

Notes and Quotes for March 12, 2023 Dharma Reflections:

What's On the Path?

Part Four: Introducing The Paramitas (Perfections)

The notion of waking up (deeply realizing the nature of Mind) *for the benefit of all beings* has taken root in us, and we have more or less turned in that direction intentionally, resolving to make it real, whatever that means, however long that might take. So where are we going? What qualities in our lives will we be cultivating, training in, and expressing as we develop? Even self-improvement courses and sales training seminars teach us to “visualize our goals” and to “fake it until you make it.” So let’s take a look ahead—the qualities of fully developed bodhisattvas are indeed appealing at a visceral level... the more we learn about what gets better as we head down the path, the more we’ll be motivated to continue.

“The Paramitas, or Perfections, evolved with the advent of Mahayana Buddhism some two thousand years ago. They were derived from the three-part teaching of Classical Buddhism: Shila, Samadhi, and Prajna—morality, absorption, and wisdom....

“The first four Paramitas relate to morality: Dana, giving; Shila, the moral code; Kshanti, forbearance; and Virya, vitality or zeal. The fifth Paramita is Dhyana, *zazen* (settled, focused meditation)—a term and practice closely related to Samadhi. The sixth is Prajna itself, or wisdom.

“Like other Buddhist teachings, the Paramitas unfolded with experimentation over time. After the first six were established in the first few centuries of the Mahayana, the decimal system of arithmetic was invented and many of the categories and formulas of Yoga and Buddhism were rounded off to ten. It seems possible that for this reason four more Paramitas were added to the original six: Upaya, compassionate means; Pranidhana, aspiration; Bala, spiritual strength; and Jnana, knowledge....

“We can be grateful for the inclusion of these additional Paramitas. No matter what the reason for their inclusion, they clarify our way of practice and deepen our understanding.

"The Paramitas are inspirations, not fixed rules. We honor them with our conduct, speech, and thought. Shantideva, the great seventh-century Buddhist teacher, cites with approval the wisdom of an early Mahayana sutra: 'The perfections of the Bodhisattva do not support me—it is I who support them.'

"Though the Buddha Shakyamuni was transmuted with Anuttara-Samyaksambodhi, pure and complete wisdom and compassion, he nonetheless continues to support the Paramitas. His work from the beginningless past through the endless future is to liberate himself and others. It is our work as well. Nobody, least of all the Buddha, can say, 'I have accomplished it.' Zazen itself is enlightenment—as Dogen Kigen Zenji never tired of saying. This means, in his words, that body and mind have dropped away and they continue to drop away endlessly. The self is forgotten and continues to be forgotten more and more completely through all time. Any residue of self-centered conduct, speech, or thought is wiped away. Any residue of that wiping away is then wiped away and so on endlessly—each day more liberated, each day more joyous. There are milestones on this path, as the Buddha found under the Bodhi tree, but they are no more than milestones and are not any kind of ultimate consummation. Perfection is a process."

- *The Practice of Perfection—The Paramitas from a Zen Buddhist Perspective*, Robert Aitken, Pantheon, 1994, pp. 1-2.

"Ten transcendent practices, or perfections, *paramitas* in Sanskrit, are fundamental to all bodhisattva function. Perfection in Buddhist teaching does not refer to being correct, or right as opposed to wrong; perfection is a matter of completion or wholeness. All bodhisattvas, at every stage, study the paramitas to develop their capacity to carry out these practices completely in all their activities. The word *paramita* also denotes crossing or carrying beings over to the other shore beyond the stream of suffering. This meaning emphasizes the import of these practices as vehicles for the liberation of all beings, the bodhisattva work....

"The first six perfections may be seen as developing bodhisattva qualities. The last four are beneficial practices of accomplished bodhisattvas returning to the world for the sake of saving others. But all these practices are as endless as the various beings and their situations, and all are inspirations, sources of encouragement for the practitioners, and for those around them.

"The ten practices are most illuminating when seen in interconnection; specific combinations of two or three of these practices clarify the essence of each. For example, generosity is informed by wisdom and skillful means, and the active practice of giving, in turn, helps develop wisdom and skillful means. Although all bodhisattvas have some relationship and engagement with all

of the paramitas, the archetypal characters of the major bodhisattva figures are revealed in part by which combination of these perfections they each particularly emphasize in their own practice.”

- *Faces of Compassion—Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression (An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism)*, Taigen Dan Leighton, Wisdom, 2012, pp. 63-64.

“The precepts to be observed by those who have taken the vow of bodhichitta in action comprise the six paramitas, or transcendent perfections. The first five—generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and concentration—are related to the sublime accumulation of merit, while the sixth paramita corresponds to the great accumulation of wisdom. Aside from these two accumulations of wisdom and method united, there is no other means of attaining Buddhahood. In addition to the usual six paramitas, a further four may be added. These are: (7) skillful means, which is the dedication of generosity and so forth to the great enlightenment of all beings (on account of which the merit generated becomes inexhaustible); (8) strength, which by overcoming all adverse conditions transforms merit into enlightenment; (9) aspiration, whereby the practitioner is always eager to engage in virtue and on account of which the qualities of generosity and the other paramitas will always arise in subsequent lives; and (10) primordial wisdom, wherewith all the paramitas are practiced, bringing others to spiritual maturity. These therefore are the ten transcendent perfections possessed by all true Bodhisattvas.”

- *Treasury of Precious Qualities (Book One: Sutra Teachings)*, Jigme Lingpa (Commentary by Longchen Yeshe Dorje, Kangyur Rinpoche), Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group (Revised Edition), 2010, p. 280.

“A monk once asked the ancient Chinese Zen master Yunmen, ‘What is the teaching of the whole lifetime of Buddha?’ Yunmen replied, ‘An appropriate response.’

“These words are simple, but it is often difficult moment by moment to realize an appropriate response to the complex and turbulent world in which we live. Fortunately, there are teachings and practices to show us the way in this great endeavor.... (T)he six heroic practices of bodhisattvas are the appropriate response of the buddhas.

“These practices invite us to enter the mind of buddha. They are based on the bodhisattva vow to become buddha in order to benefit and liberate all living beings.

“The six great paramita practices of bodhisattva heroes and heroines of enlightenment are called generosity, ethical discipline, patience, heroic effort, concentration, and wisdom. These practices are methods of training bodhisattvas to leap beyond duality, suffering, and delusion, while also leaping beyond enlightenment. These great, transcendent practices arise in communion with buddha. They are a path of training in being fully ourselves and allowing things to be fully themselves. From that fullness, an appropriate response comes forth. These teachings help us to understand the dynamism and vitality within the stillness and the silence of the buddhas....

“The word *paramita* literally means ‘going beyond.’ This going beyond can be taken in various ways. It may be understood as going beyond suffering. Another sense of it is that the paramitas go beyond themselves and beyond our ideas of what they are. Through them we transcend both the world and our ideas of practice.

“The paramitas invite us to train in innumerable ways in order to become thoroughly and completely ourselves. This may seem ironic because we usually think we are already ourselves when we begin this path of the heroic bodhisattvas. But we don’t understand what it means to be fully ourselves, and therefore, we do need training. When we are fully ourselves, we see that our lives are fragile and that we can be tender with our fragile lives. When we are tender, our lives do not become less fragile. Rather, through our deep acceptance that life is fragile, the door to an appropriate response opens. This is the door to the activity of wisdom.

“When we meet things in this way, we are able to respond to things as they are. We are generous with our lives. We are also careful, gentle, tender, mindful, patient, relaxed, open, and undistracted. Even in the beginning stages of spiritual practice, when we open to things as they appear to us, we are opening to myriad possibilities for a kind, skillful, and flexible response to emerge....

“When we first engage with these transcendent practices, we do so according to our idea of them. As we practice with them we discover that they are not only what we think they are. They are also beyond our thoughts and understanding. We begin by practicing with our *idea* of generosity, our *idea* of being ethical and patient, and our *idea* of diligent effort. By training this way, we come to the perfection of wisdom wherein we realize the actual practice of giving, which is free of our ideas about giving. The actual practice of moral discipline leaps beyond our ideas about morality and realizes the morality of the buddhas. And so on through each of the six paramitas.

“Bodhisattvas train in these six heroic practices in the conventional world in which we find ourselves. These great practices help us to be kind and compassionate within the limits of our understanding of the world as it appears to us. They help us to offer compassionate and kind action in the conventional world, and, at the same time, they train our minds so that we open to wisdom, which is the realization of the ultimate and inconceivable nature of reality. When these practices are perfected by wisdom leaping beyond, they free us from our limited understanding. They help us realize the place where we really are—the only place from which an appropriate response is fully realized.”

- *Entering the Mind of Buddha—Zen and the Six Heroic Practices of Bodhisattvas*, Reb Anderson, Shambhala, 2019, pp. 1-3.

Possible Discussion Points:

1. Aitken Roshi asserts in our first passage: “Nobody, least of all the Buddha, can say, ‘I have accomplished it.’” Why would the Buddha, the *most* accomplished being we know of in our world, be the *least* able to say, “I have it now”?
2. Taigen Dan Leighton points out, “the archetypal characters of the major bodhisattva figures are revealed in part by which combination of these perfections they each particularly emphasize in their own practice.” Without knowing a lot about most of the ten Paramitas in advance, which two or three most inspire you and set your heart racing?
3. On page 3 of this text, Jigme Lingpa likens the Paramitas to precepts. Elsewhere, Aitken states, “The Paramitas are inspirations, not fixed rules,” and Leighton asserts, “Perfection... does not refer to being correct, or right as opposed to wrong; perfection is a matter of completion or wholeness.” Can we think of the precepts in a similar fashion?
4. Most of our regrets would never have materialized had we always been able to generate what Master Yunmen called “an appropriate response.” Can you see the effect of your own spiritual practice informing your interactions with appropriateness?
5. Reb Anderson says, “These practices invite us to enter the mind of buddha.” How so?
6. Anderson also declares, “Through them we transcend both the world and our ideas of practice;” “we don’t understand what it means to be fully ourselves, and therefore, we do need training;” “As we practice with them we discover that they are not only what we think they are. They are also beyond our thoughts and understanding.” Comments?