

Karma Trinlay Rinpoche
Week 2, *Practices of a Bodhisattva: The Six Paramitas*
April 14, 2014
“Aspects of the Paramitas”

Welcome to the Tricycle online retreat on our second segment about the six *paramitas*. So, in the last segment we gave you a brief definition of each of the six paramitas. In this segment we will talk about the different aspects of each of the six paramitas.

So, as you remember, the six paramitas are benevolent generosity as the first one. And, traditionally, one speaks of three types of benevolent generosity. One is the generosity of material gift. That means giving to the poor or the ones who are in need, the things that they need; for example, food, clothing and helping in that way. It is the most common understanding of the word generosity. So, here—in a beneficial way, of course.

And then the second form of generosity is the generosity of protection, meaning here: when someone is in danger saving him from a danger, from difficulty; helping him out to be free of whatever his difficulty is. For example, if he is under the threat of some harm or some difficulty, be it natural or from other sentient beings, to help them. That is a form of generosity. It is giving him protection.

The third is a more important form and a more beneficial form of generosity, which is the generosity of instructions. Here, it is teaching. As they say, if you teach someone—if you give someone a meal, it will sustain him just for one afternoon; but if you teach someone a livelihood then he'll be able to sustain himself his whole life. So if you teach a person a livelihood, that is ethical, that does not harm other sentient beings, it is a greater gift you're giving him. And, of course, in that logic the greatest gift you can give him is teach him how to become awakened, teach him how to attain awakening. So that is the gift of the dharma, of the teachings. So those are the three aspects of generosity.

Then the second paramita—the paramita of ethical discipline—also has three aspects. One part of ethical discipline is about giving up or—how to say—turning away from what is harmful to other sentient beings, what is a negative behavior. So that's also our general understanding about ethical discipline. It's always about not doing something. So what is it that we try to avoid doing is the most harmful actions, like: murder, theft, sexual misconduct, harsh speech, lying, creating conflict between people, or idle chat that will only cultivate afflictions in other

people’s minds or in our own mind. So those are the seven physical and verbal actions that one should try to avoid. So this is one aspect of ethical discipline.

The second aspect of ethical discipline is to cultivate virtue, cultivate the means of good potential. And so this is, essentially, what we find in the six paramitas. We have a capacity to be benevolent and generous, so maybe we can only express that in a limited way at the beginning. There was once a disciple of the Buddha who found it extremely difficult to be generous. He said, “When I have a coin in my hand I just can’t let go of it. I can’t give it away to the poor.” So the Buddha taught him, “Well, why don’t you first try to practice generosity by holding the coin in your right hand and giving it to your left hand? And then you will become used to letting go of the coin. And then eventually one day you’ll be able to give it to another person, to someone close and then someone not so close, and then maybe one day even to your enemy.” So, this man trained in that way and was able to become generous. So you see, he has the capacity. Even though he may feel at first—because of habits of greed and attachment—unable to become generous, he can.

So all of these qualities—wisdom, meditative concentration, generosity, forbearance, perseverance and so forth—are all capacities that we have. So then to make effort to develop those capacities—good capacities that bring wellbeing for oneself and for others—is the second aspect of ethical discipline.

And the third aspect of ethical discipline is actually here specific to the bodhisattva’s path, in the sense it’s not just about avoiding the negative and cultivating our positive potential, but also that this positive potential truly becomes beneficial to other sentient beings. It’s the ethical discipline of benefitting other sentient beings. So this third aspect includes—for example—generosity, teaching the dharma or giving; any action that is beneficial for sentient beings and is done in an ethical way—that is a non-harmful way.

The third paramita, forbearing patience, in turn, has also three aspects. First aspect is—so as we have seen, this forbearance is about being able to deal with adversity, with difficulties. So here the difficulties can be of different sorts. One of them is when other people hurt us, harm us, inflict pain upon ourselves. And, generally, when this happens we cannot forbear, we cannot be patient, and we resort to anger and violence. And this anger and violence just—how to say—

exacerbates and makes that pain even stronger, even more harmful. A little harm is seen as a great harm.

And, you see, one important thing to see here is how the harm other sentient beings may inflict upon ourselves, the degree it hurts us; also depends not only on what they do, but also on how we feel. You know, our mind plays a very important role. Sometimes when, let's say, when you're running and you fall and you hit yourself—you know, get mad at the floor. All right? Because you don't think he had intention to do that. It was just an accident. But when somebody takes a stick and hits you at the same spot and it hurts you, you get very upset about it. Well, it's because you think that he has a deliberate intention to hurt you and harm you.

But, actually if you really look into it, what is it that brought that sentient being to behave in that way? It's also because you were irritating to him. So you also have a responsibility in the violence he expresses towards you. But more than that, if you really look into his actions, he is behaving in that way because his mind is under the influence of hatred and anger. And that hatred and anger arises in his mind because of his selfishness, his concern for himself, because he wishes happiness and doesn't want harm for himself. And that selfish concern is itself rooted in ego and the belief in the existence of “I”. So if one knows that ego is an illusion, one sees that it is unfounded, then one will see that actually his behavior is affected just by his illusion, by his confusion.

Therefore, you know, when somebody wields a stick and hits us with a stick, we never get angry at the stick. We get angry at the person who wields the stick. In the same way, if one understands that the person in his action is wielded by his anger, one shouldn't get angry at him, but get angry towards his anger. And that means what? That means that I will not let anger arise in my mind. So the first aspect of, one could say, forbearing patience is learning how to never let our calm and joyous state of mind be troubled by the harm other sentient beings can inflict upon us; to somehow make the pledge that I will always remain happy, no matter what happens.

So here if someone hurts us and harms me, beats me or slanders me, I'll not let that affect me, understanding that that is all due to other sentient beings' confusion and illusion. So that is the first aspect of forbearance: forbearing others' violence or harm.

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The second aspect of forbearance is related to suffering. So here it is forbearing suffering. For example, you may become ill and experience pain, and when pain and suffering occur the more we give it importance, the more it hurts us. You know, it's—yet, again, pain and suffering don't exist independently. Their degree, their strength depends upon how we look at them. For example, you can see that with the children. Sometimes children run and fall and hurt themselves. And if the parents get very concerned about it, the child gets very afraid and starts crying and screaming. But if the parents kind of think “Oh,” say, “it's nothing,” and are not concerned, the child forgets about it—even though it hurt him very much. So you see how mind plays a very big role in how great suffering seems to us.

So here it is about learning how to forbear with suffering to accept it, to accept suffering and to not—the more you hate it, the more you want to get rid of it; the more you want to get rid of it, the more you're giving it importance; and the more it hurts you. So it is, in a way, it's a way of—how to say—calming the suffering, the way of overcoming suffering. So that is the first, the second—I'm sorry—form of forbearance.

And the third form of forbearance is related mainly to the understanding of Buddha's teachings. Here, for example, the teachings on emptiness: understanding the true nature of mind beyond our concept of ego, beyond our concepts of existence or non-existence, seeing the mind for what it actually is, directly, beyond the conventional labels. So understanding this somehow implies a certain difficulty, because it's not our natural inclination. Intuitively, we attribute existence to the mind, to the ego, to phenomena. And they, actually if you look at it, lack that attributed, inherent and substantial existence we attribute to it. So—how to say—focusing on understanding, making effort to understand the teachings; making effort to apply that understanding of the teachings in our life and contemplating the true reality of our mind and so forth, demand a certain degree of effort and forbearance. And so this is the third aspect of forbearance, the forbearance needed in order to ascertain reality.

Then the next paramita also has three aspects. This is perseverance. So—or one could also translate it as “enthusiastic perseverance.” This aspect, the aspects of this one are—the first one is called the armor. And so here what is meant, it's kind of a metaphor. The idea here is before you doing anything, if you have a certain appreciation of what you're doing and you're happy about what you're doing, you'd be regardless or you would be unconcerned about the difficulties it implies.

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So in that way it is the metaphor of an armor. In some ways if you have an armor, then you can walk out into the battlefield of many problems and difficulties, and you will feel kind of protected, reassured. You know that you will not be able to harm, because what you're doing is truly the most meaningful thing. So if you understand that, you know, practicing bodhicitta—of working for the benefit of sentient beings, developing these qualities is the most beneficial, the most meaningful thing you can do—then no matter what that implies, what effort that implies, you will not look at it as an effort.

Or the contrary of this is, for example, often you might think, “Oh, I might want to do this,” but you're not sufficiently inspired by what you are doing. And then when you start doing it, it's a little difficult; and then you give up and you don't continue to do because you have to work hard for it. So, to be able to work hard to achieve awakening you need that enthusiasm, that joy, seeing how meaningful what you're doing is. So this is the first aspect and it's called the perseverance of the armor or similar to the armor. So it is mainly characterized by joy and appreciation of what you're doing. It precedes all of your actions.

The second aspect is application, being—that means here, applying yourself to each of the virtues, applying yourself; making generosity in forbearing or in learning the dharma; and contemplating emptiness or practicing meditation—just the fact of applying yourself to the virtue.

And the third aspect is practicing it and never turning back. That means here once you have engaged in the virtuous practice, you will see it through until its completion. You will not—how to say—abandon in the middle of the way. So this is the third aspect of perseverance. That means irreversible determination. You have a very strong resolve. So you apply yourself constantly and in a way through which you will never be deterred by anything.

So this brings us to the fifth paramita—that of meditation. So here there are numerous different aspects, but one could speak in general about three aspects. One is through meditative concentration, being able to maintain yourself within that concentration and so maintain yourself in wellbeing. So that is one aspect of meditative concentration. Another aspect is—through that meditative concentration—to enhance and cultivate; make your capacities and qualities grow, make them greater and stronger.

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Another aspect of meditative concentration is through meditative concentration it is said that you gain different powers, such as clairvoyance and better understanding. So, to use those to benefit other sentient beings. So that is in terms of distinction, in terms of action. But you have also distinctions in terms of nature. For example, there are meditative concentrations that are called “calm abiding” or *shamatha*. That is the state of mind that is settled in peace and clarity, and is extremely stable. There’s another aspect of meditative concentration, which is discernment. That is related to wisdom. Here, in meditative concentration, focusing on recognizing or discerning the true nature of all phenomena—and of the mind. Then there is the aspect that is the union of both. It is, at the same time, mental stability and, at the same time, it is discerning. It is—so *shamatha* and *Vipassana* in union explained here.

We will go to the third—I mean sixth—paramita, which is wisdom. Now wisdom also has three aspects. First aspect is understanding the ultimate reality. So here it is discerning the true nature of mind, the true nature of all phenomena. It is related, for example, to *Vipassana* that we talked about and then understanding *samvrti-satya*, or relative reality, superficial reality. Here is all other knowledges, like—I don’t know—grammar, history, philosophy, epistemology, medicine, law; all different knowledges through which one can benefit other sentient beings. So it’s all our usual knowledges. And the third aspect that one tries to cultivate, in relation to wisdom, is understanding or knowledge of how to benefit sentient beings in the best way. So what is it that is the most beneficial to sentient beings? How—so that is also a science. How to know how to teach properly, how to guide properly, how to help properly, understanding the laws of causality between our thoughts and actions and becoming; and understanding the disposition of sentient beings and, according to their disposition, being able to show them the accurate path towards awakening. So that also is the—that is, I’m sorry, the third aspect of discerning wisdom.

Now these are, one can say, the eighteen aspects of the six paramitas. So each of the six have three aspects. Now each of these aspects also are practiced, are cultivated in relation to the six paramitas. That means, for example, material generosity—or giving to the poor, food and clothing and so forth—is done in a way that is beneficial. So it must be benevolent. It must be done for the sake and for the benefit of sentient beings. So that is somehow the benevolent or the generous aspect of the generosity.

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It is that and then the ethical aspect of it is that it is unharmed. One does not give weapons—things that will directly or indirectly harm that sentient being—so, that generous material gift must also be done with ethical discipline. And then third is that when doing so—when, for example, practicing generosity and giving—there are a number of hardships related to it. So being able to forbear with all of those hardships is the aspect of forbearance that is implied in it. And then there’s the aspect of perseverance, meaning that once one has a project for example, to bring some good to someone or to benefit someone, one must—how to say—fulfill that project till its end. So it is not interrupted by any other action. That is the aspect of enthusiastic perseverance. In other words, the capacity to not become tired with it; to continuously make effort and bring it to completion.

Then one must do that with concentration that is undistracted. If one is distracted in our effort of generosity, it might be that one forgets to do it or one doesn’t do it completely so it also implies being—how to say—focused, concentrated, and undistracted. And then it also necessitates developing wisdom for it to be a paramita, without which it cannot be a paramita. It cannot be perfected truly because it will always be limited by, for example, self-concern or some hope for our self. So here if one understands that phenomena and mind are empty, one will understand that they’re empty of inherent existence; one will be able to realize that there is actually no giver, no gift and no recipient of the gift that exists ultimately.

It is just a process through which one, in the case of generosity, overcomes all stinginess, all greed, and one becomes truly a benevolent source for others. And that becoming benevolent in that way is also fulfilling for ourselves, brings satisfaction and happiness to ourselves at the same time. So here, you know, that understanding—that agent, actions and recipient of action, lack of inherent existence—is somehow applying wisdom in our action.

In other words, one could say realizing that all of this is like a dream, is not more real than a dream. You know, like in a lucid dream—where while you are dreaming you’re aware that you are dreaming, but you’re still acting for the benefit of sentient beings in that. So in the same way, as for the first aspect of generosity, the generosity of material goods and then the generosity of protection, generosity of teaching, the ethics of avoiding—how to say—negative actions. Cultivating virtues, the ethics of benefitting sentient beings forbearing other’s harms—what is it—forbearing suffering. Being patient and forbearing in the pursuit of knowledge; having the perseverance that is like an armor. Applying

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ourselves to all the virtues and never turning back from our virtuous actions. Being—how to say—focused in one way, concentrated so that our mind, no matter what situation, always is in the state of wellbeing, never harmed; and always using, using all the circumstances to enhance our inherent qualities, and at the same time benefitting other sentient beings, knowing the ultimate reality as it is. And also knowing all relative truths that, in ways, being able to use that to benefit sentient beings and teach other sentient beings, those are all the—how to say—the eighteen aspects, and each of these, each one of these implies the six paramitas.

And so, you see, these are the different aspects and these aspects are also related with one another. And so we will see that in our next segment, and we will also talk about ways of putting these different paramitas into our practice.