial mental attitude. In terms of our spiritual practice, we can say there is none more profound than this attitude: it is a supreme Dharma practice. Also, there is no better friend to rely on than this inner friend.

Therefore, in our everyday life, whether we are sitting or walking, throughout all our actions, it is important to maintain caring thoughts and a good heart towards others and prevent harmful thoughts towards them from arising. A good heart and caring thoughts will naturally bring people closer together, and these are important factors for developing trust and reliable friendship among people. We can observe the same situation among animals – for example, if there is an animal in a group that is friendly and never shows an aggressive nature, the other animals in the group will befriend that animal.

In the same way, we admire people who are warm-hearted and never want to harm others. We feel we can rely on them and trust them, and want to befriend them. This is just because we all have a natural desire to seek happiness and avoid suffering. So, it is natural for us to admire and befriend those who are kind-hearted towards others and refrain from harming them.

Therefore, as part of your daily practice, I suggest that each morning, as you wake up, spend a moment cultivating this altruistic mental attitude towards others. Then, throughout the day, remind yourself of this thought. Even though it is just a short moment of reflection – of affirming each morning that you will be a good-hearted person – that short moment will have a strong positive influence on your mind and attitude throughout the day. When we cultivate the thought, ‘I will follow an altruistic mental attitude and the principle of compassion’, we are really surrendering ourselves to the Dharma. The benefit that we will reap for ourselves and for others is enormous. Unfortunately, we normally give in to wrong thoughts, and hence suffer as a result.

We all understand that the purpose of the Dharma is to achieve happiness and alleviate suffering in our life. However, the way the Dharma directly benefits us, as individuals, is through each of us internalising it. Therefore, it is important that we always relate the Dharma to our own mind, and put it into practice. Quite often, people get confused. When it comes to practising the Dharma, they might ask: ‘What should I practise?’ or ‘What is the most beneficial Dharma practice for me?’ In fact, the most beneficial practice is obvious – it is what we are discussing here. There is no more profound Dharma than that which

will help one cultivate this altruistic mental attitude, and overcome any harmful or ill-thoughts towards others.

In relation to how to cultivate and develop such an altruistic mental attitude, we all know that there is a detailed guide in the lamrim teachings. For example, the lamrim says that, initially, we will find it easier to cultivate this attitude towards those who are close to us, like our friends. Then, we should cultivate it towards those who are neutral or indifferent to us, towards whom we neither feel close nor distant. After that, we should extend it to our enemies: those who are objects of our hatred.

If we put the Dharma into practice, we will be able to realise it within ourselves – this is how we derive the benefit of the Dharma.

(c”) Based on the elimination of unfavorable conditions and the accumulation of favorable conditions, being intent on joyously persevering (cont.)

To continue with our teaching, last time we stopped at this paragraph, which says:

Reply: In general wisdom discerns everything to be adopted and everything to be cast aside as explained in scripture; in particular, it discerns what is to be adopted and what is to be cast aside according to the vows that you have taken. Therefore, once you apply mindfulness and vigilance to these, you will complete your practice; you will not be successful by just applying mindfulness and vigilance within the narrow confines of attention to an object of meditation.

The key message, as it says here, is: *you will not be successful by just applying mindfulness.* The kind of mindfulness emphasised here is a special kind of mindfulness because, generally speaking, mindfulness does not have the attribute of being able to see the truth, to discern or differentiate right from wrong, and so forth.

Of course, mindfulness is important, but what is also important is the object, topic or subject to which you apply mindfulness – as it clearly says here, there is no point in mindfulness practice if it is applied *within the narrow confines of attention to an object of meditation.* As said before, we need to be mindful of the things that we understand through our wisdom knowledge that we should aspire to or eliminate. So, mindfulness becomes very beneficial when you use it as a way of not forgetting what to do or not to do, according to your wisdom knowledge.

However, if we look at the kind of mindfulness we normally have, we will note that it is mostly associated with the ten non-virtuous deeds. To be more specific, our mindfulness is mostly under the influence of desirous attachment. We are concerned about desirable objects – either those that we are unable to obtain, or those that, once obtained, we fear losing, and worry about whether we can hold onto them. This is where we normally direct our mindfulness, in terms of what preoccupies our mind.

The point that Lama Tsongkhapa is making here is that mindfulness, by itself, is not a big thing: it is simply a state of mind that has the ability to remember things. Rather, what is important here is this: *In general wisdom discerns everything to be adopted and everything to be cast aside.* This shows *where* we should be applying mindfulness. When the text says, ‘in general’, it is referring to the teachings generally, which show us the things we should be doing, and those we should cast aside or abandon. This is where we should be applying mindfulness.

The text also says, *in particular, it discerns what is to be adopted and what is to be cast aside according to the vows that you have taken*. Specifically, here, it is saying that if we have taken any vows or precepts then, most importantly, each of us should apply mindfulness to the precepts we have taken. Observing those precepts or ethical practices is very important because moral ethics is regarded as the root or base from which all virtues arise.

The text then goes on to explain how we go about applying mindfulness:

What is more, when warriors are in a battle, they strive from the beginning not to lose their sword;...

There is no need to mention how important it is in battle for warriors to firmly grasp their weapon, and not lose it from the outset.

...when by chance they do drop it, they pick it up immediately.

So if, by chance, a warrior dropped his weapon on the ground, he wouldn't waste a second, but would attempt to immediately pick it up. Why does the warrior have to do that? The next line explains:

These two actions rest on a fear of being killed that is not mere words.

The moment the warrior loses the weapon, what he feels in the depth of his heart is the real and imminent threat of being attacked or even killed by the enemy. This sense of threat to his own life is not just words, but something he feels profoundly. That is why he won't waste any time picking up his sword from the ground.

The text continues:

These two actions rest on a fear of being killed that is not mere words. Likewise, those who cultivate the path are afraid to lose the mindfulness that does not forget what is to be adopted and what eliminated; even if they do lose it, they immediately reapply it.

By providing an analogy, Lama Tsongkhapa makes the presentation of the teaching and advice very clear. What is required of us is to read the text slowly, and reflect on its meaning. As said before, the mindfulness we need to practise relates to the instruction of what to adopt and what to reject. In a sense, relating mindfulness to ethical practice and the instructions on what to adopt and what to reject also refers to the practice of the law of karma.

As it says here:

These two actions are based on the development in their minds of a real terror of falling into miserable realms as a result of the pollution of infractions and faults that occur when mindfulness lapses.

Just as when the warrior feels fear about the threat to his life when he drops his sword, similarly, if we lose mindfulness, we will forget our core practice of what to adopt and what to reject. If we relate this to the law of karma, it means to practise virtue and abandon non-virtue. Therefore, losing mindfulness is like opening ourselves to the danger of forgetting our virtuous practice and committing non-virtues, or staining our continuum – in particular, through the transgression of our vows, or the *pollution of infractions and faults that occur when mindfulness lapses*.

This, in turn, depends on having made karma and its effects central to their practice and then sustaining that approach.

This sentence points out to us how karma should be the central, core practice when we talk about what to adopt and

what to abandon. When we relate this to our own practice, we can feel how much of a gap there is between theory and practice. Normally, when we think of spiritual practice, we hardly ever think about the ethical practice of karma. This may be because we lack the time for Dharma practice because we are overly preoccupied with worldly work; or it may be because in whatever practice we may do, we don't really pay attention to the real practice, as advised here... *karma and its effects central to their practice and then sustaining that approach*.

Those who fail to develop the awareness that these points are profound instructions...

This refers to the ethical practice of karma.

... sever the root of the good qualities ensuing from the practice that delights the learned, the sacred foundation of the path.

This points out why ethical practice is so important. It is the *sacred foundation of the path* and something that *delights the learned* – we are talking here about one's lama or gurus, and how, of all the offerings we could make, the offering of our practice is the one that pleases the gurus most. Therefore the text is emphasising the importance of ethical practice.

We must understand that if we do not put ethics into practice, then whatever else we do that we assume to be a practice – such as sitting in an upright meditation posture – is not something that will truly please our guru. When we meet the guru and offer the *kagtag*, we think that it is also going to please the guru, but that is not necessarily the case. As it says here, the thing that will really please the guru is ethical practice: the understanding of what to adopt and what to abandon in our life.

Those who fail to develop the awareness that these points are profound instructions sever the root of the good qualities ensuing from the practice that delights the learned, the sacred foundation of the path.

Question: Well, why is it necessary to look with fear upon even minor misbehavior, and not let it continue but immediately stop it?

This implies that we should not undermine the benefit of abandoning non-virtue; no matter how small it is, non-virtue must be abandoned. Similarly, we should not undermine the benefit of accumulating virtue; no matter how small it is, virtue must be accumulated.

The sutras elaborate this point about not undermining the importance of accumulating or abandoning even a small virtue or non-virtue with the examples – how a tiny spark can destroy a mountain of grass and how drop after drop of water can eventually fill a big container. This is also true in terms of saving money. We have to start saving dollar by dollar and eventually we will have two hundred or three hundred dollars. It is important for us to apply this advice to our practice of overcoming every negativity or non-virtue – even if it is tiny, we should try to avoid it. Whereas, no matter how tiny the virtue is, we must try to accumulate it.

The text continues:

Reply: Take the example of a poisoned arrow that makes a tiny surface wound. Before long, the poison from this wound will spread throughout the entire body. You must operate on the wound and remove the poison. Similarly, even when wrong behavior does not make anything more than a small wound in the mind, if you ignore it, it will quickly pervade your mind so that it becomes large. Therefore, from the start you must prevent wrongdoing

before it takes place and, if it does happen, you must discontinue it immediately.

The advice here is in accord with the first of the four general characteristics of karma – that karma is definite. The next characteristic is that karma increases. That is why it emphasises here that we should not underestimate any action, even if it seems insignificant. In fact, it is said that with karma as an inner object – more so than what you see in the external world – a small cause can yield a huge result. So a small karma can be a cause for a huge result.

The last line above says, *therefore from the start you must prevent wrongdoing*. It is best if we avoid wrongdoing from the beginning. If we do happen to create any wrong action, even if it is very small, we cannot just leave it, but rather should apply the remedy. As clearly explained here, using the analogy of a wound caused by a poisoned arrow, it is important to remove the poison as soon as possible; otherwise, later on, it will spread to the whole body.

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds states:

Just as poison spreads throughout the body,
Carried by the blood,
So a fault pervades the mind
If it finds an opportunity.

Question: Well, how do those who want victory over the afflictions apply mindfulness and vigilance?

If we consider ourselves to be Dharma practitioners then, as it says here, our goal should be to gain victory over the mental afflictions, which are the enemies of our practice. We gain victory over these enemies by applying mindfulness and vigilance, as was practised by Katyayana, one of the principal disciples of the Buddha.

Reply: You must concentrate, just as *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* says:

A practitioner must be as concentrated
As someone carrying a pot full of mustard oil

The Tibetan term translated here as ‘mustard oil’ is *nyung-ma*, which is a kind of turnip.

Here’s the story of Katyayana. Once a remote king invited Arya Katyayana to his town to teach. The king greeted Katyayana with some grand street entertainment, but when he asked Katyayana, ‘How was it?’ the reply was, ‘Sorry I didn’t notice.’ The king was disappointed and puzzled, wondering how anyone could not notice such a festive welcome.

Later on, the king heard that monks practise mindfulness of their vows to prevent external distraction. So to test whether the mind directed to just one object will lose awareness of other objects, the king instructed a man to carry a basket full of turnips (translated here as a pot of mustard oil) on his head and walk the same street where the entertainment was happening. A guardsman – whose task it was to strike the man if he dropped any turnips from the basket – followed him. Of course, the man concentrated on his task well, so he didn’t notice the street entertainment. This led the king to believe in the power of mindfulness and meditation.

A practitioner must be as concentrated
As someone carrying a pot full of mustard oil
Who is fearful when a swordsman before him
Threatens to kill him if he spills a drop.

The meaning of this verse relates to the level of intensity required, in terms of maintaining your mindfulness. As it says here:

Understand this from the scriptural statement with respect to the border region in the story of Katyayana.

This analogy shows how we should apply or maintain mindfulness.

While you are concentrating, if in general you should behave wrongly or in particular you should experience the causes of laziness – such as sleepiness, etc. – then you must not assent to them but must confront and avert them.

So even if you apply mindfulness in your practice with great care, it is still possible that you will face obstacles like laziness or sleepiness. If any such interference occurs in your practice *then you must not assent to it but must confront and avert*. In other words, you must try to overcome it immediately.

Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds states:

Thus, if a snake came onto your lap,
You would hastily stand up.
Just so, if sleepiness and indolence come,
Quickly avert them.

Furthermore, do not merely discontinue faults, but actively feel displeasure at their having occurred.

This clearly indicates the importance of *immediately* overcoming any interference to one’s practice, in the form of sleepiness or laziness. You wouldn’t just sit and do nothing if a venomous snake came towards you. You would immediately feel scared, and act to either stop the snake or run away. Similarly, the text is emphasising here the importance of overcoming that interference, of getting rid of it immediately, and then to *actively feel displeasure at their having occurred*. You want to act immediately to overcome that interference. Not only should you apply a remedy to overcome it, but at the same time, you need to have a feeling of displeasure, a sense of dislike, at being under the influence of defilements or laziness. This is why you should feel displeasure.

Then:

Contemplate as follows, “Because I proceeded in this way in the past as well, I have been wandering in cyclic existence up to now. In particular, it is especially blameworthy that I have taken the bodhisattva vows and yet continue with things that are incompatible with the vows’ precepts.”

This line shows why you have to remove this obstacle or fault in your practice.

Become inspired to henceforth restrain yourself, thinking, “From now on I shall make sure that this fault never occurs.”

To prevent sleepiness or other defilements occurring again in our practice, we need to apply the four forces to remedy negativities, including the force of resolution – being determined to not allowing such faults to occur again.

We will continue:

Frequently employ both these attitudes. *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* says:

Whenever a fault occurs,
I shall reproach myself and long ponder,
“By all means I will do whatever it takes
So that this shall never happen again.”

Strive at any deep causes that give rise to the continuous, powerful mindfulness that is the root of this practice.

This talks about striving to create the favourable causes that enable us to maintain this continuous and powerful

mindfulness which, as it says, is the root of this practice. Then the text says:

Rely on such activities as keeping the company of excellent teachers and excellent companions, and broad learning, which are the causes of this powerful mindfulness.

This should be obvious to us, because the kind of mindfulness we are trying to practise here is that of always remembering virtuous objects: an important feature of this mindfulness is not forgetting virtuous objects. Therefore, to support our mindfulness, we should rely on *such activities as keeping the company of excellent teachers and excellent companions and broad learning, which are the causes of this powerful mindfulness.*

In this vein *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* states:

“In any of these situations
I will practice mindfulness.”
With this motive aspire to meet teachers
And engage in appropriate activities.

The text then says:

In summary, you must study and discern well what bodhisattva training requires you to adopt and to cast aside, and then joyously persevere at continuously being mindful in all your conduct of what you have understood about what to adopt and what to cast aside. Hence, it is extremely important not to err about that at which you are to persevere.

This is about the benefit of learning, which is said to be ‘an opener of our wisdom eye’ or enlightening our mind to know precisely what we should do, and what we should not do. In other words, the benefit of learning is the very clear sense of discrimination that we will develop through learning. Then we should joyously persevere.

So we should direct our mindfulness to the things we should be mindful of – that is, what to adopt and what to reject – having gained that knowledge from our learning. We then have to apply joyful effort and enthusiasm to this mindfulness, which helps us keep our practice of virtue very alive, very present. The text is saying that if our effort is not directed at this, then whatever effort we make will be directed at the wrong purpose and our effort will be futile. As it says here, we should *joyously persevere at continuously being mindful in all your conduct* – throughout all our actions, we should direct all our effort and mindfulness at what should be adopted and what should be cast aside.

We will do the Twenty-one Tara Prayers for Jessie’s father who has been sick. He lives near Kumbum, which is the birthplace of Lama Tsongkhapa in Tibet. I saw a photo of him with the late Panchen Lama too. I think he is very fortunate to have met the Panchen Lama.

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Edited Version*

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