

Chapter 11

The Six Paramitas

Many books on Buddhism have discussed the concept of the “Six Paramitas”¹ (Six Perfections). These ideals can be viewed as a summary of good conduct and benevolent behaviours based upon Buddhist principles. In other words, the Six Paramitas contain all the things that a Buddhist follower should recognize and practice.

Paramita 1: Giving away (Almsgiving)

There are three different forms of giving away² that involve the donation of wealth and service:

1. The giving of wealth. This refers to charities that are aimed at helping others, including donating money. Providing services to others is also one form of giving.
2. The giving of teaching. This type of giving assists people in understanding the truth of things, such as the Buddhist teachings. This type of giving away has more merits to the giver than monetary donations. Section 32 of the *Diamond Sutra* has clearly expounded that “If, however, any bodhisattva or mahāsattva were to fill immeasurable and incalculable world-systems with the seven treasures and make a gift of them, and if some gentleman or lady were to do no more than learn just a four-lined verse from this Perfection of Insight and memorize it, teach it, and

¹ 六波羅蜜 or 六波羅密.

² 財布施, 法布施, 無畏布施.

master it, and elucidate it in full for others, the latter would generate from that a lot more merit, an immeasurable and incalculable amount”.

3. The giving of fearlessness. This protects all sentient beings from fear and maintains their peace of minds.

The Non-substantiality of the Three Aspects of Giving³:

Now let us further explore the meaning of the perfection of giving away and the true essence of “compassion” as one of the six Paramitas. For Buddhist practitioners who are familiar with the idea of offering up deeds of goodness, understanding the concept of the non-substantiality of the three aspects of giving will be easy. For example, if I am planning to donate ten thousand dollars to a person who is suffering from poverty and illness, the process involves three aspects. The first aspect is “I” the benefactor; the second aspect is the beneficiary, the person being plagued by poverty and illness; the third aspect is the donation of ten thousand dollars. If my mind is concerned with thinking about the three aspects, then I would lack of the true heart of doing good things. This is because Buddhism teaches us to get rid of the three aspects of giving in order to accumulate great merits; that is, the factors such as who are the benefactors and beneficiaries, and what is the donated item become secondary. This concept is called the non-substantiality of the three aspects of giving. The ability to adopt such an attitude when helping others is true compassion which the first Paramita expects of us, and our conduct should be driven by

³ 三輪體空.

this frame of mind at all times. This resonates with the teaching of the *Diamond Sutra* that “when giving away to help others, there should not be any link or attachment to other considerations.”⁴

Paramita 2: Observing precepts

Buddhist followers are asked to keep the precepts. Doing so provides guidance for perfect behaviour and helps one avoid evil conduct.

Paramita 3: Forbearance

Forbearance is slightly different from patience. Forbearance refers to one’s self-control when facing humiliation or adversity. Adopting this attitude will dispel hatred from your mind and help you restore your “intrinsic nature”.

When confronting indignity, a Buddhist learner shall not fuel hatred. Of course this is not an easy task at all.

The paramita of forbearance means tolerance without rancor. The old saying that “Revenge is a dish that could be eaten cold” is highly misleading.

Paramita 4: Diligence (*jing jin* 精進)

The character “*jing*” (精) refers to concentration, and the character “*jin*” (進) denotes unwavering effort and progress. This perfection elucidates the importance of cultivation. Only through unremitting efforts of cultivation can one attain enlightenment.

⁴ 應無所住而行布施.

Paramita 5: Deep concentration (*chan din* 禪定)

Deep concentration has always been seen as an indispensable method of cultivation in Buddhism and especially in Chan Buddhism. In effect, meditation is practiced in all the Buddhist schools, but each gives the process a different name. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng offers a definition of *chan ding* in his *Platform Sutra*:⁵

Chan is “external freedom”, and *ding* is “inner tranquility”, which is also conceived as “motionlessness”. Simply put, practicing meditation not only prevents us from being influenced by the outer world, it also provides a clear goal in life. We might explain it in this way: no matter what we do, we should stick to the purpose of restoring our “intrinsic nature”.

This is probably not the same as the commonly perceived practice of *chan ding* that requires one to sit down cross-legged in a clean and quiet place. Rather than underestimating the significance of sitting meditation, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng sees the broader and deeper meaning of meditative concentration as one of the Six Paramitas.

When addressing sitting meditation, we shall notice the fact that maintaining a peaceful and tranquil mind has constantly been considered important in Chinese culture. In *Great Learning*, one of the Four Books in Confucianism, it states that: “Once the point to rest is known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, once that is determined, an unperturbed calmness may be attained to. That calmness will be succeed by

⁵ *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.*

a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end”. A determined and tranquil mind will greatly benefit one’s behaviours.

Paramita 6: Wisdom (Skt.: *prajñā* 般若)

This capacity helps one to clearly comprehend the nature of and interrelationship between myriad things. There are two kinds of wisdom: fundamental wisdom and subsequently attained wisdom. A Buddhist householder of the Tang dynasty, Da Yuan, explains it: “Buddhism teaches people to primarily seek the fundamental wisdom, which neither leaves marks nor discriminates. Secondly, people should pursue the subsequently attained wisdom that discriminates all dharmas”. *Prajñā* wisdom is more profound than general wisdom, for it embraces the capabilities of knowing and understanding things from the Buddha’s point of view. It is said that “*prajñā* lacks knowing; it is omniscient”. *Prajñā* wisdom lacks knowing, because it never moves or arises from any thought in the mind when facing the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, impulse, and consciousness in the world. On the other hand, the *prajñā* wisdom knows everything.

According to the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, “the self-nature of thusness gives rise to thought [...] because it is the attribute of thusness which gives rise to thought, our six sense organs, in spite of their functioning in seeing, hearing, cognition, and knowing, need not be tainted or defiled in all circumstances, and our true nature may be ‘self-manifested’ all

the time”.⁶ The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sutra* thus says that “He who is an adept in the discrimination of various things and phenomena will be immovably installed in the ‘First Principle’”⁷.

The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* also offers an explanation of *prajñā*: “What is *prajñā*? It means ‘Wisdom’. If at all times and at all places we steadily keep our thought free from foolish desire and act wisely on all occasions, then we are practicing *prajñā*. One foolish notion is enough to shut off *prajñā*, while one wise thought will bring it forth again. Average people are too ignorant and delusional to see it. They talk about it with their tongues, but in their mind they remain foolish. They are always saying that they practice *prajñā*, and they talk incessantly about ‘emptiness’, but they do not know true emptiness. The mind of wisdom, which is formless and immaterial, is *prajñā*. If we interpret it in this way, then indeed we understand the wisdom of *prajñā*”.⁸

Other references on the Six Paramitas

(1) An article summarizes the Six Paramitas as follows:

“The Six Paramitas begin with a heart of compassion. This is “giving away”. We know that everything has its own methods, programs. This is the observation of precepts. Be patient and persistent. This is forbearance. Be focused and assiduous. This is

⁶ 六祖壇經：“真如有性，所以起念。”六祖壇經又說：“真如自性起念，六根雖有見聞覺知，不染萬境，而真性常自在。”

⁷ 維摩詰經-佛國品：“能善分別諸法相，於第一義而不動。”

⁸ 六祖壇經對“般若”亦有所解釋：“何名般若？般若者，唐言智慧也。一切處所，一切時中，念念不愚，常行智慧，即是般若行。一念愚即般若絕，一念智即般若生。世人愚迷，不見般若。口說般若，心中常愚。常自言我修般若，念念說空，不識真空。般若無形相，智慧心即是。若作如是解，即名般若智。”

diligence. Be strong-minded and independent. This is meditative concentration. Be omniscient. This is wisdom. Buddhism teaches us to apply these six paramitas in everyday life. This follows the authentic practices of the bodhisattva that lead to enlightenment. ”

- (2) A Buddhist text introduces the Six Paramitas as follows (The *Dacheng Ligu Liu Boluomiduo Jing*, 大乘理趣波羅蜜多經):

“Good men and good women practitioners shall guide all sentient beings of the five destinies, pursuing the peerless correct perfect enlightenment, and distancing from non-Buddhist and false doctrines, as well as bad teachers. They should become intimate with those who cultivate, donate, observe precepts, tolerate, work hard, meditatively concentrate, replete in wisdom, and practice the teachings of the great vehicle. They should hear the correct Dharma, and to apply themselves in reciting sutras and keeping in their mind. They should always dwell comfortably onto the six paramitas. They should cultivate diligently to control the mind and protect the six faculties. Quickly realize the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment based on this momentum. It is called bodhisattva-mahāsattva. What we call the six pāramitās are give away, observe precepts, forbearance, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. These are the six paramitas.”