
The Six Perfections

འཇུག་པ་ཆེན་པོ་སྤྱི་ལ་བསྐྱབ་ཚུལ།

Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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We will begin with the usual meditation.

[*Tonglen Meditation*]

Next, we will recite the prayer, *Praise to Dependent Arising*.

Today marks the Buddhist festival called Descending from Heaven. A week after giving birth to the Lord Buddha, his mother passed away and took rebirth in one of the lands of gods. So, some time after he achieved enlightenment, as a way to repay the kindness of his mother, the Buddha went to the land of the gods to teach the Dharma to his mother and the gods there. Accordingly, the Buddha taught the Dharma and today is the day that marks his descent from heaven to Earth. There is also a sutra called *Meeting of the Father and Son Sutra*, which records the Buddha's deeds to repay his father.

As we recite this *Praise to Dependent Arising* we should fervently pray, 'May we never be parted from the holy teaching, or from the Buddha.' Right now, we are so blessed and fortunate that we have met with the Buddha's teaching, and also had contact with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who we can say truly represents the Lord Buddha. Thus, meeting His Holiness the Dalai Lama is like meeting the Lord Buddha himself.

His Holiness is a bodhisattva and a bodhisattva is also regarded as a son of a buddha. Just as the son of a king is the heir to the king, a bodhisattva is one of the Buddha's heirs. Hence, we have a wonderful opportunity to accumulate great benefit in this life. We should also make a strong and fervent prayer that we never be separated from the Buddha and his noble teaching, and that we never stray from the Dharma path.

The most important thing for us is that we always have contact with the Buddha's teachings in the future. Some students have expressed their concern about whether or not they will meet me in future. I said to them that meeting me is not important; what is important is that they meet the Buddha's Dharma. I also said, 'Keep praying. You never know, we may meet again in a future life.' Caryn Clarke once said to me that she was not really frightened about death, but what really concerned her was whether she would meet me again in the future. Hearing from her that she was not frightened about death was, I thought, not only a confident statement, but also very much showed the sign of a good practitioner. I was quite impressed when she said that.

Indeed, when you think of death, it passes very quickly; the duration of death is just a matter of breathing out and then not breathing in. So, we should be more worried about what happens after death. Death is not the end of our life; rather we then go onto the next destination. But

we have no control over where we go. This is something we need to think about now, in order to ensure that we go to where we would like to go.

Some religions, like Christianity, accept the fact that our body ends with death. However, they believe in something they call 'the soul', which goes to the next life. Depending on how you live your life, it either goes to heaven or to hell. So even Christians talk about a future life. Compared to Buddhism, their explanation of a future destination is quite simple.

We will start the prayer now.

[*Recitation of Praise to Dependent Arising*]

Try to cultivate the proper motivation as we continue with the teaching.

(b) Training in the four ways to gather disciples that help others to mature

(iv) A somewhat elaborate explanation (cont.)

We will continue with the text:

Moreover, these four ways to gather disciples are the way all the bodhisattvas of the three times work for the welfare of others, so it is the single path to travel.

This is quite self-explanatory, and is, of course, referring to the four means of gathering followers. *Moreover, these four ways to gather disciples are the way all the bodhisattvas of the three times work for the welfare of others* refers to what is practised by all the bodhisattvas of the three times – past, present and future. Therefore, *it is a single path to travel*.

The *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* states:

All those who have gathered disciples,
Are gathering, or will gather them
Do so in this way; therefore, this is the path
For the maturation of living beings.

This passage from the *Ornament for the Mahayana Sutras* summarises the way bodhisattvas help the maturation of the continuum of all other living beings through these four means of gathering the followers. With regard to gathering beings, those beings who need to be matured include those who have gathered disciples. This includes all those who the bodhisattvas have already gathered or attracted, and those who the bodhisattvas are presently gathering or will gather in the future. It directs us to *do so in this way*.

We have previously discussed what the four means of gathering are – generosity, pleasant speech, practising the purpose and accordance or conforming with the purpose. It is through these four skilful means of gathering that the bodhisattvas benefit other beings in terms of maturing or ripening their continuum with virtue.

Then the text continues:

In general, then, though the bodhisattva deeds are limitless, the six perfections and the four ways to gather disciples are their best summation.

This is saying that even though the deeds of the bodhisattvas are very vast, if we have to condense them then the best way to do that is to divide them into two, which are, as it says, *the six perfections and the four ways to gather disciples*. These two sets of practices of the

bodhisattvas' deeds condense all of the vast deeds of bodhisattvas.

The text continues:

For, bodhisattvas have just two tasks, the maturation of causal collections for their own buddhahood and the maturation of the mind-streams of living beings; they accomplish both of these through the perfections and the ways to gather disciples.

This explains the reason we can condense all of the bodhisattvas' deeds into the deeds of the six perfections and the four ways of gathering. It says here that the bodhisattvas' deeds have two purposes: the purpose for self or for themselves and the purpose aimed at benefitting others. Then the text shows here how these two purposes are accomplished. For instance, the six perfections primarily accomplish the bodhisattvas' purpose for themselves and the four means of gathering accomplish the purpose of achieving the welfare of other beings or benefitting others.

Thus the *Bodhisattva Levels* also says:

The perfections bring to complete maturation the buddha qualities you will have yourself. The ways to gather disciples bring all living beings to complete maturation. In sum, know these to be the active expression of a bodhisattva's virtuous qualities.

This passage from the *Bodhisattva Levels* summarises what has already been explained, showing how the bodhisattvas' purpose is to achieve their ultimate goal of complete enlightenment, which they are able to achieve through the six perfections; while the bodhisattva deeds for fulfilling the purposes of other beings is to show them how to achieve their own enlightenment. Again, the bodhisattvas are able to fulfil that through these four means of gathering. Through that, they are able to mature or ripen other beings so that they are able to reach complete enlightenment.

The text continues:

Therefore, I have set forth in this section these two categories of practice. If you want to know them in more detail, look in the *Bodhisattva Levels*.

With respect to the way these practices are done during and after meditative equipoise, the Great Elder says:

The deeds of bodhisattvas are
The magnificent six perfections and so forth.
The yogi arisen from meditative equipoise
Resolutely accomplishes the path of accumulation.

The text continues:

Beginning bodhisattvas who have taken the vows of the conquerors' children and are on the path of accumulation practice only the six perfections, whether in meditative equipoise or subsequent to it. They sustain some of the perfections in meditative equipoise and others in the post-equipose state. Some aspects of meditative serenity (which is meditative stabilization) and some aspects of insight (which is the perfection of wisdom) are cultivated in meditative equipoise, whereas some other aspects of meditative stabilization and wisdom are sustained in the post-equipose state, along with the first three perfections.

The first three perfections are the perfections of generosity, moral ethics and patience.

Joyous perseverance occurs in both the meditative equipoise and post-equipose states, while one type of patience—certain aspects of the patience of certitude about the profound teachings—also occurs in meditative equipoise.

Essentially, if we think of the bodhisattvas' deeds in terms of timeframes there is the time of meditative equipoise and there is the post-meditation period. The text talks about where the six perfections are emphasised relative to these timeframes. We note here that in the post-meditation period there is an emphasis on engaging in the deeds of the first three perfections, which are generosity, moral ethics and patience. You can clearly see the reason: it is vitally important for bodhisattvas to accumulate a great amount of merit, which they do mainly through practising giving and ethics and so forth. Whereas the last two perfections of concentration and wisdom are primarily practised in a deep meditative state, that is, during the meditation period. However, as it clearly says here, some aspects of both concentration and wisdom must also be practised and applied even in the post-meditation period.

We can also see how both concentration and wisdom are important in whatever practices we do. If we practise generosity or we engage in simple single-pointed meditation, it is very important to depend on concentration and especially the wisdom-knowledge that is essential for all practices. In fact, without wisdom-knowledge, it is very difficult to make any progress in terms of cultivating and developing virtues.

Then the text continues:

The Great Elder says:

During periods after rising from meditative equipoise¹,
Cultivate the view that all things
Are like a magician's illusions, as in the eight similes.
Thereby emphasize in post-meditative thought
Purification and the training in method.
During periods of meditative equipoise
Continually condition yourself to
Serenity and insight in equal measure.

If we look into the meaning of the passage by the Great Elder, there are two stanzas, which give us some instructions on what we should do when we are in deep meditative equipoise on emptiness. Then it talks about what practice we should do when we arise from that meditative equipoise and engage in various deeds subsequent to that meditative equipoise.

It says, *during periods after arising from meditative equipoise cultivate the view that all things are like a magician's illusion, as in the eight similes, thereby emphasize in post-meditative thought*. That shows how, when we arise from deep meditative equipoise and engage in the world and move into the post-meditational period of engaging in diverse activities, our mind becomes engaged with various objects. It is saying here that these objects may appear to our mind as if they all exist truly or inherently from their own side.

Therefore, *cultivate the view that all things are like a magician's illusion*, which is to say, even though things

¹ This refers to arising from the deep meditative equipoise that is penetrating emptiness.

appear to our mind as truly existing, they don't exist that way in reality; hence we should see them like a magician's illusion. It also says *as in the eight similes* which indicates that there are other similes which can also be used to understand how things appear during the post-meditation period. So, even though things appear as truly existent, this appearance doesn't accord with the way things exist in reality.

The text also says, *thereby emphasise in post-meditative thought purification and the training in method*. Here 'purification' means getting rid of grasping at things in the way they appear to our mind in that post-meditation period, i.e. appearing to have true existence. It is saying here that we need to engage in *purification* to stop grasping at this inherently existent self, even though things appear in that way to our mind.

The text then talks about *training in the method*. It clearly shows here that in the post-meditative period, our primary focus is on enhancing the method aspects of the practice. Then *during the period of meditative equipoise continually condition yourself to serenity and insight in equal measure*. Other common terms we use are 'calm abiding' and 'special insight'. The necessity for, and importance of the union or combination of both calm abiding and special insight is as you will find in many other texts.

We can see here how Lama Tsongkhapa has given us a very detailed explanation of what we should do, guiding us in terms of when we go into deep meditation, as well as when we come out of that meditation and engage in post-meditation activities. The explanation indicates that this is not something he made up himself. He used authentic sources – the early Buddhist classic texts of the great masters – to elaborate on the subject matter.

This has been an explanation of the practices of bodhisattvas. Many of you have learned about the view of emptiness, and even if you don't fully understand the whole idea, at least, every now and then, you should try to apply this in your practice. When we perceive various things, they give our mind the notion of true or inherent existence. They appear to our mind like that, so at least try to see that they don't reflect the ultimate mode of existence, that this is not the way things exist, and that things do not exist objectively in that way. The text is saying that it will be very beneficial if you try to stop grasping, or at least try to decrease the force of your grasping at things as being truly existent. Then, even if we don't gain the realisation of emptiness right now, any meditation on emptiness that we do now will leave a good impression in our mind, which will help us to easily and quickly gain the true realisation of the wisdom of emptiness in the future.

The text emphasises that we have to apply what is instructed here. When we engage in the meditation on emptiness, we need to utilise all our knowledge of emptiness. To understand how things lack inherent existence, we maintain our focus on the emptiness of things. At the same time, it emphasises here that when we arise from our meditation practice things may appear to our mind as having inherent existence, and it is important to recognise and understand that this is not the

ultimate mode of existence; that this is not the way they actually exist.

In this way we will find benefit in the post-meditation period, in terms of effectively counteracting mental delusions and preventing them from arising. And if any delusions do arise, the meditation on emptiness has the benefit of weakening the force of that delusion. In this way we can really taste the benefit of meditating on emptiness while we are sitting in meditation, as well as in our everyday life.

Sometimes, when we sit in meditation we find ourselves feeling very peaceful and calm. But after we finish the meditation we completely forget all about our practice and easily lose our self-control and lose our temper. So there is a tremendous benefit from this meditation on emptiness. As we read in the *Praise to Dependent Arising, For you, emptiness seen as dependent arising does not render as contradictory emptiness of self-nature and ability to function*. Even though everything lacks inherent or true existence, all the nominal functioning of things becomes tenable. It also refers to *the wondrous teachers, wondrous refuge, wondrous speakers, wondrous saviours*. Here Tsongkhapa praises the way the Buddha taught this profound view, showing the ultimate mode of existence, while at the same time, making sense of things conventionally.

Now we continue with the text:

When bodhisattvas whose minds are untrained in such marvelous but difficult deeds hear of them, they feel distressed. Although they are unable to practice such things at first, they come to understand them and then to intimately familiarize themselves with them as objects of aspiration. Later they engage in them spontaneously without any strain. Thus, familiarization is of the greatest importance, for if these bodhisattvas recognized their inability to actually engage in such deeds and then gave up on even the familiarization conducive to training the mind in them, they would greatly delay reaching the pure path.

This shows the importance of progressing stage-by-stage. Initially one engages in practice that is conducive and in accord with one's own level and mental capacity. Then, as one continues this practice and habituates oneself with it, the practice which was initially very hard becomes very natural and very easy. The bottom line here is that it is important to engage in practice and not to lose heart by saying, 'It's too hard'. One must practise even if it is hard. At the very least, practise in accordance with your capability – practise something that you can do.

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Edited Version*

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