

## *The Six Paramitas*

(based on a talk given by angel Kyodo williams in September 2007 at Center for Urban Peace: New Dharma Community, Berkeley, CA)

So welcome.

Each of you is here during what is known as the practice period, a 27-day period during which people take on the choiceful effort of fine-tuning their intentions. Their intentions to deal with, negotiate, or confront an array of matters in their life. There are many things that are part of that, and part of the form is to actually commit, by way of a written document that says these are the things that I choose to address in my life, to the practice period. And those who participate release the intentions, the perfect intentions, which are formulated from the six classic Buddhist *paramitas*.

This evening, and through the next few weeks, I'll be talking about the *paramitas*. Let's talk just about this slightly foreign word for most of us, "*paramitas*." What it translates as roughly is "the other shore." The inference is that to cross over to the other shore from the place of unending suffering traditionally known as *samsara* into the land of Awakened beings is itself perfection.

The *paramitas* are often called "the perfections," both because to execute them is perfection itself and also because the act of participating, of taking on the *paramitas*, is to bring about a kind of perfection--at least as perfect as we can get in a human form, which is pretty good, I think.

So the six *paramitas* are the *paramitas* of generosity—that's the very first one. Its Sanskrit name is *dana*, *dana paramita*. It's the transcendental virtue of giving. It's not ordinary giving; it's transcendental giving. It's the giving that moves us closer to our own Awakening. It's not just the giving that temporarily relieves suffering. To practice *dana paramita* means to find a way to give of yourself so completely that you are, in every gesture, seeking to eliminate suffering for eternity with each individual you meet, with each act that you perform.

When we say these virtues, we kind of rattle them off, "There's giving, and there's ethics, and there's effort, and there's patience, and there's concentration, and there's wisdom."

And those are all words that mean something to us in the English language. I think at this point even wisdom has become fairly mundane in our language. If we go back to the root language and root words, we would understand that each of those concepts is imbued with greatness. And they call forth our greatness. They call forth our greatness to be *bodhisattvas*, to be Awakened

beings that practice the fundamental act of compassion by holding off their own Awakening, because they so want to be available to support the Awakening of others.

That is the classic ideal of what is called the Great Vehicle, the *Mahayana* Vehicle, of Buddhism. Usually we have everyone hang out so we can just talk about Buddhism, because what we're here for, at the end of the day, is to figure out our lives. We want to figure out our own lives. How do we show up in the best way that we can? How do we have a set of principles and ideals that give us a firm container for understanding and approaching our lives?

When we begin to think of it that way, the *paramitas* are not just something crafted somewhere in the last 2,500 years...some people say 3,000, some people say the Buddha borrowed them from previous forms of practice and tradition. When we think of the *paramitas*, when we think of our perfect intentions, we bring them fast forward right into 2007 where they can be meaningful, where they can actually be of value to us and our lives and the way in which we touch everyone that we're in connection with. So we begin with this plan for **Awakening** living.

A lot of you know already, I don't tend to use the word Enlightened, because the English translation of that word is often transliterated so that "enlightened" carries with it the sense of something glowing. And so when you start to think of someone that's glowing and entering some kind of glowing state, we suddenly start to get very small and see ourselves as disappearing from that possibility unless we're willing to put everything away and do nothing but practice.

But here we are these ordinary beings wanting to live extraordinary lives of service. When we think of it that way, what we most need to do is Wake up from the slumber that plagues many of us on a day-to-day basis, that keeps us from living that extraordinary life, the slumber that is a moment-to-moment challenge for us. So I like to use the word "awaken" so that we connect in a very real way with something that we do in the mundane way every day--every day we wake up, every day we are in a slumber. We are foggy, fitful, desirous, grasping, confused, tickled, interested, disinterested, completely cut-off and then we wake up, and we're in our beds and it's just like that. The world comes into view, and we immediately recognize the fuzziness of our previous state.

So we're in this sleep, this dream-like world, and the moment that wakefulness comes to us the fog starts to clear and we become connected with the understanding, Oh, I was asleep. And all kinds of things that seemed muddy and foggy become clear for us, at the very least the existence of the muddiness and fogginess becomes clear. Oh, I was asleep!

So the fact that my mother was in this place with my boyfriend and we couldn't figure out why we were on a boat and why that boat didn't actually sit on water—we become clear. But in our dream state we are just kind of dealing with our lives in this fogginess. And we take it for granted it that somewhere in that dream state, in that confusion, that that's the *way it is*. And we think, **THIS** is kind of confusing, but okay, and we stumble around in that dream state until we wake up and look back and then say, Oh, I was asleep! And the extraordinary notion of being Awake is just that way; it's just that way.

Many of the ways in which we are currently moving through our lives when we bring to bear a clear set of actions, a clear set of principles, of virtues, when we practice them they illuminate that sleepy state. They illuminate that confusion by clearing it up, clarifying it. And through that, through the many things that we do, the many ways in which we engage just normal things, it becomes clear to us, 'oh, I was asleep,' and we have an opportunity before us to change.

So we begin with the practice of generosity. In the practice of generosity what we begin to do is give away our ego; we begin to stop filling up the basket of the mind's confusion and fixation on self that is somehow more important than basically everything else. When we practice deep generosity, transcendental giving, we begin to let go of this solid idea of a "me" that owns something and a "you" that needs to be given something. We eliminate the separation between a "me" and a "you" when we have transcendental giving.

When we have ordinary giving, there's someone in need, and we have something and we give it to them. When we have transcendental giving, there's just what is called for; there's just what arises, and there's no giver and there's no recipient and there isn't even a gift. There's just what is called for and the whole separation falls away.

~~It goes on for the remaining paramitas in that way.~~ Do you understand the difference between ordinary giving and transcendental giving? With ordinary giving, you get to do the giving. With transcendental giving, you don't. It's as simple as that. The giving still happens, but there's no separation in that act. There's not, Oh, that guy needs something from me, and so I'm going to give it to him and doesn't that make me great. It falls away. The quarter or dollar leaves your hand and simply is passed on and there's no residue of reaction left behind. You just keeping moving in your life without fixation on "the you" that gave or even a fixation on "the him" that needed something. Nor do you fixate on: I shouldn't really have given a dollar. I probably should have given five. Actually, I needed that dollar to get on the bus. I should have given a quarter.

It all dissipates; it all dissolves into just what was called for, transcendental giving: the act of giving in such a way that you give away yourself in the process, transcendental ethics in which there isn't a noodling over Should I be

good? Should I be bad? How do I behave in this situation? Which means you're in a constant state of, Did I do that right. How did I look? Did everyone notice me? I was so good. Did you see the way I walked in that room? It was so smooth. And I'm so good, because here I am giving the dharma. That's very, very ethical. And actually, I reduced my water usage today. We could go on and on.

In transcendental efforts we are simply present with each situation as it arises and the appropriate behavior that is called for arises with the moment. There is no need to get caught up in a discourse over, Is this the right thing or is this the wrong thing? There's no need to compare yourself to others, Well, you know, I know I'm kind of rough around the edges, but Tai Amri, I mean, he's *really* a little frayed.

With ordinary ethics what we do is get into comparing mind. We get into a state of, "I'm good" or "I'm bad." I did that well or I didn't do that well. I didn't call my mother. I don't do anything in my life that's really social change work. We have this constant barrage of information that we're using to compare our little self to some ideal, to some fixed concept of what it means to be good. In transcendental ethics, your fundamental goodness simply arises. As they say, you just keep your eye on the birdie, which is the moment, and in the moment what is natural, what is good for that moment, at that time, is what arises. The only thing that inhibits that is the noise of the mind, the fixation on *a you* that has to accomplish something good and right. It's the same for effort because if we're going to do any of this at all, we're sure we have to bring effort.

*Virya. Virya.* It sounds like effort, right? *Virya paramita.* We bring our effort, and of course, in the ordinary mind, we get caught up in that too. That's the part of us that says, Look at me; I'm doing so well. I'm a really good practitioner. I sit **this many** hours or minutes a day. I sit **this many** days a week—effort. Quick, tick it off of my to do list and I'll show you what a good practitioner I am. In fact, I have a whole page full of good things that I've done that show that I really make a lot of effort, and that makes me, of course, in the ordinary mind, a slightly better person than just about everyone else. Or, on the other hand, we say to ourselves, I'm not making enough effort; I really should be doing more. There are people dying, and here I am sitting on comfortable, little red cushions in a rather lovely room listening to someone chatter. What kind of effort was that?

In transcendental effort, the continuous bringing of your self to the situation *as it is* is all that's called for. I'll say it again, the continuous bringing of your self to the situation *as it is* is all that's called for. And if the situation calls for you to leave and be on a plane and be in Iraq, then that will be what you'll do. If

the situation calls for you to take out your oil paints and express yourself on a canvas, then that will be what you do.

Without the notion of a *you* that needs to be doing something, that needs to apply yourself in some fixed way, you enter into the stream of transcendental effort. That allows you to meet the moment and to bring yourself fully to whatever it is you do, to bring yourself fully to **whatever** it is you do. Without a kind of nagging, dragging discourse going on in the back and on the sides and in the front of your mind, you are free to enter into the stream of transcendental effort.

When you have all of this effort brought to your understanding about *the way it is*—not the way it kind of is, not the way it should be, not the way I wished it was, but *the way it is*—you will want to make yourself available to the study of that, to the reflection, the contemplation of what that might mean for you. This concept *the way it is* became a notion of “the law,” meaning a concept similar to *the way it is*. Not the law that’s imposed by someone else, but things as they “are-ness.”

You have to have a lot of patience because as much as we’d like it to, bringing ourselves fully to something doesn’t happen just like that. It can happen “just like that,” but it doesn’t happen like that until it does. And everything else before that moment requires patience so that we can bring ourselves back to the point over and over and over again, to the point of presence, to the point of the attention that is called for from us in this very moment. That’s *kshanti paramita*, patience.

We think of ordinary patience as a kind of dull waiting. With it we become okay with what’s happening like standing on the too-long grocery line at Whole Foods or Berkeley Bowl and kind of “peacing-out,” so that it doesn’t really trip us out that there are way too many people waiting in line. It’s ordinary patience.

In transcendental patience there is an ever present dynamic showing up that allows us to cross over to the other shore, similar to *virya* (effort), without the noise in our heads. So with effort we apply ourselves, and *kshanti* (patience) allows us to be at ease with whatever arises. Somewhere in the rulebooks it is said that just because we apply ourselves it doesn’t mean things turn out the way we need them to, and so transcendental patience supports us in being able to be available to whatever shows up as a result of that.

All of these prior notions are incredibly difficult for us to really wrap our minds around without some kind of stabilizing force, something that enables us to allow these practices of transcendental virtues to really deepen within us because the world is moving really, really quickly. Who has time for transcendental anything? Until we find ourselves at *dhyana paramita*, which is

meditation. Ordinary meditation finds us on a cushion being a meditator...or a yogi or a mantra practitioner or any other kind of thing. --yet another feather in our caps. Transcendental meditation, not in the TM style, the transcendental virtue of practicing meditation is the meditation that is simply what we bring ourselves to with the deep understanding that that is the foundation of all other practices. Meditation allows the opportunity for spaciousness so that the front and the back and the sides begin to dissipate their norms. We bring ourselves to the practice of meditation in a deep way in order to clear that space out. Further, we don't get caught up in the idea that this meditation only happens on small round cushions. In transcendental meditation, each moment, each *moment* as we approach it is a meditation.

The last of the *paramitas* is—we say it in the beginning in the Heart Sutra--*prajna paramita*. The mother of all Buddhas is named *prajna paramita*. And *prajna paramita* refers to what we translate as “wisdom.” We're a very heady society, and so wisdom is often equated with an intellectual capacity. Wisdom is equated and correlated, in many of our minds, with someone who's really smart, someone who has all the answers and can tell us something great and that will help us. And we use the word loosely, Oh you're really wise. What we really mean is, they helped me figure something out. But transcendental wisdom has *nothing* to do with intellectual capacity at all. In fact, what transcendental wisdom has to do with is *no thinking* whatsoever. No thinking, no ideas, no concepts about giving, no thinking, ideas, no concepts about ethics, no thinking about effort, about patience, or about meditation. What transcendental wisdom is is to embody these virtues with no concept whatsoever. No gain, no idea about attaining anything. In fact, transcendental wisdom isn't even interested in being a *bodhisattva* because transcendental wisdom understands you're already there. Transcendental wisdom understands that you *as you are* is just what you need to be in that moment and releases a fixed idea about what needs to happen.

And here we are feeling a little concerned that we actually haven't been able to achieve each of these virtues in the way that I've explained them. They seem a bit lofty. How do we get to this extraordinary life from this ordinary place that we sit? With perfect intentions.

We begin where we are.

We begin with the practice of very, very ordinary generosity. If we have something to give and we can offer it, we do that. Maybe we'll think of ourselves as a giver and someone else as a recipient. Then we do really ordinary ethics where we grapple with things and wonder, Is this the way to be? And we stumble on moments when no one has to tell us, and we don't have to wonder, and we enter into a transcendental relationship with *those* ethics.

We start from a place of really basic effort. We get up in the morning when we don't really feel like it and we show up. We show up for our parents; we show up for our children; we show up for our practice; we show up for life in a very ordinary way. In the process of applying ourselves to that effort *completely* some moment arises where there is no effort and there's just you and there's just the moment that is present and you enter into transcendental effort.

So the entry into transcendental virtues is to be your ordinary self with the intention for perfect perfection, with the *intention* for crossing out of the sleeping state and into Wakefulness with very ordinary, very human giving and effort and ethics and patience and meditation and even your very ordinary wisdom brought to bear on as many moments as you can possibly muster. And you do this moment by moment.

Somewhere in the back of your mind, you will have an experience that you'll be able to turn around and reflect on. You'll remember that for a moment you forgot yourself, that for a moment you transcended. You'll take the experience of that moment and you'll connect it with the next one that arises and the next one that arises and before you know it there'll be no moments where that's not so.

So understand the word perfection as a living and dynamic way of being. Understand that you, and only you, have the capacity to encourage over to the other shore an ordinary state to a transcendental state by *your* choice, *your* actions, *your* effort in Each Moment. And trust that wherever you are is just where you need to be.

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