

PERFECTING THE PARAMITAS

Greetings; this is Taiun Michael Elliston, Abbot of the Silent Thunder Order, headquartered at the Atlanta Soto Zen Center in Atlanta Georgia, USA. You may find more information about our programs at www.aszc.org. This series, Perfecting the Paramitas, consists of eight half-hour talks, one on each of the Six Paramitas of Buddhism, plus this introduction, and a summary conclusion. It is one of several series that are available on Zen Buddhism in daily life, and designed for your personal practice.

Let's begin with the traditional *Dharma Opening Verse*; please join in chanting:

*The unsurpassed profound and wondrous dharma
Is rarely met with even in a hundred thousand million kalpas
Now we can see and hear it accept and maintain it
May we unfold the meaning of the Tathagata's truth*

Let me introduce you to, or reacquaint you with, the Six Perfections of Zen, called Paramita in Sanskrit. Like most translations of Buddhist terms from Sanskrit, Chinese or Japanese, *perfection* is a poor rendition of the complex meaning of *paramita*. We use the active form, *perfecting* instead, which implies a process, rather than a state of so-called perfection. *Perfecting* is better than *perfection*, in that the gerund, or verb form, is more consonant with living Zen, which unfolds, like a flower blossoming, in our daily life.

For example, in Zen meditation, in Japanese, *zazen*, we never imagine that we have attained the perfect posture, but only continue aiming at it, working our way through every bone in our body. We just simply sit very still, and for rather long periods of time, in upright posture. So, you might say, we practice *posture paramita*, while we are on the cushion. Zazen is supposed to be the comfortable way, but it is not lackadaisical. It is also the simple way, but it is not free of difficulty. We make it complicated. The same can be said for the Paramitas. We make them complicated.

Just as *zazen* is the irreducibly simple method for settling the body and mind in Zen meditation — just so the Paramitas should be reduced to their utmost simplicity. Let me restate that the focus is on *process*, rather than results, or an effect that we may hope for, or aspire to. The attitude we take, is that we will fail to live up to the paramitas, and in fact need to fail, in order to perfect our approach in any meaningful sense. It is a process of perfecting, or correcting, returning to our aspiration, each and every time, when our expectations are disappointed.

Similarly, all of the teachings of Buddhism are ideals toward which we strive, rather than pat states of perfection that we can actually achieve. This applies to the Paramitas, and all the fundamental teachings of the Middle Way. And yet, Buddhism holds forth the promise that, if we persevere, a transformational event will eventually take place, in our life. This is not something that we can cause to happen, by sheer force of will, but it will come about naturally, if we do the spade work, and if we simply don't ever give up.

The term *ripening* may be most apropos, for full realization of the Paramitas. A natural process takes place, nurtured by meditation, and the conscious study of the teachings, in which the fruits of the Paramitas become fully ripe, fully realized, in our lives. *Paramita* literally means “that which has reached the other shore.” In the literature, they are presented in the traditional order, as in the perfecting of: *generosity*; *precepts*; *patience*; *exertion*; *contemplation* or *meditation*; and, finally, *wisdom*, which follows from perfecting all the others. This sequence may seem to represent the Paramitas as stages of training, that we go through progressively, beginning with *generosity*, advancing to a high level of *contemplation*, and then ending at *wisdom*.

In some cases and under certain teachers, the Paramitas may be usefully approached in this way. But in real life, the process may not be so neat, or linear. Like most of the formulations of Zen training, we revisit the various stages again and again. This suggests a more dynamic, seemingly random, process of experiencing each one of the six Paramitas in our awareness. Perfecting *contemplation* through our meditation, for example, affects how we practice, or witness, *generosity* in our behavior. When we develop *patience* with ourselves on the cushion, our *exertion* or the application of *energy* to our various projects in daily life becomes more natural, less inhibited by second-guessing. We could go into many more examples of how the Paramitas are all intricately interlinked and work in combination, rather than independently. But, suffice it to say that as the Paramitas sink in, you will begin to witness their true meaning in your daily life.

Let me quote some brief comments that my teacher, Matsuoka-roshi, once made in a talk he gave called *Zen Mind is Ordinary Mind*. It is recorded in the second volume of his collected teachings, called *Mokurai*, a Japanese term that can be translated “silence is thunder,” which is where we get the name for the Silent Thunder Order. This volume, *Mokurai*, is available through our web site. Please listen to Sensei’s words of wisdom:

Zen Buddhists stop to reflect upon the state of their lives as they are being lived each day, and upon the lives which they hope to live as Enlightened ones. They think about a way to pass from this shore of Illusion to the shore of Enlightenment by perfecting the six spiritual virtues in their daily lives. The six spiritual virtues named in historical Buddhism are Charity, Morality, Endurance, Perseverance, Meditation and Wisdom. They are the spiritual “work” of Zen. The six paramitas are basically simple in themselves, but difficult to practice with perfection.

The first, Charity, asks that you realize that the essence of human life is mutual aid, and that you give of yourself as well as of your possessions. Giving is not just the contribution of money, although this is an important part of it. It also means the practice of benevolence, love, compassion and virtue so that others will be inspired by your example and spirit.

The second Paramita asks us to observe the precepts handed down to us by the Historical or Sakyamuni Buddha. The eight-fold Path of Right Views

and Behavior; and the Ten Prohibitory Precepts which prohibit behavior which would harm others, are all given to us an example of a moral life.

The third Paramita, Endurance or Patience, urges us to be humble, tenderhearted and patient, so that a peaceful world can be realized.

The Fourth Paramita, Perseverance, is an ideal for us which urges us to exert ourselves and to continue in any difficulty we may encounter in our lives.

Practicing the Fifth Paramita, Meditation, will bring us to have that Ordinary mind we talk about in Zen, so that the potential to become a Buddha—enlightened one—will be realized in our lives.

The last Paramita, Wisdom, is what persons are said to possess if we practice all the Paramitas with sincerity. We will have seen things as they really are, with an ordinary mind. We will have seen through the illusion of this world and will have entered that of Enlightenment.

Notice that Matsuoka-roshi used different words, *virtues* rather than *perfections*; *charity* rather than *generosity*; *morality* instead of *precepts*; *endurance* for *patience*; *perseverance* as *exertion*. These are examples of the multiple connotations of the original terms that do not translate readily into one English word. In this series on the Paramitas, we will examine each of the six in detail, so that their literal and more abstract meanings will become more clear. But, again, it is their reality in daily life that really matters.

The key statement that Sensei makes amounts to a practical overview that we should adopt: “They are the spiritual ‘work’ of Zen. The six paramitas are basically simple in themselves, but difficult to practice with perfection.” What makes them difficult, again, is that we are difficult. We typically try to practice generosity, or charity, as we understand it, rather than paying attention to what it may really mean in daily life. If we are overly generous to our family, for example, we may be uncharitable to others as a result. If, instead, we devote too much time and effort to others, such as friends and colleagues, we may end up neglecting our families. Balance is what is called for.

The Six Perfections consist of a set of actions and attributes, the perfecting of which is necessary, to come to appreciate the cessation of suffering. As such, they offer a model of practice that complements the Eightfold Path, with which you may be familiar. The Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the other three being the existence, the origin, and the cessation of *dukkha*, usually rendered as *suffering*. The eight dimensions are usually given as *right view*, *right thought*; *right speech*, *action* and *livelihood*; *right effort*, *mindfulness* and *meditation*, or *contemplation*.

Again, these English words are poor translations of the original meaning, and *dukkha* would be a prime example of the inadequacy of choosing *suffering* as its meaning. *Dukkha* is a Sanskrit term that connotes a kind of general dissatisfaction with existence,

in the context of human idealism; and has more the meaning of universal change, by attrition, than of human suffering alone. But that is another story. The main point here is that following the Eightfold Path in daily life, is a parallel track to perfecting the Paramitas, and they overlap in several instances.

The Paramitas form a kind of dynamic tautology, or internally consistent logic, in that our practice of them, for example, *generosity*, can eventually result in our actually being, or becoming, truly generous. The Paramitas, then, can be understood on several levels. We might consider a model of three levels, as something like: 1) the literal - conventional, social or relative; 2) the abstract - philosophical or absolute; and 3) the personal – transcendental or concrete. It is possible to extend this analysis further, but a simple approach will best serve our purposes of bringing these ideas into our present awareness. Let's briefly consider each of the six, one at a time, and pose some questions to consider.

1. Generosity (*dana*); conventionally, we would think of this as performing good deeds, developing selfless actions and attitudes, in a social context. But how do we practice generosity when there is no one else around?

2. The Precepts (*shila*), as we receive them in the lineage of the Silent Thunder Order, are as follows: The first five received during Initiation into Soto Zen, or *Jukai*, in Japanese:

- 1) *Affirm life—Do not kill*
- 2) *Be giving—Do not take what is not freely given*
- 3) *Honor the body—Do not engage in sexual misconduct*
- 4) *Manifest truth—Do not speak falsely*
- 5) *Proceed clearly—Do not cloud the mind with intoxicants*

Note that these are stated in the affirmative first, an approach that we adopted from the ceremonies of other centers, and then in the prohibitive, or negative form. In the later Discipleship ceremony, an additional five round out the Ten Grave Precepts:

- 6) *See only your own faults—Do not discuss the faults of others*
- 7) *Know self and other as one—Do not praise yourself at others' expense*
- 8) *Share generously—Do not spare the Dharma assets*
- 9) *Actualize harmony—Do not indulge in anger*
- 10) *Know intimacy with all things—Do not defame the Three Treasures*

In the third segment on the Precepts, we will go into detail on each. But for now, let's look at them briefly. The Precepts, like Paramitas, are also meaningful on several levels. For example, from a literal point of view, it is impossible not to kill, and still be alive. Our very body is constantly killing in order to survive. Our immune system is designed to dispatch microbes with brutal efficiency. Of course, we usually regard the Precepts as prohibitions against harming others, that is, our fellow human beings, again primarily in a social context. Like the Paramitas.

Similarly for the Precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, and so on – we think of generosity and the rest in relation to our behavior in relationships. But how do we not kill our own life, our own potential? How do we avoid stealing from, and lying to, ourselves?

3. Patience (*kshanti*) We think of practicing patience with the failings and follies of others, but how do we come to tolerate our own? If we are unable to exercise patience, or forbearance, with our own foolishness, how will we ever have patience for others?

4. Energy (*virya*) We often feel, and say, that we do not have the energy for something, let alone the time. Especially for something like zazen, which can seem so demanding. But how do we turn this around, and find the true source of energy in our life, and in our practice?

5. Contemplation (*dhyana*), which is a traditional form of meditation, we usually associate with a specific practice — posture, breathing, and attitude — requiring a special time and place to practice it. But what does it take to develop a mode of meditation that is not limited to a time and place, one that doesn't take time at all, but in fact, gives us back our time? Contemplation is usually of an object of some sort — a teaching, nature — a subject meditating upon an object. But how do we enter into contemplation that has no particular object? Objectless meditation, or *shikantaza*, in Japanese.

6. Wisdom (*prajna*) We usually regard wisdom as a kind of knowledge or insight that we do not now have, but can attain by study and understanding. But how do we *accede to the wisdom of the buddhas*, to borrow a phrase from Master Dogen's *Principles of Zazen*, or *Fukanzazengi*; a wisdom that is not accessible through intellectual understanding?

These are questions that we ask in Zen. We find the answers on the cushion, in zazen.

The six Paramitas are all interconnected and interactive. In the Buddhist model, they are interdependent, mutually modifying causes and conditions. For example, how can we practice generosity, without patience? How can we practice meditation, without energy or effort? How can we accede to wisdom, without deep contemplation of the true conditions of our existence?

If we visualize these six Paramitas as the corners of a hexagon, and fill in all the connectors, we will see a beautiful, gem-like crystal, in which all the facets reflect each other. The Paramitas, like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and all the other teachings of Buddhism, are, taken together, like an intricate latticework. But they are not fragile. They are more like diamond, adamantine and indestructible.

By exploring this series of eight talks, perhaps we will come to some deeper grasp of the Paramitas, at least on the conceptual level. Hopefully that will bring about a mindset that begins to open our awareness to the dynamic reality of the Paramitas, as functioning vitally in our daily lives. By combining this study with zazen, meditation time on the cushion, the depth and breadth of the meaning of the Paramitas will become clear in its

own time, and in a way that is natural to you. Please join us for the next segment in the series, on *dana*, the meaning of true generosity.

Thank you for listening, and your patience and attention. And thank you for your practice. Again, I am Taiun Michael Elliston, Abbot of the Silent Thunder Order. You can find more information about our programs, and submit any questions or comments, at www.aszc.org.

Let's close with the *Dharma Closing Verse*, the *Four Great Vows*:

<i>Beings are numberless</i>	<i>I vow to free them</i>
<i>Delusions are inexhaustible</i>	<i>I vow to end them</i>
<i>Dharma gates are boundless</i>	<i>I vow to enter them</i>
<i>The buddha way is unsurpassable</i>	<i>I vow to realize it</i>

Hopefully we have opened some dharma gates today. Talk with you next time.