

Selections from: **A Treatise on the Paramis** by Acariya Dhammapala  
Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Adapted by Gil Fronsdal

We now undertake a detailed explanation of the paramis for clansmen following the suttas who are zealously engaged in the practice of the vehicle to great enlightenment (*mahabodhiyana*). ... The condition for the paramis is, firstly, the great aspiration ... which occurs thus: "Crossed I would cross [others], freed I would free [others], tamed I would tame [others], calmed I would calm [others], comforted I would comfort [others], attained to Nibbana I would lead [others] to Nibbana, purified I would purify [others], enlightened I would enlighten [others]. The characteristic of the aspiration is rightly resolving to attain supreme enlightenment. The function of the aspiration is to desire, "Oh, may I awaken to supreme perfect enlightenment, and bring well-being and happiness to all beings!". ... Its proximate cause is great compassion.

Like aspiration, great compassion (*mahaakarunaa*) and skillful means (*upayakosalla*) are also conditions for the paramis. Therein, "skillful means" is the wisdom which transforms giving (and the other nine virtues) into requisites of enlightenment. Through their great compassion and skillful means, the Great Ones devote themselves to working uninterruptedly for the welfare of others without any concern for their own happiness and without any fear of the extremely difficult course of conduct that great bodhisattvas must follow. And their nature is such that they are able to promote the welfare and happiness of beings even on occasions when they are merely seen, heard of, or recollected, (since even the sight, report, or thought of them) inspires confidence. Through his or her wisdom the bodhisattva perfects the character of a Buddha, through compassion the ability to perform the work of a Buddha. Through wisdom the bodhisattva brings him or herself across (the stream of becoming), through compassion he or she leads others across. Through wisdom the bodhisattva understands the suffering of others, through compassion he or she strives to alleviate their suffering. Through wisdom he or she becomes disenchanted with suffering, through compassion he or she accepts suffering. Through wisdom he or she aspires for nibbana, through compassion he or she remains in the round of existence. Through compassion he she enters samsara, through wisdom he or she does not delight in it. Through wisdom he or she destroys all attachments, but because his or his wisdom is accompanied by compassion the bodhisattva never desists from activity that benefits others. Through compassion the bodhisattava shakes with sympathy for all, but because compassion is accompanied by wisdom his or her mind is unattached. Through wisdom he is free from "I-making" and "mine-making," through compassion he is free from lethargy and depression.

So too, through wisdom and compassion respectively, the bodhisattva becomes his or her own protector and the protector of others, a sage and a hero, one who does not torment him or herself and one who does not torment others, one who promotes his or her own welfare and the welfare of others, fearless and a giver of fearlessness, dominated by consideration for the Dhamma and by consideration for the world, grateful for favors done and forward in doing favors for others, devoid of delusion and devoid of craving, accomplished in knowledge and accomplished in conduct, possessed of the powers and possessed of the grounds of self-confidence. Thus wisdom and compassion, as the means for attaining each of the specific fruits of the paramitaas, is the condition for the paramis. And the same pair is a condition for the resolution as well.

### **What are the paramis?**

The Paramis are the noble qualities such as giving, etc, accompanied by compassion and skilful means and untainted by craving, conceit and views.

**Generosity:** *Giving* is stated at the beginning: (a) because it is common to all beings, since even ordinary people practice giving; (b) because it is the least fruitful; and (c) because it is the easiest to practice.

Giving has the characteristic of relinquishing; its function is to dispel greed for things that can be given away; its manifestation is non-attachment, or the achievement of prosperity and a favorable state of

existence. Further, when a suppliant asks for something, a bodhisattava should reflect: “He or she is my intimate friend, for he or she divulges his own secret to me. He is my teacher, for he or she teaches me: ‘When you go you have to abandon all. Going to the world beyond, you cannot take your own possessions!’

**Virtue:** *Virtue* is stated immediately after giving: (a) because virtue purifies both the donor and the recipient; (b) to show that, while giving benefits others, virtue prevents the affliction of others; (c) in order to state a factor of abstinence immediately after a factor of positive activity; and (d) in order to show the cause for the achievement of a favorable state of future existence right after the cause for the achievement of wealth.

Virtue has the characteristic of composing; co-ordinating, and establishing are also mentioned as its characteristics. Its function is to dispel moral depravity, or its function is blameless conduct; its manifestation is moral purity....

The perfection of virtue (*sila*) should be thought about as follows: Even the waters of the Ganges cannot wash away the stain of hatred, yet the water of virtue is able to do so. Even yellow sandalwood cannot cool the fever of lust, yet virtue is able to remove it. Virtue is the unique adornment of good people, surpassing the adornments cherished by average folk, such as necklaces, diadems, and earrings.

Virtue should be reflected upon as the basis for rapture and joy; as granting immunity from fear of self-reproach, the reproach of others, punishment, and an evil rebirth; as praised by the wise, as the root-cause for freedom from remorse; as the basis for security.

Virtue surpasses material wealth because thieves cannot confiscate it. Because it enables one to achieve supreme sovereignty over one’s own mind, virtue surpasses the sovereignty of warriors, kings and priests.

Virtue surpasses the achievement of beauty for it makes one beautiful even to one’s enemies. It cannot be vanquished by the adversities of aging and sickness. Since it is the foundation for states of happiness, virtue surpasses such dwellings as palaces and mansions. In accomplishing the difficult task of self-protection, virtue is superior to troops of elephants, horses, chariots, and infantry, as well as such devices as mantras, spells, and blessings, for it depends on oneself, not on others.

Thus esteeming virtue as the foundation of all achievements – as the soil for the origination of all the Buddha-qualities, the beginning, footing, head, and chief of all the qualities issuing in Buddhahood – one should guard diligently and thoroughly perfect virtue as a hen guards its eggs.

**Renunciation:** *Renunciation* is mentioned immediately after virtue: (a) because renunciation perfects the achievement of virtue; (b) in order to list good conduct of mind immediately after good conduct of body and speech; (c) because meditation (*jhaana*) succeeds easily for one who has purified his virtue; (d) in order to show that the purification of one's end (*aasaya*) through the abandoning of the offensive mental defilements follows the purification of one's means (*payoga*) by the abandoning of offensive actions; and (e) to state the abandoning of mental obsessions immediately after the abandoning of bodily and verbal transgression

The *perfection of renunciation* is the wholesome act of consciousness which occurs renouncing sensual craving and becoming, preceded by the perception of their unsatisfactoriness and accompanied by compassion and skillful means. The bodhisattva should practice the perfection of renunciation by first recognizing the unsatisfactoriness in sensual craving. ...

Having recognized the unsatisfactoriness in sense pleasures in accordance with this method, he should then, by the reverse method, contemplate the benefits in renunciation, with a mind slanting, sloping, and inclining toward the happiness of renunciation, solitude, and peace.

**Wisdom** is mentioned immediately after renunciation: (a) because renunciation is perfected and purified by wisdom; (b) to show that there is no wisdom in the absence of meditation (*jhaana*), since concentration is

the proximate cause of wisdom and wisdom the manifestation of concentration; (c) in order to list the causal basis for equanimity immediately after the causal basis for serenity; and (d) to show that skillful means in working for the welfare of others springs from meditation directed to their welfare. ...

Wisdom has the characteristic of penetrating the real specific nature (of phenomena), or the characteristic of sure penetration, like the penetration of an arrow shot by a skilful archer; its function is to illuminate the objective field, like a lamp. Its manifestation is non-confusion, like a guide in a forest. Concentration, or the Four Noble Truths is its proximate cause. ...

Wisdom is the chief cause for the practice of the other perfections. Without wisdom, giving and so forth do not become purified and cannot perform their functions. Without wisdom there is no achievement of vision, and without the achievement of vision there can be no accomplishment of virtue. One lacking in virtue and vision cannot achieve concentration, and without concentration one cannot even secure one's own welfare, much less the lofty goal of providing for the welfare of others.

Great compassion and skilful means (directed toward liberation) are conditions for the perfections. Skilful means is the wisdom which transforms giving (and the other nine perfections) into requisites for awakening. Through wisdom a bodhisattva brings him or herself across (the stream of suffering), through compassion he or she leads others across. Through wisdom one understands the suffering of others, through compassion one strives to alleviate their suffering. Through wisdom one destroys all attachments, but because of compassion, one never desists from activity that benefits others. Through wisdom one is free from "I-making" and "mine-making," through compassion one is free from lethargy and depression. Through wisdom and compassion one becomes one's own protector and the protector of others.

Wisdom is the opposite of greed, hate and delusion is so far as greed, hate and delusion create blindness, while knowledge restores sight.

**Energy:** The Perfection of Energy is stated immediately after the Perfection of Wisdom: a) because the function of wisdom is perfected by the arousing of energy; b) to show the auspicious work the bodhisattva undertakes for the welfare of beings after having reached [the wisdom attainment of] the patience acceptance of their emptiness; c) to state the causal bases for exertion right after the basis of equanimity; and d) to state the arousing of energy right after the activity of wise consideration.

**Patience** is mentioned immediately after energy: (a) because patience is perfected by energy, as it is said: "The energetic man, by arousing his energy, overcomes the suffering imposed by beings and formations"; (b) because patience is an adornment of energy, as it is said: "The patience of the energetic person shines with splendor"; (c) in order to state the causal basis for serenity immediately after the basis for exertion, for restlessness due to excessive activity is abandoned through reflective acquiescence in the Dhamma; (d) in order to show the perseverance of the person of energy, since one who is patient and free from restlessness perseveres in his or her work; (e) in order to show the absence of craving for rewards in a bodhisattva diligently engaged in activity for the welfare of others, for there is no craving when he or she reflects on the Dhamma in accordance with actuality; and (f) to show that he or she is working to the utmost for their welfare.

Patience has the characteristic of acceptance; its function is to endure the desirable and undesirable; its manifestation is tolerance or non-opposition; seeing things as they really are is its proximate cause.

Patience is the unimpeded weapon of the good in the development of noble qualities, for it dispels, without residue, anger, the opposite of all such qualities. It is the adornment of those capable of vanquishing the foe; the strength of recluses and Brahmins; a stream of water extinguishing the fire of anger; a mantra for quelling the poisonous speech of evil people; the supreme source of constancy in those established in restraint. Patience is an ocean on account of its depth; a shore on account of bounding the great ocean of hatred.

Patience should be fortified by reflection: "All beings are like my own children; who becomes angry over the misdeeds of his or her own children?" Or, "I am wronged by others because of some residue of anger in myself; this residue I should remove." Or, "A wrong-doer is

a benefactor, for he or she is the basis for developing patience.” Or, “If there were no wrong-doers, how could I accomplish the perfection of patience?” “When there is patience, the mind becomes concentrated, free from external distraction. With the mind concentrated, all formations appear as impermanent, stressful, and not-self. In addition, Nirvana appears as unconditioned, deathless, peaceful, and sublime, The groundlessness of “I-making” and “mine-making” becomes evident to reflection thus: ‘Mere phenomena alone exist, devoid of self or of anything pertaining to a self; they arise and pass away in accordance to their conditions. They do not come from anywhere, they do not go anywhere, they are not established anywhere. There is no agency in anything whatsoever.’”

**Truth:** *Truthfulness* is stated immediately after patience: (a) because the determination to practice patience continues long through truthfulness; (b) having first mentioned the patient endurance of wrongs inflicted by others, to mention next fidelity to one's word to render them help; (c) in order to show that a bodhisattva who through patience does not vacillate in the face of abuse, through truthful speech does not relinquish (his antagonist); and (d) to show the truthfulness of the knowledge developed through reflective acquiescence in the emptiness of beings.

Truthfulness has the characteristic of non-deceptiveness. In speech; its function is to verify in accordance with fact; its manifestation is excellence.... Without truthfulness, virtue and the following perfections are impossible, and there can be no practice in accordance with one's compassionate vows. All evil states have in common the transgression of truth.... With truthfulness as a foundation one is able to purify and fulfill the requisites of enlightenment... All the perfections are grounded in truth, clarified by letting go, intensified by peace, and purified by wisdom.

**Determination** is stated immediately after truthfulness; (a) because truthfulness is perfected by determination, since abstinence (from falsehood) becomes perfect in one whose determination is unshakeable; (b) having first shown non-deception in speech, to show next unshakeable commitment to one's word, for a bodhisattva devoted to truth proceeds to fulfill his vows of giving, etc., without wavering; and (c) to show, right after the veracity of knowledge, the complete accumulation of the requisites of enlightenment (*bodhisambhara*); for one who knows things as they really are determines upon the requisites of enlightenment and brings them to completion by refusing to vacillate in the face of their opposites. ...

The fulfillment of the perfection is dependent on utmost dedication (*adhikara*) and strong desire (*chandata*). ..

Determination has the characteristic of being resolved on the requisites of Awakening (e.g. the perfections); its function is to overcome their opposites; its manifestation is being unshakeable in that task.... Without firmly, vigorously, and persistently undertaking the perfections and maintaining an unshakeable resolve when encountering their opposites, the perfections as requisites of Awakening do not arise. ...

Whoever has an aspiration for full Awakening should, for the sake of fulfilling the perfections, always be devoted to what is proper and intent on service. He or she should be zealous in providing for the welfare of beings, and from time to time, day by day, should reflect, “Have I accumulated merit and knowledge today? What have I done for the welfare of others?”...

The primary condition of the perfections is great aspiration expressed as “Having crossed over I will cross [others] over; being free I will free others, tamed I will tame others, calmed will calm others, comforted I will comfort others, having attained nirvana I will lead others to, nirvana, purified I will purify others, awakened I will awaken.”

**Loving-kindness:** The perfection of loving-kindness is the wish to provide for the welfare and happiness of the world, accompanied by compassion and skilful means; literally it means benevolence....

Loving-kindness is mentioned immediately after the perfection of resolve a) because loving-kindness perfects the determination to undertake activity for the welfare of others; b) in order to list the work of actually providing for the welfare of others right after stating the determination to do so, for “one determined upon the requisites of enlightenment abides in loving-kindness”; and c) because the undertaking (of the activity for the welfare of others) proceeds imperturbably only when resolve is unshakeable. ...

The noble qualities of loving-kindness should be reflected upon as follows:

*“One resolved only upon his or her own welfare cannot achieve success in this world or a happy rebirth in the life to come – there must be some concern for the welfare of others; how then can someone wishing to establish all beings in the attainment of Nirvana succeed without loving-kindness? And if you wish to ultimately lead all beings to the supramundane achievement of Nirvana, you should begin by wishing for their mundane success here and now.”*

And:

*“I cannot provide for the welfare and happiness of others merely by wishing for it. Let me put forth effort to accomplish it.”*

And:

*“Now I support them by promoting their welfare and happiness; afterwards they will be my requisites of Awakening. Since they are the cause for the manifestation and perfecting of all the Buddha-qualities, these beings are for me a supreme field of merit, the incomparable basis for planting wholesome roots, the ultimate object of reverence.”*

**Equanimity** is mentioned immediately after loving-kindness: (a) because equanimity purifies loving-kindness; (b) in order to show the non-reactivity one must maintain toward the wrongs inflicted by others when one is providing for their welfare; (c) having mentioned the development of loving-kindness, to state next the development of the quality which evolves from it; and (d) to show the bodhisattva's wonderful virtue of remaining impartial even toward those who wish him well.

The function of equanimity is to see things impartially; its manifestation is the subsiding of attraction and repulsion. Its proximate cause is reflection on the fact that beings inherit the results of their own karma. ... The perfection of equanimity should be considered thus: “When there is no equanimity, the offensive actions performed by beings cause oscillation in the mind. And when the mind oscillates, it is impossible to practice the requisites of awakening.” And: “Even though mind has been softened with the moisture of loving kindness, without equanimity one cannot purify the requisites of enlightenment and cannot dedicate one's requisites of merit along with the results to furthering the welfare of beings.” ...

Without equanimity the bodhisattva cannot offer up something without making false discriminations over gifts and recipients. Without equanimity one cannot purify one's virtue without thinking about the obstacles to one's life and one's vital needs. Equanimity perfects the power of renunciation, for by its means one overcomes discontent and delight. ... When energy is aroused to excess because it has not been examined with equanimity, it cannot perform its proper function of endeavoring. .. And because one is unconcerned over the wrongs done by others, one perfects the abiding in loving kindness. ...

Equanimity is accompanied by compassion and compassion by equanimity. (Someone may ask:) “How can the bodhisattvas, the great compassionate ones, look upon living beings with equanimity? Some teachers say: “Sometimes they show equanimity towards living beings when it is necessary to do so.” But others say: “They do not show equanimity towards living beings (as such), but toward the offensive actions performed by beings.”