



The Six Paramitas (Perfections)



The Sanskrit word *paramita* means *to cross over to the other shore*. Paramita may also be translated as *perfection*, *perfect realization*, or *reaching beyond limitation*. Through the practice of these six paramitas, we cross over the sea of suffering (samsara) to the shore of happiness and awakening (Nirvana); we cross over from ignorance and delusion to enlightenment. Each of the six paramitas is an enlightened quality of the heart, a glorious virtue or attribute—the innate seed of perfect realization within us. The paramitas are the very essence of our true nature. However, since these enlightened qualities of the heart have become obscured by delusion, selfishness, and other karmic tendencies, we must develop these potential qualities and bring them into expression. In this way, the six paramitas are an inner cultivation, a daily practice for wise, compassionate, loving, and enlightened living. The paramitas are the six kinds of virtuous practice required for skillfully serving the welfare of others and for the attainment of enlightenment. We must understand that bringing these virtuous qualities of our true nature into expression requires discipline, practice, and sincere cultivation. This is the path of the Bodhisattva—one who is dedicated to serving the highest welfare of all living beings with the awakened heart of unconditional love, skillful wisdom, and all-embracing compassion.

1) The Perfection of Generosity (Dana Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of generosity, charity, giving, and offering. The essence of this paramita is unconditional love, a boundless openness of heart and mind, a selfless generosity and giving which is completely free from attachment and expectation. From the very depths of our heart, we practice generously offering our love, compassion, time, energy, and resources to serve the highest welfare of all beings. Giving is one of the essential preliminary steps of our practice. Our giving should always be unconditional and selfless; completely free of any selfish desire for gratitude, recognition, advantage, reputation, or any worldly reward. The perfection of generosity is not accomplished simply by the action of giving, nor by the actual gift itself. Rather, the true essence of this paramita is our pure motivation of genuine concern for others—the truly generous motivation of the awakened heart of compassion, wisdom, and love. In addition, our practice of giving should be free of discrimination regarding who is worthy and who is unworthy to receive. To cultivate the paramita of generosity, it is wise to contemplate the enormous benefits of this practice, the disadvantages of being miserly, as well as the obvious fact that our body and our wealth are impermanent. With this in mind, we will certainly be encouraged to use both our body and wealth to practice generosity while we still have them. Generosity is a cure for the afflictions of greed, miserliness, and possessiveness. In this practice of giving, we may offer our time, energy, money, food, clothing, or gifts so as to assist others. To the best of our ability, we may offer the priceless treasure of Dharma instruction, giving explanations on the Buddha's teachings. This offering serves to free others from misperceptions that cause confusion, pain, and suffering. We can offer fearless giving and protection by delivering living beings (insects, animals, and people) from harm, distress, fear, and terror. In this way, we offer care and comfort, helping others to feel safe and peaceful. We do this selflessly, without counting the cost to ourselves. We practice the perfection of generosity in an especially powerful way when we embrace all living beings continually in the radiant love of our heart.

2) The Perfection of Ethics (Sila Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of virtuous and ethical behavior, morality, self-discipline, impeccability, personal integrity, honor, and harmlessness. The essence of this paramita is that through our love and compassion we do not harm others; we are virtuous and harmless in our thoughts, speech, and actions. This practice of ethical conduct is the very foundation for progressing in any practice of meditation and for attaining all higher realizations on the path. Our practice of generosity must always be supported by our practice of ethics; this ensures the lasting results of our generosity. We should perfect our conduct by eliminating harmful behavior and following the Bodhisattva precepts. We abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, gossip, greed, malice, and wrong views. Following these precepts or guidelines is not meant to be a

burden or a restriction of our freedom. We follow these precepts so we can enjoy greater freedom, happiness, and security in our lives, because through our virtuous behavior we are no longer creating suffering for ourselves and others. We must realize that unethical behavior is always the cause of suffering and unhappiness. If we give even the slightest consideration to the advantages of cultivating ethical behavior and the disadvantages of unethical behavior, we will certainly develop great enthusiasm for this practice of ethics. Practicing the perfection of ethics, we are free of negativity, we cause no harm to others by our actions, our speech is kind and compassionate, and our thoughts are free of anger, malice, and wrong views. When our commitment is strong in the practice of ethics we are at ease, naturally confident, without stress, and happy because we are not carrying any underlying sense of guilt or remorse for our actions; we have nothing to hide. Maintaining our personal honor and integrity, our moral impeccability, this is the cause of all goodness, happiness, and even the attainment of enlightenment.

3) The Perfection of Patience (Kshanti Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of patience, tolerance, forbearance, and acceptance. The essence of this paramita of patience is the strength of mind and heart that enables us to face the challenges and difficulties of life without losing our composure and inner tranquility. We embrace and forbear adversity, insult, distress, and the wrongs of others with patience and tolerance, free of resentment, irritation, emotional reactivity, or retaliation. We cultivate the ability to be loving and compassionate in the face of criticism, misunderstanding, or aggression. With this enlightened quality of patience, we are neither elated by praise, prosperity, or agreeable circumstances, nor are we angry, unhappy or depressed when faced with insult, challenge, hardship, or poverty. This enlightened attribute of patience, acceptance, and tolerance is not a forced suppression or denial of our thoughts and feelings. Rather, it is a quality of being which comes from having our heart open and our mind deeply concentrated upon the Dharma. In this way, we have a clear and correct understanding of impermanence, of cause and effect (karma), and with strong determination and patience we remain in harmony with this understanding for the benefit of all beings. The ability to endure, to have forbearance, is integral to our Dharma practice. Without this kind of patience we cannot accomplish anything. A true Bodhisattva practices patience in such a way that even when we are hurt physically, emotionally, or mentally by others, we are not irritated or resentful. We always make an effort to see the goodness and beauty in others. In practicing this perfection of patience and forbearance, we never give up on or abandon others—we help them cross over the sea of suffering. We maintain our inner peace, calmness, and equanimity under all circumstances, having enduring patience and tolerance for ourselves and others. With the strength of patience, we maintain our effort and enthusiasm in our Dharma practice. Therefore, our practice of patience assists us in developing the next paramita of joyous effort and enthusiastic perseverance.

4) The Perfection of Joyous Effort / Enthusiastic Perseverance (Virya Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of energy, vigor, vitality, endurance, diligence, enthusiasm, continuous and persistent effort. In order to practice the first three paramitas of generosity, virtuous conduct, and patience in the face of difficulties, we need this paramita of joyous effort and perseverance. Joyous effort makes the previous paramitas increase and become even more powerful influences in our life. The essence of this paramita of joyous effort is the courage, energy, and endurance to continuously practice the Dharma and pursue the supreme goal of enlightenment for the highest good of all beings. From a feeling of deep compassion for the suffering of all sentient beings, we are urged to unflinching, persistent, and joyous effort. We use our body, speech, and mind to work ceaselessly and untiringly for the benefit of others, with no expectations for personal recognition or reward. We are always ready to serve others to the best of our ability. With joyous effort, devoted energy, and the power of sustained application, we practice the Dharma without getting sidetracked by anything or falling under the influence of laziness. Without developing Virya Paramita, we can become easily disillusioned and drop our practice when we meet with adverse conditions. The word *virya* means persistence and perseverance in the face of disillusionment, energetically striving to attain the supreme goal of enlightenment. When we cultivate this type of diligence and perseverance we have a strong and healthy mind. We practice with persistent effort and enthusiasm because we realize the tremendous value and benefit of our Dharma practice. Firmly establishing ourselves in this paramita, we also develop self-reliance, and this becomes one of our most prominent characteristics. With joyous effort and enthusiastic perseverance, we regard failure as simply another step toward success, danger as an inspiration for courage, and affliction as another opportunity to practice wisdom and compassion. To develop strength of character, self-reliance, and the next paramita of concentration, is not an easy achievement, thus we need enthusiastic perseverance on the path.

5) The Perfection of Concentration (Dhyana Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of concentration, meditation, contemplation, samadhi, mindfulness, mental stability. Our minds have the tendency to be very distracted and restless, always moving from one thought or feeling to another. Because of this, our awareness stays fixated in the ego, in the surface layers of the mind and emotions, and we just keep engaging in the same habitual patterns of behavior. The perfection of concentration means training our mind so that it does what we want it to. We stabilize our mind and emotions by practicing meditation, by being mindful and aware in everything we do. When we train the mind in this way, physical, emotional, and mental vacillations and restlessness are eliminated. We achieve focus, composure, and tranquility. This ability to concentrate and focus the mind brings clarity, equanimity, illumination. Concentration allows the deep insight needed to transform the habitual misperceptions and attachments that cause confusion and suffering. As we eliminate these misperceptions and attachments, we can directly experience the joy, compassion, and wisdom of our true nature. There is no attainment of wisdom and enlightenment without developing the mind through concentration and meditation. This development of concentration and one-pointedness requires perseverance. Thus the previous paramita of joyous effort and perseverance brings us to this paramita of concentration. In addition, when there is no practice of meditation and concentration, we cannot achieve the other paramitas, because their essence, which is the inner awareness that comes from meditation, is lacking. To attain wisdom, compassion, and enlightenment, it is essential that we develop the mind through concentration, meditation, and mindfulness.

6) The Perfection of Wisdom (Prajna Paramita)

This paramita is the enlightened quality of transcendental wisdom, insight, and the perfection of understanding. The essence of this paramita is the supreme wisdom, the highest understanding that living beings can attain—beyond words and completely free from the limitation of mere ideas, concepts, or intellectual knowledge. Beyond the limited confines of intellectual and conceptual states of mind, we experience the awakened heart-mind of wisdom and compassion—prajna paramita. Prajna paramita is the supreme wisdom (prajna) that knows emptiness and the interconnectedness of all things. This flawless wisdom eliminates all false and distorted views of the absolute. We see the essential nature of reality with utmost clarity; our perception goes beyond the illusive and deceptive veils of material existence. With the perfection of wisdom, we develop the ability to recognize the truth behind the temporary display of all appearances. Prajna paramita is a result of contemplation, meditation, and rightly understanding the nature of reality. Ultimately, the full realization of prajna paramita is that we are not simply a separate self trying to do good. Rather, virtuously serving the welfare of all beings is simply a natural expression of the awakened heart. We realize that the one serving, the one being served, and the compassionate action of service, are all the same totality—there is no separate ego or self to be found in any of these. With this supreme wisdom, we go beyond acceptance and rejection, hope and fear, dualistic thoughts, and ego-clinging. We completely dissolve all these notions, realizing everything as a transparent display of the primordial truth. If our ego is attached even to the disciplines of these paramitas, this is incorrect perception and we are merely going from one extreme to another. In order to free ourselves from these extremes, we must release our ego attachment and dissolve all dualistic concepts with the insight of supreme wisdom. This wisdom transforms the other five paramitas into their transcendental state as well. Only the illumination of supreme wisdom makes this possible.