

## *Paramitas: Techniques of Nongrasping*

*Paramita practice is based on human decency, and how to be in the world and help others who are suffering. . . . Paramita practice is the essence of how to be a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is someone who is brave, and utterly and thoroughly involved in the discipline taught by the Buddha. Bodhisattvas are ideally soaked in the water of helping others in every way.*

THE MAHAYANA path, or the bodhisattva path, is regarded as an intermediary process in the development of enlightenment. That is to say, enlightenment is the final result, and hinayana is the starting point. We start from the viewpoint of individual salvation, and go beyond that into an understanding of reality as shunyata and compassion. The maha-yana is the way to develop or cultivate shunyata, and paramita practice is how we can apply those teachings very personally and directly.

### EXERCISING GOODNESS

When you realize a spark of goodness in yourself, real basic goodness, you may experience an attack of negativity. You may suddenly feel angry, anxious, or depressed. But that kind of attack serves as a reference point for you to recognize your basic goodness, so it is no longer destructive. You are seeing things as they are, so all of it is fine. Basically, if you don't see white, you don't see black. That's how it goes.

If you don't have basic goodness, you don't have anything. But you don't just *have* goodness or *feel* goodness—you have to *exercise* goodness. Goodness has to be worked with. You do not have goodness for your own sake, but for the sake of others. So the bodhisattva ideal is to share your goodness with others. Otherwise, why do you have goodness at all? But the actual application of basic goodness is very demanding. You have to develop the ground to help others, but you can't help anybody while you are sitting by yourself and meditating. You actually have to go out and help them.

Before taking the bodhisattva vow, you need to have the conviction that it is necessary to do so. You need to have genuine interest, gentleness, and a sense of egolessness. And after you have already taken the vow, there is a feeling of continuing further along the path and beginning to understand what the bodhisattva path is all about.

### THE WORK OF A BODHISATTVA

The technique for becoming a good practitioner, a decent person, a good warrior, and a good bodhisattva is to follow the six transcendent disciplines. With generosity you open yourself and give away everything, including yourself.

Out of that naturally grows transcendent discipline. With discipline, you do not get tied up in your generosity. You don't have any hangover from giving away too much, and you don't develop any heroism from giving so much away.

Out of discipline comes patience. You control your aggression by means of shamatha and vipashyana and by means of realizing absolute and relative bodhichitta. You develop nonaggression.

Out of patience grows exertion, which is having a sense of joy in, and appreciation of, your livelihood and your practice.

After exertion comes meditation. Meditation does not mean purely sitting on your meditation cushion, or *gomden*. Meditation means that the cushion is sewn to your pants, so your gomden goes with you everywhere. Instead of wearing a crucifix, you might sew a gomden onto your skirt or your pants, so that you always have an awareness of meditation. It's as literal as that.

From the paramita of meditation, an extraordinary intelligence begins to open up, known as *prajna* paramita. From the extraordinary intelligence of prajna, you develop an understanding of mindfulness and awareness, as well as an understanding of all five previous paramitas. Prajna is also like the horse that pulls the chariot, or the rest of the paramitas. Prajna knows where to go and how to go. Therefore, prajna is a very important part of bodhisattva discipline: everything begins to spark. It has also been said in the texts that all rivers go to the south and that all rivers flow into the ocean. That ocean is prajna.

Prajna is the wakefulness that occurs to everybody at the moment of panic. At the moment of panic, at the moment of pleasure, at the moment of doubt, at the moment of comprehension, there is a gap—and before you realize what it is, prajna happens. It is like coughing or sneezing: while you are coughing or sneezing, your mind stops, and then you resume your previous situation all over again. So there is a gap, and then, “Gesundheit!”

The paramitas of generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and prajna are the natural habitual patterns of a bodhisattva's work. But there needs to be a total involvement in the bodhisattva path, so that your approach does not become purely charitable work inspired by an emotional surrendering to the world. You are not just trying to do a good job or trying to perform a good deed every minute. Bodhisattva activity is not quite the same as that of the Red Cross or UNICEF. The bodhisattva's work is much more organic and somewhat less organized. The organization is within the bodhisattvas themselves, rather than being based on any external setup or projects, such as collecting a penny a minute. You are not looking for any reward, not looking for achievement, and not looking for any personal complement to your own existence. Your approach is based on something other than that.

People who work in the Red Cross are serious and dedicated to their global vision of charity, or aid to children, or other causes. But the bodhisattva's approach has to be much more deep-rooted than that. Such dedication can only come about when you have an understanding of yourself and your particular attitude and involvement in such an endeavor. Having taken the bodhisattva vow, your approach may at first be quite vague. You may think, “Now that I am on the way to becoming a bodhisattva and am a member of the family of Buddha, maybe I can do something great. But what can I do? How can I render my service?” That question might be the first impact on your mind, but initially it is not so important to know what you should be doing; it is more important to find out where you are and what kind of world you are in. The question is, what is your state of mind? Your state of mind is ordinarily a confused one. You do not know what to do, and you hope that you could do something. But the more you think that you have to do something to fulfill your bodhisattva activity, the more confused you feel.

When you first take the bodhisattva vow, you have some understanding of the nature of the commitment you have made, and you have some kind of faith in the transplanting of bodhichitta into your heart. But you

still need something beyond that—you need an understanding of egolessness. You need to understand that you can only be a bodhisattva if you give up the idea of attaining enlightenment for yourself. The ideal bodhisattva, or ideal student of the bodhisattva path, is the person who actually gives up the idea of personally attaining such a thing as enlightenment. Instead, you simply enjoy working with the paramitas, with the basic energy inspired by taking the vow.

From a Western viewpoint, that approach may seem to be very impractical. You might ask, “Why do I have to slave to death if I have no idea what I am going to get out of this?” You may be quite familiar with that approach. It is like parents telling their children, “You should get your life together. If you have greater responsibilities, you should get higher pay. At least you should have some security, a house, and a car. How much are they paying you?” That kind of approach comes from animal instinct, and that instinct continues, which seems to be a problem. Anything other than bodhisattva activity, in fact, could be regarded as animal instinct. Whether it is the highest culturally evolved society or a more simple society, it is basically the same. Whether your money is in the form of gold or paper, you think you should get your money’s worth. But the bodhisattva approach is not that you should get your money’s worth or that you should get your practice’s worth. That kind of business approach to practice or to the bodhisattva path does not work. In fact, the more you regard the whole thing as purely a business deal, the more you cut your own throat in a non-bodhisattva-like way.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SUBTLETIES OF PARAMITAS

The key point of the mahayana approach is the commitment to dedicate yourself to helping other sentient beings. Building yourself up or perpetuating your own existence is regarded as neurosis. Instead of building yourself up, you should continue with your pursuit of helping others. Instead of being selfish, you should empty yourself. The basic definition of ego is holding on to one’s existence—and paramita practices are techniques that allow you not to grasp onto or propagate the notion of me-ness, or “I am.” Experiencing egolessness is a process of letting go. But you do not regard the ego as an enemy or obstacle, you regard it as a brussels sprout that you cook and eat.

*Paramita* is a Sanskrit word that means “going beyond.” *Para* means the “other shore of the river,” *mita* means “arriving”; so *paramita* means “arriving at the other shore.” The Tibetan word for paramita is *pharöl tu chinpa*. *Pharöl* means “other shore,” *tu* is “to,” and *chinpa* means “arrived”; so *pharöl tu chinpa* means “arrived to the other shore.” It means crossing the turbulent river of mental gossip and continuous passion, aggression, and ignorance. As you go across that river, the captain of the boat is the spiritual friend. You go across with the captain, who has experience, and you get to the other shore by practicing the six paramitas, beginning with *dana* paramita, or generosity. Paramitas are based on not holding on to your personal territory. When you become a bodhisattva, you are going beyond habitual patterns altogether.

Although we have been discussing the six primary paramitas—generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and prajna, or knowledge—there are ten paramitas altogether, according to the Buddhist tradition.<sup>1</sup>

A natural sense of appreciation of things as they are without poverty mentality of any kind is referred to as *skillful means*, which is the seventh paramita. Having made that discovery, you wish to share your discovery with others. That is the eighth paramita, *aspiration*. Beyond that, you begin to experience *strength*, the ninth paramita. You are not subject to or enslaved by some other entity, but a natural quality of strength

takes place. Ordinarily, when you experience something special, it drains the energy out of you and diminishes your strength. But in this case, your strength is not based on struggle. Therefore, it becomes a natural food in itself.

The last paramita is *wisdom*. I would like to make quite clear that wisdom does not come from reading many books and or collecting a lot of material. Wisdom means that you have naturally settled into the situation. Wisdom is self-contained. Adding these four to the initial six paramitas makes ten paramitas altogether. On one hand, it might be hard to achieve all that or go that far step-by-step; but on the other hand, minute by minute, you can actually achieve the ten paramitas right away.

Sometimes it is said that there are thirty-six paramitas, which is a way of showing the subtleties of the development of the paramitas. For instance, with the paramita of generosity, you could have the generosity of discipline, the generosity of patience, the generosity of exertion, the generosity of meditation, and the generosity of prajna. Dividing each of the six paramitas into six different aspects in that way makes thirty-six paramitas altogether. Such hairsplitting is necessary and important—particularly if you are actually going to practice the paramitas, rather than theorize the whole thing, write your book, and take off on the next airplane to Mexico. If you are going to stick with the practice, it is important to realize the subtleties of the paramitas. You may think you are working purely on prajna paramita or on the paramita of meditation, but maybe at the same time you are still working on the basic generosity level. So understanding the subtleties of the paramitas is very important and necessary.

The idea of the paramitas is that they all should happen at once. But we cannot talk about them all at once; that would be impossible. So we have to speak about them one after another.

Some of the teachings are linear, and some are more environmental. But in either case, there is a process of growth. There is the way you eat your food as an infant, the way you eat your food as a teenager, the way you eat your food as an adult, the way you eat your food as a middle-aged person, the way you eat your food as a very old person, and the way you eat your food as a dead person. That is linear, and at the same time it is equally environmental. We cannot dissect the path by saying this belongs to that, and that belongs to this. But we can say that the development taking place in your own state of mind can be applied to a further evolution.

## THE DELIGHT AND WORKABILITY OF PARAMITA PRACTICE

Paramita practice transcends both the simple, ordinary pain of samsara, and the hinayana notion of peaceful attainment, or nirvana. The traditional phrase for this is: “Not wandering in samsara, not dwelling in nirvana.” It transcends both worldly views and shravaka and pratyekabuddha notions of virtue. Paramitas do not refer to ordinary ethics, such as the ethics of bank loans or the world of business, nor are we practicing the paramitas in order to achieve spiritual tranquillity or equilibrium. Not at all! Paramita practice is based on the realization that there is no individual here seeking individual little goals. There is no “you.” In fact, at this point, your existence and the existence of others are both questionable. The only thing guiding you on this particular journey is a sense of delightfulness, warmth, and sympathy. At the same time, there is also the realization that sentient beings do exist, and that they wander around in their own little world and suffer a lot—and you try to help them. The approach is not that you too are bogged down in the world of sentient beings and trying to struggle out. You are not a worm wandering around in a sewage system; you have greater vision than that.

Paramita practice is the essence of how to be a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is someone who is brave, and utterly and thoroughly involved in the discipline taught by the Buddha. Bodhisattvas are ideally soaked in the water of helping others in every way. However, paramita practice is not particularly a religious practice. It is different than the missionary approach of trying to convert people into your faith. It is more like teaching people how to be. Paramita practice is based on human decency, and how to be in the world and help others who are suffering.<sup>2</sup>

As you gallop along the mahayana highway, it is important to have a good understanding of paramita principles. Some Buddhist traditions say that only when you have already gained some spiritual attainment can you practice the paramitas or even take the bodhisattva vow. But according to my tradition, you do not have to attain a high state of realization in order to enter the mahayana. There is always a place for you: there is always a stirrup for you to put your foot into, and there is always an empty chair for you to jump into as you ride up the ski slope.

According to the practicing lineages of Kagyü and Nyingma, there is always a way for very ordinary and basic laypeople like ourselves to enter the path and experience the teachings. What has been described in the teachings can actually be achieved and worked with. There is always the great possibility that you could attain some level of realization. Your realization may be crude; nonetheless, it is workable. So although some traditions say that if you want to be a dharmic person, you have to become worthy first, we say that if you want to become a dharmic person, you are worthy of it in any case. That is the difference between the two approaches.

Some people might say, “If you can’t afford to buy underpants, why are you dressed up in a suit and tie?” But somehow or other, we have managed to have a suit and a tie as well as decent underpants. That is how we do it. Otherwise, there would be no way to begin. If we said that you had to be a millionaire in order to become a king, this would make it impossible for you. Instead, we say that you simply begin as a king—and in the process, you could also become a millionaire. The point is that you don’t abuse your opportunity, but you use it. Whether we are talking about the hinayana, the mahayana, or the vajrayana, you should realize that we are always talking in terms of something that is reachable.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARAMITA PRACTICE

Paramita practice has four characteristics. The first characteristic is that paramita practice overcomes neurotic hang-ups and defilements.

The second characteristic is that paramita practice develops an understanding of threefold purity. You understand the relationship of actor, action, and object. You realize the relationship of you as the doer, your act as the doing, and the object of the action as the other. The emptiness of those three principles has to be very clear: there is no “you,” there is no action to perform, and there is no “other,” or object. There is no “you” because you are dependent on yourself, which in turn is dependent on the other, which is purely the working of conceptual mind. There is no “other,” because “other” would be your projection; therefore, no other actually exists. There is no “activity” to relate you with the other, because if everything is open and free from conception, there is no activity taking place. No conceptual world of “you,” “other,” and “activity” actually exists. So bodhisattva activity is free from all debts.

The third characteristic of paramita practice is that your actions are completed. You understand that the paramita practices are necessary not simply as reference points or feedback, but are needed in order to fulfill actions very precisely.

The fourth characteristic of paramita practice is that your actions have benefited others. Through your actions, you have created a proper relationship with others.

## INTENTIONAL ACTION IN PARAMITA PRACTICE

In paramita practice, the notion of trying is a problem; it's like trying to climb up the Empire State Building from the outside. But with paramita practice, you don't actually try; you just do it. There will be obstacles and problems, but you keep doing it. You do it on the spot. Then there are more obstacles, and you do it again. So you keep on doing it, rather than trying to do it, and at some point it becomes real. When you look back on your past and see how much you have been doing it, you realize that you have done it. Then you keep on doing it, until doing it becomes more real than trying to do it. You have a realistic attitude to the whole practice rather than a dreamy attitude. You are not just listening to a tale.

You should practice the paramitas in spite of your subconscious gossip, such as thoughts about what you are supposed to be doing or feeling, as opposed to what you really are doing or feeling. Such activity is important, because it stops the nidana flow. Your intention is secondary. When you have actually done something, you may feel that your intention was dubious, but your intention has followed your action. When you realize what you have done, you may wonder whether you can undo it. But you cannot undo the past, and since you have done it already, you resign yourself. As you go on in that way, the whole thing becomes genuine.

You have to teach your mind. In order to do so, sometimes action is best, because when you are performing an action, your mind follows. At other times, you have a good intention, and your body follows. At the mahayana level, those two approaches are complementary, but when you get to the vajrayana level, action is always the first breakthrough. Action means that you just do it. As an example, many people have difficulty saying "Yes." If you have that difficulty, you could practice saying "Yes." When you say "Yes" verbally, your mind says, "I said it halfway, but I didn't really mean it." You keep a little corner. But the more you say "Yes," the more you mean it. That is the whole idea behind reciting aloud. For example, when you take the bodhisattva vow, you say that you aspire to become a bodhisattva even though you don't really mean it all the way. Having said it, you have to think about it. You follow the words with your mind, and you actually begin to get it.

Sometimes a physical message is the most direct. It is the best way to deal with a situation like sitting practice. You sit, although you don't really want to sit; you just assume the posture of the Buddha and do it. Then your mind begins to curve toward it and actually do it. It is that way all along, in all three yantras. The first way to bend your mind is to work with what is there.

1. The ten paramitas are: (1) generosity, (2) discipline, (3) patience, (4) exertion, (5) meditation, (6) prajna, (7) skillful means, (8) aspiration, (9) power, and (10) wisdom. In Tibetan they are: (1) dana, (2) tsültrim, (3) söpa, (4) tsöndrü, (5) samten, (6) prajna, (7) thap, (8) mönlam, (9) bala, and (10) yeshe.

2. One way to learn more about paramita practice is by looking at the many ways in which a person's actions fail to reflect these transcendent virtues. For a listing of contradictions to paramita practice, see appendix 5, "Forty-Six Ways in Which a Bodhisattva Fails."