

October 17, 2009
Dharma talk: The Six Perfections

Jewel Ornament of Liberation by sGAM.PO.PA. (Died 1153 AD)
Translated and annotation by Herbert V. Guenther

(Herbert Guenther was a scholar in residence at a Center for Tibetan Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, where I was the cook for a year. We sometimes sat and ate a meal together when the Institute was quiet. I had no idea who he was and we had good conversation about mundane things. I bought the book he was working on after it was published. I never read it. But I found it in the footnotes of something I was reading a few weeks ago, and got excited. “I have that book” I exclaimed to myself. And now I have read it. Sometimes it just takes 35 years for seeds to germinate.)

Source is early Tibetan, when the Theravadan tradition was moving into Tibet.

(xxi) “Samsara and Nirvana are not entities, but interpretations of our experiences, and as such, both are Sunyata, which again is an operational term, not an ontological concept.”

Suffering and Enlightenment are not things or places or stages of development. They are Empty of any thing-ness.

These concepts are more verb-like than noun-like.

We are not doing this work to arrive somewhere else or be someone else.

(xiii) “...Buddhism is not escapism; it is the unending task of making life livable.”

How do we make life livable?

Of course, we have a list!

The six perfections:

(xiv) “The interrelation between attitude and acts needs constant attention. Here the six ‘perfections’ strengthen attitude which, in turn, make the ‘perfections’ more and more perfect. Five of them, Liberality, Ethics and Manners, Patience, Strenuousness, and Meditative Concentration, are overshadowed by and lead up to the sixth perfection: Discriminating Awareness born from Wisdom.”

Right now these may seem like just too many words. What I would like to do in this brief talk is to help turn these words into functional, useful tools for your own investigation. You are welcome to listen to what I am saying, or simply listen to the sound of my voice.

(xv) [this is] Buddhism as a living experience and as a human task.

This is useless talk unless it becomes applied.

(15) Our discontent becomes our motive to do this work. Our haughtiness, our specialness, our disparaging nature can turn into compassion and understanding for ourselves and all beings.

The first perfection is Liberality, or Generosity.

(152) “He who has never given a gift remains without wealth.”

(153) “A gift really belong to us and has intrinsic value (just because it has been given), while something left in the house does not [belong to us] and has no intrinsic worth.” That which is in the house has to be guarded and is a cause of anxiety. Things given away show the way to enlightenment, while those left in the house lead to damnation. [The gift] turns into inexhaustible wealth while the other is soon exhausted.

Generosity expands the heart and engenders trust. Hoarding and grasping reinforce fear.

The second is the perfection is Ethics and Manners.

With the cultivation of ethics and manners we take fewer hostages by our behavior and certainly have less clean up to do.

(164) “Quickly one attains absorption undisturbed by conflicting emotions; this is the benefit of ethics and manners.”

The third perfection is Patience.

We need to learn to master the reflexive impulses of anger and impatience, or the mind will never settle, and we will continue to cause disturbance. This does not mean we should be at the mercy of harmful people, but we also don't want to be at the mercy of our own rage and impatience, and come to know only all the harm that we cause. Patience must be cultivated.

(176) “Understand harmful persons as benefactors.
Enlightenment is not realized without the perfection of patience,
which can not be developed without a harmful person.

(176) “Since he is a companion in my striving for enlightenment
I must delight in my enemy.
Because I have got one
The fruit of patience
Should first be bestowed on him.
Thus he is the cause for patience.”

The fourth perfection is Strenuousness.

This is about the necessary effort we must make to do this work.

We are promised:

(182) Enlightenment is easy for the hardworking
Striving for the good and the wholesome.”

Effort needs to be wisely applied.

With the fifth perfection, we finally get to the sitting practice. It is the **Perfection of Meditative Concentration**.

From moment to moment there is attentiveness. We are not lost. We are cultivating equanimity and steadfastness.

(187) “He who does not practice meditation, though he be liberal and possess all other qualities, falls into the power of restlessness and his mind is wounded by the fangs of conflicting emotions.”

(196) With meditative concentration the mind does not swerve between the opposites, relaxes, enters its own sphere and does not look for solution elsewhere. It is without arrogance and emotional evaluation. It is without conflicts due to dogmatism and worldliness. There is fusion of mind with mind in the absorption of concentration.

(197) “Tranquility is the essence of meditative concentration, while insight is essential to discriminating awareness arising from wisdom.”

So here we have the sixth perfection: Discriminating Awareness Arising from Wisdom.

Wisdom knows all to be transient—all life, all objects, all sensations, all moods, all emotions. Discriminating awareness knows this, and does not develop a fixed sense relationship to any phenomena.

Discriminating awareness must be paired with compassion.

(203) Since discriminating awareness without compassion and compassion without discriminating awareness have been termed 'bondage,' they must never be parted from each other.

Discriminating awareness can not arise without compassion, and compassion by itself can not become liberated.

(203) "When we walk, our eyes and feet must co-operate if we are to reach the city of our choice. In the same way the eyes of discriminating awareness and the feet of [compassion] must work together.

Both arise from Wisdom.

Discriminating Awareness operates to reveal the emptiness of all fixed ideas and things. All substantiality breaks down.

With the development of Discriminating Awareness our relationship to time begins to change.

(207) "The past is like a rotten seed having no creative power; and the future is like a barren woman's son..."

Our relationship to the body changes as it breaks into component elements:

(207) "Our body is of the nature of the four elements. That which is solid in it is the element earth; that which is moist, water; that which is warm, fire; and breathing and movement are wind. There is no (anthropomorphic) self or mind in these four elements

(of the body) nor in the outer unorganized ones of earth, water, fire and wind.”

(208) “Mind defiled by traces and dispositions appears as an object.”

As the discursive, meaning-making, habitually reactive mind is quieted and as old habits drop away, and through the developing compassionate awareness, the mind as fixed object, as a fixed sense self, begins to drop away.

And here we need to get back to the operational terms of suffering and liberation, of Samsara and Nirvana. We need an operational understanding of Sunyata, of emptiness. We need to see the operation of the Discriminating Awareness as it functions, which neither clings nor pushes away, and nothing is a fixed object.

(210) Avoiding the extremes of existence and non-existence,
The wise man keeps in the middle course,
...devoid of substantiality and insubstantiality.

(211) Those who believe in existence are stupid like cattle,
But those who believe in non-existence are still more stupid.

Outer objects cannot be said to either exist or not,
Mind also can not be grasped in any way.
[There is the] rejection of all opinions...

(212) “Those who believe in Sunyata
Are said to be incurably ill.

How is this? In medical practice a disease is cured when both it and the medicine have been eliminated from the body, but if the medicine is not digested, the disease is not cured and death follows. It is the same with Sunyata, which should remove belief in existence. If you cling to Sunyata—misunderstanding it as a mere negative concept—you fall into evil ways.”

“Existence is the view of eternalism.
Non-existence that of nihilism.”

(213) “The wise man does not cling
To existence or non-existence.’

So this brings us back to the basics of practice.

(216) The preparatory phase is to bring the mind to rest.

“Just as an elephant becomes gentle again after his rut,
Mind rests in itself when its coming and going has stopped.
Having understood it thus, what else do I need?

(217) At time of practice nothing is to be practiced,
Conventionally it is said to be attentive practice.”

We practice being attentive, with compassion as we simply sit
here.

