

Karma Trinlay Rinpoche  
Week 1, *Practices of a Bodhisattva: The Six Paramitas*  
April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
“The Six Transcending Perfections”

Welcome to Tricycle’s online retreat. We will be discussing the six *paramitas* or perfected virtues. These are fundamental virtues of the bodhisattva and they are particularly related to the Mahayana teachings of Buddhism. We will—in this retreat, on the first segment of this retreat—go through the definition of the six paramitas, and then in the following segments we will look at the different aspects and give some indications of how to put these different virtues into practice.

So first of all, these virtues are a way of cultivating *bodhicitta*. Bodhicitta is the motivation to attain the state of the Buddha—or perfect awakening—in order to benefit all sentient beings. This motivation is an altruistic motivation. It is based on having developed universal loving-kindness and compassion. So the main idea of this path and this practice is not about creating something new, something artificial, but actually truly actualizing the true qualities of our mind. The idea behind this is that awakening is our nature. It is our inheritance. And our confusion, suffering and so forth are all temporal or all due to just an illusion. They’re not something that defines us in our nature.

So the whole path is about—or trying to actualize—our inherent qualities. So our mind—that can be characterized by sentience—is inherently pure. It is not different than the mind of a buddha. This is true also for all other sentient beings. And if we understand this, then we can develop towards all other sentient beings appreciation and affection, love. And, through that love, then we will feel concerned about their suffering and their confusion and develop compassion. And through the power of compassion, we can really dedicate ourselves to benefitting other sentient beings. And the method of benefitting other sentient beings—while also benefitting ourselves—is summarized in the six paramitas.

So the term paramita is somewhat important because it means that this virtue is not just an ordinary virtue. It must be brought to its perfection. So, generally, the term paramita, which is a Sanskrit word, is given two different etymologies. One of the etymologies is derived from the Sanskrit *parama*, which means what is the highest, that above which there is nothing else—so, somehow the unsurpassable perfection. So it implies that this virtue is brought to that excellence. The second etymology given takes into account the word paramita as two different words. On one hand, *para* which means the other shore, the other bank of the river or beyond; and *mita*, which is that which has arrived. Or also certain speak of *ita*, which is that which goes to that other shore.

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In other words, it means that these virtues bring us to awakening and they are also—how to say—when these virtues are perfected it is, in other words, awakening. It is both the—it is related to the first meaning of the word. In other words, it brings to the unsurpassable perfection. So this is the word that is retained. For example, in the etymology that is retained in the Tibetan translation: *parol tu chinpa*, which means that which has gone to the other shore. So here “the other shore” implies necessarily wisdom. In other words, a virtue like generosity cannot be a paramita if it is not associated with discernment and also the other virtues, and particularly discernment.

It is said, for example, that the ordinary virtues are—like generosity, ethical discipline, and so forth, except wisdom—are all like blind people. They cannot in themselves lead to awakening. It is when they are associated with wisdom that they can lead to awakening. It is in that way that these—this way associated with wisdom—that these different virtues become paramitas. So the six paramitas, to present them one can translate them as benevolent generosity, ethical discipline, forbearing patience, enthusiastic perseverance, and concentrative meditation; and the most important of them is the following one, the sixth: discerning wisdom.

They are presented in this order as going from the easiest to perfect to the one that is the most difficult to perfect. So to give you a more clear definition of these words, we’ll look at their etymology because sometimes the English does not carry in its translation the full meaning of the term. So the term “benevolent generosity” translates the Sanskrit *dana*. The Sanskrit *dana*, the word *daha* of *dana* is related to the Sanskrit term *daridrya* which means misery or poverty, difficulty. And the term *na* is a negation, which means—in other words, the term means to eradicate poverty, to eliminate poverty.

So that is generosity. And since this generosity is associated with loving-kindness and compassion and with wisdom, it is truly benevolent. It is not just about giving. Gifts can also be negative gifts, for example. It isn’t necessarily a positive gift. And it is not just the action of giving. It’s more the state of mind that has the— that benevolent intention to help, to benefit. So it is the contrary of greed, stinginess. So that’s what defines, in other words, generosity.

The second paramita is in Sanskrit *shila*. The word *shila* means, in Sanskrit, coolness. It comes from the word—I mean it comes from the word *shita*, which means coolness. So it means, in other words, obtaining coolness “Obtaining

coolness” here meaning comfort or soothingness. Something that is—a state that is soothing. So the idea here is that ethical discipline will enable us to create wellbeing within conditioned existence. So that is why, in other words, it is—the term designates the result or the consequence of the practice. The practice in itself is—how to say—characterized by non-violence, not-harming other sentient beings.

Now the third paramita is—what we have translated as “forbearing patience.” The Sanskrit term is *kshanti*. And this derives from the Sanskrit word *kshamu*, which means hardship. So the idea here is the action of forbearing what is irritating. So not letting our mind get irritated and become angry or upset about a situation. So as we, so that is what—how to say—characterizes patience. It is the contrary of patience is anger, hatred, mental agitation.

The fourth paramita, the fourth virtue, is—we translated it as enthusiastic perseverance. The Sanskrit term is *virya* and the term is derived from *vira*, which means to overcome, implying here also courage and bravery. So it is the effort, mental effort, through which one applies oneself to perfecting our qualities. It is the energy, the diligence, the effort we put into becoming excellent. The contrary of this is laziness. Laziness can mean, of course, being idle; not doing anything. But it also means doing the wrong things. For example, one could be extremely perseverant at playing video games, but those will not enable—that effort will not enable us, ourselves, to develop qualities. They will not enable us to attain awakening.

Then the fifth paramita is *dhyana* or meditative concentration. So the word dhyana—*dhya* in Sanskrit—means mind or the mental or thoughts. So here the idea is that one focuses our mind in a way; or one concentrates so that mind does not become distracted. It is really meditation, you know, concentrative meditation. The idea here is to seize the mind and be able to maintain the mind focused on one point without it being distracted. So our mind generally is—tends to be very agitated. And so here the effort is to bring our mind to a certain degree of stability and clarity. So it’s that which characterizes dhyana.

Then the sixth and last and most important of the paramitas is wisdom. The Sanskrit term is *prajna*, and *jña* in Sanskrit means knowledge. In other words: understanding, knowing. And the word *pra* is kind of an amplifier. It means knowing perfectly, so knowing very well. So this is translated as “wisdom.” So

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here it is, essentially, understanding reality as it is. Not being misled about reality or confused about reality, seeing the true nature of our mind, understanding the true nature of phenomena as it is.

And so this is the ultimate aspect of wisdom. Wisdom also means other knowledges through which one can, for example, benefit other sentient beings. But, fundamentally, it is the knowledge of the ultimate, the ultimate truth. So these are the six paramitas and their brief definition. We'll see in the next segment, now, the different aspects of each of these six paramitas.