

The Six Perfections

The Six Perfections are generosity, morality, patience, joyful effort or enthusiastic perseverance, concentration or single-pointedness of mind, and wisdom. Buddha taught them in this order, with the easier practices leading on to the harder. Also the previous practice helps form the basis for the next one. For example, it is hard to practice morality if we are attached to our possessions, and the best antidote to attachment is generosity.

“The path to enlightenment is twofold: wisdom and skillful means. The practice of the first four perfections is the practice of skillful means. The last two perfections reveal the practice of wisdom.”

BUDDHA

Below

We give from our hearts to others through our actions, when there is pure motivation in us to be generous.



GENEROSITY

Traditionally there are three kinds of generosity: giving material help to those who lack material necessities, giving protection to those in fear, and giving pure, sincere Dharma teachings to those who request them.

Giving material help includes giving to charity, beggars, friends in need, and to famine or disaster victims. Some of these people or organizations are easier to give to than others. We may feel like helping a friend and giving to a particular charity only but if we really think about it, all needy people require assistance, whether we like them or believe in their cause or not. This doesn't mean we should give away all our possessions to everyone who needs them! However, thinking about those who lack the things we have with kindness rather than scorn or blame helps develop generosity. Then we can give skillfully any material assistance we are able to offer. As Geshe Wangchen says: "... giving any helpful advice in a sincere way is also the practice of generosity."

Pure Motivation

This leads to our motivation for giving. If we practice generosity to make ourselves look good, this is not pure giving. Or if we throw a few coins at a beggar with disgust in our eyes, this is also not pure giving. We must give from our hearts as well as our pockets for the act of giving to be complete.

We can also be mindful of what we give. Gifts of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, though they may give some temporary relief, might in the long run be injurious. Similarly, killing one animal to feed another, like giving a live fish to a seagull, is also inappropriate. Considering what we give is as important as how we give it.

There are many opportunities to give protection to those in fear in our modern world. It is unfortunately quite common for people to be robbed or attacked, and doing what we can to help these individuals is real generosity. Similarly, there are charities to help torture victims, street children, and maltreated animals. Supporting organizations like these helps provide much relief.

We might think giving Dharma teachings is well beyond our capability, particularly if we have only recently encountered Buddhism. In some ways this is correct, but the essence of what Buddha taught is simple kindness and compassion toward others, and – if we are asked to say something – we can all mention these qualities. The Dalai Lama has often been heard to say, "My religion is kindness."

MORALITY

Practicing morality is mindfully refraining from any negative actions. Traditionally these are classified as the Ten Nonvirtues. There are four nonvirtues of speech: telling lies, slandering others, gossiping, and using harsh words and swearing. There are three nonvirtues of body: killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; and three of mind: craving and attachment, wishing to harm others, and holding wrong views.

By sincerely trying to avoid negative behavior, our mind becomes calm and clear, so we feel happy. We have all experienced how angry and troubled we feel if we have harmed someone, even if we feel justified, or satisfied and happy when we have actually helped someone, even in a small way.

Morality includes cultivating good qualities too, not just avoiding negative behavior. So we try to develop love, kindness, and compassion for others, as well as not harming them. This is quite easy to do for our friends and family but if we think about how everybody wants to be happy and avoid suffering equally, then we can try to expand our goodwill toward all beings.

Buddha taught that morality is the foundation of a single-pointed mind. We can see this from the literal translation of *shila* – morality – which means cool and peaceful. When our mind is free from negative emotions it becomes tranquil and focused, and then positive mind states, such as love and compassion, arise naturally.

Cultivating Morality

However, practicing morality is not always easy! So we can try to engender morality in our meditation sessions. Many meditations are designed to help us in this way. But we must also try to practice morality in everyday life too, otherwise it remains theoretical.

It is important to remember Buddha's middle way. We have probably all met people who – despite their best intentions – seem overly pious and rigid. So we must be careful not to reduce morality to a set of inflexible rules regardless of circumstances.

It is somewhat unlikely that we can practice pure morality in all things at the beginning of our practice. So we keep a perspective on morality by understanding that some actions have more serious consequences than others. However, it is important not to repress our negative emotions. If we feel angry toward someone we can refrain from expressing it to the person, instead finding a sympathetic friend and telling him or her about it. This will allow us to exorcise the negative feelings in a nonharmful way.

PATIENCE

Practicing patience gives us great inner strength and courage to face difficult situations. It helps us discover the real cause of problems and not to simply react by blaming temporary circumstances. If we are patient, we are less likely to get upset quickly when things don't go our way and less likely to act badly toward others.

Traditionally patience is classified into three types: the patience of forgiveness, the patience of accepting suffering, and the patience of being able to behave virtuously.

The nature of our world is inherently unsatisfactory, so troublesome situations will definitely arise. So, when someone gets angry with us, or abuses us, we also naturally tend to be angry and abusive toward the person. This merely aggravates the situation. If we practice patience instead of mindlessly reacting, we realize the person is suffering and out of control. However, we do not have to behave in the same way. If we stay calm, eventually the person's anger will lessen and the situation can be resolved calmly.

Accepting Suffering

The patience of accepting suffering is of great use in our lives, because suffering will inevitably arise due to the unsatisfactory nature of our existence. Normally when we suffer and face problems and difficulties we think of them as really bad. If we accept the situation with patience and remind ourselves that even this too will pass, then we lessen the experience of suffering.

The Japanese poet Issa accepted the presence of fleas and lice as part of his daily life. But he transformed his irritation through cultivating patience to the point where he treated them as friends. In this Haiku poem he is talking to the fleas that lived on his body as he prepared to go on a trip:

*Now you fleas!
You shall see Matsushima –
Off we go!*

Patience can help us transform how we think about our problems. If we regard them as teachers, providing us with the opportunity to learn, we are less distressed when they arise. We cannot prevent problems – this is the nature of life – but transforming how we think about them helps us deal with them more successfully.

JOYFUL EFFORT

Following the Buddha's path is rewarding but not always easy, and changing our old habitual patterns and learning new ways of being is an ongoing process. There is little point in giving up when the going gets tough, as these are moments of greatest opportunity. So this is where joyful effort, or enthusiastic perseverance, comes in.

Joyful effort incorporates our attitude toward our spiritual practice. If our attitude is only to follow a set of rules rigidly and blindly, then we are probably quite miserable! If, however, we remind ourselves thoroughly of the great benefit to ourselves and others from practicing what Buddha taught, this helps us cultivate joyful effort. Then we approach the Buddhist path with great joy at having found such a wonderful way of life.

Joyful effort includes great determination to keep practicing, even when we are depressed or facing problems. It encourages us to keep trying and helps us maintain our resolve when we feel weak. Joyful effort is also the best antidote to laziness, not just when we are meditating, but in all activities of our daily life.

Three Aspects of Joyful Effort

Traditionally, joyful effort has three aspects. The first is understanding the great value in practicing a spiritual path and developing confidence that we can do it. If we come to Buddhism feeling helpless and inadequate, then our attitude is too passive. We think that meditation and Buddhist practice will take care of us, that we don't have to do anything other than sit on a meditation cushion. So we develop joyful effort by reminding ourselves often of the great virtues of Dharma practice. This gives us the strength to follow Buddha's way.

The second aspect is maintaining joyful effort despite all the setbacks we encounter. Buddhist practice is a continual process, not something we do once a day or a few times a week. So we must have great determination not to give up. We can resolve not to lose strength and maintain joyful effort by meditating on the many benefits of Dharma practice.

We develop and maintain our Dharma practice, but we still need some extra impetus. This is the third aspect of joyful effort, the encouragement to follow our practice through. In practical terms this means not giving up watching our breath after five minutes and staying patient in the traffic jam until it clears. We can remind ourselves of our innate buddhanature that will one day shine through all our delusions.

CONCENTRATION OR SINGLE-POINTED MIND

The last two perfections come under wisdom, because without concentration we cannot penetrate deeply into an object of meditation and thereby realize its true nature. Without developing single-pointedness of mind, our meditation will not realize its full potential. This is based on developing virtuous qualities of mind and eliminating deluded states of mind. We should first practice mindfulness meditation, which is explained with instructions in the next chapter. This calms the mind and improves our concentration. When our mind is calm, we can focus our attention on an object. Once we are able to analyze the nature of the object, we can realize the truth of how it actually exists. We can meditate on a physical object such as a statue of Buddha, or a nonphysical object such as the luminosity of our own mind. The latter refers to the mind freed from thoughts, emotions, and ego preoccupations. When we begin, our mind will frequently wander away from the object, and we need to keep bringing our attention back. We can practice mindfulness of breathing until the mind calms down. The other main distraction is dullness, when the mind becomes tired and sleepy. We can lift the mind by reflecting on the excellent qualities of Buddha.

Three Stages of Single-Pointed Mind

Buddha explained how to develop a single-pointed mind in three stages. The first, the six prerequisites, are the base upon which we develop single-pointed mind. These are: living in a safe, quiet environment conducive to meditation and close to our spiritual guide; controlling desire by meditating on impermanence and the unsatisfactory nature of our lives; being contented with our lives, not craving what we don't have; renouncing meaningless activities; maintaining morality; and avoiding discursive thought, when our mind drifts aimlessly. The second stage is the actual practice of single-pointed mind which has three points: meditating in the correct posture, described in the next chapter; using an object of meditation to develop concentration, which can be a physical object or a subject we contemplate mentally; and developing concentration by avoiding wandering thoughts from an overstimulated mind and mental dullness from a sleepy or tired mind. The result of practicing single-pointed mind is the third stage and has two major benefits. These are alertness and suppleness of mind and pacification of mental obstacles, which leads to stability and clarity of mind.

WISDOM

In these famous words from the Heart Sutra, Buddha teaches the essence of the perfection of wisdom; form and emptiness are not essentially different. At first glance this might seem contradictory and difficult to understand. What does it actually mean?

We experience forms or objects as solid entities. We have read that emptiness means they exist in dependence on their constituent parts, causes, and conditions.

But emptiness is also empty; it cannot exist by itself and is dependent on causes and conditions, too – such as someone realizing its true nature. There is no solid ground to stand upon. Yet it is our tendency to try to hold on to things as solid entities, solid beliefs. There are simply objects and our perception of these forms, which differ subtly from person to person. It is not a question of my perception being better than yours, or yours being right and mine wrong. They both exist differently simply because each of us is unique; no two people have had exactly the same experiences and reactions to them. And this is where the problems of our world begin and end. If we do not take our own perception of reality too seriously and allow other people to have theirs, then there are fewer rigid viewpoints and fewer arguments.

The Hardest to Realize

This is the last of the Six Perfections, and the hardest to realize. Without generosity, morality, joyful effort, patience, and single-pointed mind, we are unable to practice the perfection of wisdom fully. However, wisdom must also inform the other five perfections. Otherwise self-identity arises, for example, with an act of generosity – “I am being generous,” which only leads to the accumulation of merit.

When wisdom informs an act of generosity there is no sense of “I” giving; the act is a spontaneous gesture arising from compassion. When we give – or practice morality, and so on – in this way, such acts lead us toward enlightenment. And this is why we are practicing Buddhism, to be free of the sufferings of cyclic existence.

Traditionally, the simile used to illustrate this point likens this twofold approach to the two wings of a bird. Thus we practice the first five perfections – albeit at the beginning with self-identity – in order to develop wisdom, and we also practice wisdom in order to let go of self-identity with our actions. This is the uniting of method, or skillful means, with wisdom, and when these two things work together in harmony we can fly toward enlightenment.