

Introduction to the Six Paramitas: Dana Paramita

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Dana paramita, generosity, is the first of the six paramitas and the most important, because all the paramitas are contained within it. Now, it's also true that if we go to the depth of each paramita, all the paramitas are also embraced and included. But when we look at them individually, they sound very different — generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, zazen and wisdom. They sound like very different things, but they all come out of the same thing, which is the transcendent.

When we get over the self, or past the self, or drop the self — whatever term you prefer, it's all the same — then all paramitas are in full realization. Full realization. The experience of doing that, of dropping the self, is called kensho, or seeing into one's nature or, sometimes, satori.

When we have a great kensho or dai kensho then we don't keep returning and the self doesn't keep coming back in, in a certain way. It's still there, it's always there, and we'll never get rid of it — and we don't want to get rid of the self, or the ego-self — but we want to get past ourself, over ourself, because when we're so focused on ourself we don't see others. When we are one with others, we drop ourself. And that's what the paramitas are about. They are like a road map to dropping the self and experiencing Zen.

Zen is the essence of Buddhism. Zen is not a particular form. I'm saying this because a lot of people get all caught up in the forms. Now, it's nice, and beautiful, to experience the forms. It's beautiful to know them, it's beautiful to practice them, but they're not the essence of Zen; they are the manifestation of the experience.

So the Buddha Shakyamuni, 2500 years ago, had a Zen experience, it's called awakening. He woke up to one's true nature, his true nature, which is Buddha nature, sometimes called Christ nature, sometimes universal nature, but it's all the same. It's the transcendent. It's when the self is dropped, others are dropped, there is just the experience of sunyata — pure emptiness, which is complete form. It is form, but it's empty of all concepts, of all ideas, all attributes, all things. It's just the purest nature of every being.

To use an analogy which I have always loved: you have a big snowstorm, let's say you're in Colorado or Utah, you have three feet of snow on the ground and you go out there and you build all these snow people. You build a snowman and a snowwoman, you build a doggy and a kitty, you build children, you build all these other things. They're all different, but in essence they're all one thing — snow.

That's like sunyata. They're all the same and yet each is manifesting in a different form, in a different way. But they're still essentially equal. So, dai kensho is the experience of absolute equality. Absolute equality. When we have a dai kensho we see eyeball to eyeball with all the Buddhas and all the ancestors since the beginning 2500 years ago. It is all seen as equal, because in essence we're all one. We're all absolutely one.

To realize this oneness is Zen. The interconnectedness of all things is Zen. What we are going through right now in this time of Covid is that many people are beginning to see the interconnectedness of all of us. Some are even beginning to see that what one person does affects the whole world. What the whole world does affects each of us. What anybody out there does has some effect on us. A Putin in Russia has an effect on the entire world.

We very often suffer from a kind of shame or a feeling of unworthiness, that we're not good enough or somehow not enough. And that drives us to a practice, so we can feel that we are good enough — to be on this planet, to have this body, to have this life. So, what we want to do is experience this essence of life, our true nature as it's called, this absolute equality. That takes care of all our attachment to needing to prove ourself, needing to prove that we have a right to exist, a right to be.

However, we can very easily get caught up in thinking that we need to get that approval from somebody else. But it doesn't work that way. No matter how much approval we get from the outside — even rock stars, movie stars, musicians, athletes, who get very famous, very popular, known by the world — if they don't feel approved by themselves, the amount of approval out there is never going to satisfy the itch. So we all have to look inward, turn our gaze, our attention, inward.

That's why koans work so well. Like the koan “Who is it that hears the sounds?” Who is it that feels the sensation? Who is it that smells the smell? Who is it that thinks the thought? Who is it that feels the pain? Who is that? When we turn our light inward to see who that is, we find there's nobody there.

It's like being on a ship, let's say you're the captain of this little sailboat, and you see another boat coming towards you. You can't see who's at the helm, but you see it coming right at you and you start screaming, ‘Stop, stop, stop! Get away! Get away, you're going to hit my boat!’ And then the boat hits, and you jump aboard and you're all angry and you're going to kick the butt of the person sailing that ship — and there's nobody there. It was adrift.

That is how it is. We always make the others wrong, or right. We confer that separate, tangible existence on others, but there's nobody there. We think somebody is there, a self, because we think there is a self here. So enlightenment is seeing there's nobody here, and there's nobody there. Now that's very hard to swallow from the dualistic mind — that you don't exist and I don't exist. But these are just concepts: you're a concept, I'm a concept. It is two concepts relating, trying to relate to one another. And that's why we're always projecting, because to preserve the concept that you exist and I exist, I have to keep projecting. If I stop projecting, you're gone and I'm gone. There is just oneness.

So the whole point of Zen is to experience that oneness, that interconnectedness, that unity that is one life, one world, one mind, one heart, one essence, one spirit. When we do that, it helps us with this shame or this feeling of I am not worthy to exist. Some people try to find that sense of worth by being, confirmed from outside. So we get into Zen and we think ‘it's all about being a monk,’ ‘it's all about shiho,’ ‘it's all about inka’ — because that will confirm that I exist. No, it only confirms that you don't exist. We don't give the confirmation if you're coming from a place where you think ‘I deserve,’ ‘I'm entitled to’ something. Because who's the ‘I’? Who's entitled?

When I was about to receive shiho, it was a few days before, I went in to Maezumi Roshi and I said, “You know, I don't feel worthy to receive shiho. I feel like I have some doubt in myself.” And he said, “No shiho for you!” Which was exactly what I feared would happen. But if he had just said, “You are not worthy” — now, I would have been very hurt if he had said that, but I would have had to reflect, ‘Well he's right. How can I be worthy of receiving the Dharma?’ How can any vessel be worthy of it? So, when we think we're worthy and we want it, we're not worthy, because there's nobody there to be worthy. Anything we receive should be seen as a gift, and therefore be thankful and appreciative of everything we receive.

Dana paramita is giving ourself away, so completely that everything that comes to us is a gift, is Dharma, and it's all a teaching, and it's all reality and it's all true. That's why capital D Dharma means reality, truth, the essence of life, the manifestation of all things.