

THE SIX PERFECTIONS

A true practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism wants to become enlightened like the Shakyamuni Buddha for the sake of all living beings. Tibetan Buddhism is a part of the Mahayana tradition and according to this tradition there are six practices to be cultivated in order to be able to reach enlightenment. These practices are known as the six (transcendent) perfections, or the six paramitas. Some Buddhist teachings mention ten perfections instead of six. The six perfections are: 1. Generosity, 2. Ethical discipline, 3. Patience, 4. Enthusiastic effort, 5. Concentration, 6. Wisdom

The six perfections must be cultivated in order to become enlightened. Enlightenment is to become a buddha, an exalted being that has cut off the roots of ignorance and been released from cyclic existence. By practicing the first four perfections one generates discipline and harmony in physical and verbal actions. According to the law of karma positive actions are necessary means in order to cultivate the fifth perfection, concentration, and harmony and stability in the mind. The practice of the first five perfections is to use skilful means and accumulate merit. Without wisdom, the sixth perfection, one will not be able to develop a buddha's exalted understanding of reality and therefore enlightenment is impossible. The fourth, enthusiastic effort, is the indispensable support of all perfections.

A PROGRESSIVE SYSTEM OF ACTION The six perfections are not placed in this order by accident. The order is explained as going from lower to higher practice or from the gross to the subtle level. As one makes progress in this scheme of action, the practices are growing in importance and difficulty. The practice of each of the perfections is impossible without the cultivation of the preceding one from which it is developed.

Gampopa explains that when one practices generosity, one will accept the pure morality without focusing on material concerns. Ethical discipline gives rise to patience. When one has patience, one can make enthusiastic effort. When one has made enthusiastic effort, concentration will arise. When one is absorbed in Concentration, one will perfectly realize the nature of all phenomena (i.e. have wisdom).

WHY PRACTICE THE SIX PERFECTIONS? It is not difficult to agree with the Buddhist teachings that say all human beings want happiness and want to avoid suffering. According to these teachings human beings desire happiness, but in fact they are creating the causes for suffering. Since the teachings explain happiness as being the result of a peaceful mind, in order to become happy it is necessary to train the mind. When practicing the six perfections the mind is trained to perfection. The bonus is that the practice of the perfections also benefits other people, not only oneself. If the goal is that of a bodhisattva to attain enlightenment for the sake of all living beings, the practice of the perfections is indispensable.

TRANSFORMING THE PERFECTIONS INTO HABITS The ideal practitioner of the six perfections is the bodhisattva, but the perfections are virtues for everybody. To practice the six perfections one must have the wish to transform oneself. The teachings

say that the first step to cultivate each of the perfections is to reflect on the advantages of practicing and the drawbacks of not practicing the perfections. The teaching called "The 37 practices of Bodhisattvas" say that one should make the six transcendent perfections one's habits. If happiness is sought it is necessary to transform the way of thinking, feeling, and acting. All actions of body, speech, and mind must conjoin with the six perfections and this means to become familiar with the perfections by practicing them in everyday life. The Buddhist teachings say that if each of the perfections is meditated upon, if only for a short time, gradually one's capabilities will increase.

In the Mahayana teachings the bodhisattva's way of practicing stands as the excellent example for all followers of the Mahayana tradition: Their aim is temporary and ultimate happiness for all living beings. Their motivation is to attain enlightenment and become buddhas for the sake of all living beings, and this motivation is maintained at all times. They practice as well as they can and in accordance to the particular situation. They practice as many forms of each specific perfection as possible. They dedicate the merit gained through their practice, to the enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. Their practice is purified through their compassion and wisdom. This is the way a Bodhisattva practice. The Indian Buddhist teacher Shantideva has always inspired practitioners of the Bodhisattva trainings. He urges one to start practicing immediately: (The Way of the Bodhisattva, chapter VII, verse 14):

"Take advantage of this human boat; Free yourself from sorrow's mighty stream! This vessel will be later hard to find. The time that you have now, you fool, is not for sleep!"

Netlink: The Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Geshe Rabten, explains the six perfections in detail: <http://fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenParamitas.html>

1 GENEROSITY

The first perfection, generosity is called dana in Sanskrit and sbyin pa in Tibetan. The perfection of generosity is to cultivate an attitude of non-clinging. It is the wish to give to everybody, without expecting any reward, and giving fully without attachment. Generosity is measured by the motivation, not the action in itself. The perfection of generosity is not measured by one's ability to give, but by the attitude and readiness to give whatever is needed. When you give with perfectly pure altruistic intention, the amount is not important. This motivation is called bodhicitta. According to the Buddhist scriptures, the perfection of generosity is of three kinds:

1. The giving of material things. 2. The giving of protection from fear. 3. Teaching the Buddha's doctrine, the dharma.

BENEFITING ONESELF AND OTHERS Why is it important to practice the perfection of generosity? The perfection of generosity cuts off disturbing emotions and creates non-clinging. Clinging and possessiveness prevents us from any further progress along the path to enlightenment. Generosity is of great benefit to others and it generates compassion, the greatest virtue for a bodhisattva.

The Tibetan Buddhist master Gampopa explains how the perfection of generosity

benefits others. He says that the giving of material things will stabilize others body, the giving of protection from fear will stabilize others lives, and the teaching of dharma stabilize others minds.

According to the Buddhist teachings one cannot bring along anything at the time of death except one's karma. What is not given away will anyhow pass away in the end. So, the Buddhist teachers encourage the listeners to be clever and to be generous towards living beings now. One of the Mahayana texts imaginative reasons for practicing generosity is that if one is not generous, one will be reborn as a hungry ghost!

DEVELOPING AND INCREASING GENEROSITY According to Buddhist philosophy, it is clinging and attachment that prevents one from being generous. To develop and increase generosity it is necessary to generate the wish to give away everything and practice generosity in as many ways as possible. Also the fruits, i.e. the merit gained through being generous, should be abandoned. This is called "dedication of merit" and it is a very important part of every practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Dedicating the generosity practice to the enlightenment of all living beings is said to increase ones perfection of generosity.

There are many things that can be given away: Material things, positive energy, protection, friendship, advice, and one's body. The idea of giving away one's body has resulted in many fantastic and strange parables about self-sacrificing men, women, and animals. The Buddhist teachers point out that it will suffice to imagine giving the body away to living beings.

THE GIVING OF WISE GIFTS The perfection of generosity is practiced according to the situation. One should not give anything that can harm or cause suffering. Only what is afforded is given, and not given to the wrong persons. The perfection of generosity is practiced with respect and joy, and it is directed to everybody alike. Sometimes giving may even not be the appropriate thing to do. The Buddhist texts explain this in detail and the point is that as a practitioner of the Mahayana Buddhism one has the responsibility to evaluate the circumstances when giving. Perfecting the practice of generosity, is to be generous when one reflects on when to give, what to give and not to give, how to give, the recipient of the gift, and reflecting on why one is giving.

As a teacher giving instructions this responsibility of giving wise gifts only is even greater. Explaining the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine, the dharma is restricted by many rules. The recipients should be considered before given teachings because only what is suitable is taught to the audience. Like the other kinds of generosity, dharma should be given without consideration for wealth, honor, praise, or fame. Motivated by compassion, dharma is given in order to eliminate suffering and causing the listeners to act virtuously according to Shakyamuni Buddha's words. _____

2 ETHICAL DISCIPLINE

Ethical discipline, the second perfection, is known as shila in Sanskrit, and tshul khrims in the Tibetan language. There are three classifications of ethical discipline:

1. Restraint from harmful actions of body, speech, and mind. A monk or nun should keep the rules of monastic discipline, the pratimoksa vows (Tibetan: so sor thar pa), and laypersons should act in accordance with the lay precepts (not kill, not steal, no sexual misconduct, not lie, and no intoxicants). 2. Cultivating, protecting, and increasing virtue. 3. Helping and benefiting living beings, working for their aims in this and the next life. Helping others can be the giving of friendship, support, protection, and material things for those in need.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUAL PROGRESS Although we practice generosity, the first perfection, it can be spoiled through unethical conduct. The Buddhist teachings say that according to the law of karma the effect of unethical conduct is a bad rebirth were one cannot accumulate fresh stores of merit.

The Shakyamuni Buddha said that ethical discipline is the basis of all good qualities and compared it with the earth that supports everything. That is the reason why it is important to cultivate and protect ethical discipline. It is said that the cultivation of inner discipline lays the foundation of a peaceful mind. A peaceful mind is needed in order to make any further progress along the path to enlightenment. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Patrul Rinpoche invites us to take control of ourselves and practice ethical discipline: (Extract from Patrul Rinpoche / Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) & K. Brown and S. Sharma (eds.): *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. kunzang lama'i shelung p.238. Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997 (1994))

"Abandon evil doing. Master your own mind. Practice virtue well. This is the Buddha's teaching."

PURIFYING KARMA Even though one's mind is set to only do wholesome deeds, the Buddhist teachers recognize the fact that it can be difficult to avoid doing harm. The Tibetan teacher Geshe Sonam Rinchen advises the practitioner of the perfection of ethical discipline to purify their karma every day in order to counteract their wrongdoings. There are four important counteractions:

1. The power of reliance: Taking sincere refuge in the Shakyamuni Buddha (Tibetan: sangs rgyas), his teachings (Sanskrit: dharma, Tibetan: chos), and the spiritual community (Sanskrit: sangha, Tibetan: dge dun). 2. The power of counteractive behavior: Counteractions are any positive action done in order to purify one's thoughts and behavior. The most powerful counteraction is meditation practices that seek to eventually uproot ignorance, the very source of disturbing emotions, which prevent enlightenment. This decreases unwholesome acts and it is possible to engage in ethical discipline. 3. The power of regret: Acknowledging and truly regretting negative actions. This counteraction is described as genuine when one is feeling like having accidentally swallowed poison and thus intensely regret the wrongdoing. 4. The power of promise: Promising not to repeat the action.

PRACTICING INNER DISCIPLINE AND AWARENESS Ethical discipline is measured by how developed our personal intention and ability to refrain from harm is. So

practicing the perfection of ethical discipline starts with the intention. First of all one has to develop the wish to do beneficial and wholesome actions. Like all the other transcendent practices, the motivation should be bodhicitta, the altruistic intention and wish to help all living beings. Secondly, one has to be able to recognize negative and harmful actions in order not to do them. In addition to being able to distinguish between right and wrong, one has to pay close attention to thoughts and actions. It is important for the Buddhist practitioners to examine themselves and discover their faults and shortcomings.

"The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas" encourage one to practice like a bodhisattva and points out the importance of awareness and self-investigation (Verse 31):

"If you don't examine your own errors, You may look like a practitioner but not act as one. Therefore, always examining your own errors, Rid yourself of them- This is the practice of Bodhisattvas." _____

3 PATIENCE

It is necessary to protect the perfections of generosity and ethical discipline. This is done through cultivating the third transcendent perfection, patience, called ksanti in Sanskrit and bzod pa in Tibetan. The Buddhist concept of patience is more varied than just to bear up against troubles. The perfection of patience is of three kinds:

1. Taking no account of those who harm, applying patience as the antidote to anger. Anger destroys the ability of distinguishing between right and wrong. The Buddhist teachings say that even a single instant of anger destroys the merit gained from former wholesome actions. Anger leaves no peace in mind so spiritual maturing becomes impossible. Therefore anger is said to be ethical disciplines worst enemy, and it is important to be armored with patience, the antidote to anger. Patience calms the turbulence of disturbing emotions and is the best way to protect bodhicitta. Not expressing anger is no indication of patience. The Tibetan teacher Geshe Sonam Rinchen points out that patience is not the suppression of anger but the ability to remain calm and feel at ease.

2. Accepting hardships and suffering. While practicing the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings one has to investigate the nature of suffering and accept the hardships as an outcome of past actions, the personal karma. Perfection of patience is to see suffering and hardships as a help to ripen the fruit, the outcome of those past negative actions, and in that way consuming negative karma. If this is accepted, and patience applied, one only has the actual difficulty to deal with and this difficulty is in turn decreased by making constructive use of it. Positive and patient behavior is also a way to avoid collecting new negative karma.

3. Persistent study of the dharma, the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings. This is the patience of continuous investigation of the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine in order to acquire firm faith in his teachings. It is listening to the teachings, critically reflecting on the meaning, and putting into practice what is learned. The practitioner applies patience

in facing the truth of reality without fear and accepting the doctrine that all phenomena's nature is emptiness.

SUFFERING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE PATIENCE If one wants to develop a bodhisattva's patience, the first step is to reflect on the advantages of suffering and hardships. According to the Buddhist teachings the nature of cyclic existence is suffering. Thinking about suffering as the outcome of past negative actions, suffering works as a reminder to avoid those harmful actions and instead delight in what is good. If there was nobody who stirred up one's anger, no unfavorable circumstances, no suffering at all, it would be impossible to develop patience and in the end also impossible to become a buddha. For the bodhisattva, hardships are the teachers of patience, the great chance to cultivate the perfection of patience.

INNER DEBATE Buddhist teachers advise the practitioners to undertake reflection and a kind of inner debate. The intention of inner debate and investigation is to persuade oneself that it is never appropriate to become angry. The Buddhist texts give many examples of this inner debate to be reflected on in order to develop and increase patience. One of the popular examples is that of an angry person hitting you with a stick:

When an angry person is hitting you with a stick it is not appropriate to become angry at the stick that causes you pain, because the stick is wielded by the angry person. It is not appropriate to be angry with the person, because anger and the causes for anger (disturbing emotions) move him to hit you. In Mahayana Buddhism, the law of causation and interdependence explains that nobody can act independently without conditioning factors. If one believes, like the Tibetan Buddhists, that everybody are slaves of disturbing emotions, patience seems to be the only solution to suffering. Shantideva investigate this example further. He points out that not only are everybody moved to act by disturbing emotions, but also the person who gets hit is at fault. By having a body one is providing the target of the stick. Since both persons have faults, who is to blame? (Shantideva: The Way of the Bodhisattva, chapter VI, verse 43)

"Their weapons and my body-Both are causes of my suffering! They their weapons drew, while I held out my body. Who then is more worthy of my anger?" _____

4 ENTHUSIASTIC EFFORT

The fourth transcendent perfection, enthusiastic effort, is known as virya in Sanskrit and brtson 'grus in Tibetan. Virya is the strength, zeal, and diligence in every undertaking. It is the enthusiasm to work for the benefit of others and delight in wholesome activities. Enthusiastic effort is steadfast, energetic, and joyful striving because the benefits of one's actions are recognized. The Tibetan scholar Gampopa defines the fourth perfection as a feeling of joy in virtue that implies having an excellent motivation, excellent applied effort in virtue, and continuing perfecting motivation and effort.

THE ROOT OF ALL PERFECTIONS All the other perfections need to be strengthened and increased through enthusiastic effort. Creating and stabilizing the other perfections

depend on enthusiastic effort. As the energy to set out on the bodhisattva path and to continue until one reaches enlightenment and becomes a buddha, enthusiastic effort makes it possible to complete what is undertaken. Without enthusiastic effort the other transcendent perfections would be useless and enlightenment would not become a goal possible to reach. According to the traditional Buddhist teachings there are three aspects to enthusiastic effort:

1. Enthusiastic effort as armor: The courage and energy that prepares one to withstand difficulties and continue until one's goal is achieved. This means to take on heavy burdens and being prepared to make sacrifice for the benefit of others. 2. Diligence in positive actions: Striving to create virtue through the practice of the perfections. This means to conjoin all actions of body, speech, and mind with the perfections. 3. Insatiable enthusiastic effort: Devoting all energy in working for others. Patrul Rinpoche wants the practitioner to be determined to keep going with the constant power of a great river until enlightenment is achieved.

LAZINESS: A WASTE OF HUMAN POTENTIAL In order to understand enthusiastic effort one has to understand its opposite: laziness. The Buddhist teachings say it is very foolish to be lazy and not take the opportunity of the very fortunate fact that one is born as human beings and thus can do whatever is wanted. Since the possibility to become a buddha is present in every human being, it is said to be a waste of human potential not to make use of it. A bodhisattva applies enthusiastic effort to counteract and remove laziness, self-contempt, and discouragement, which are obstacles in the practice of the perfections. The Buddhist teachings point out that it is important to combat laziness by discovering and stopping its causes and investigate how to support enthusiastic effort. Laziness can be hesitation and postponement, discouragement, and involvement in trivial activities. Patrul Rinpoche compares trivial activities to ripples on the water, they are endless, and thus it is never possible to find time to practice the transcendent perfections. That is why it is necessary abandoning one's engagement in trivial activities.

URGENT ACTION The Buddhist teachings urge the practitioners to oppose the laziness of postponement. Since it is impossible to predict death, it is necessary to take to action immediately. Shantideva's advice to the practitioner is to reflect on which great opportunity it is to be born as a human being. Death may take this opportunity away from one at any moment and the teachings say that later it can be very difficult to obtain such favorable conditions as having a human body. When one understands that there is no time to lose the feeling of urgency should trigger one to start practicing Buddhism. Patrul Rinpoche calls on immediate action: (Extract from Patrul Rinpoche / Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) & K. Brown and S. Sharma (eds.): *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. kunzang lama'i shelung p.246. Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997 (1994))

"Do not wait another second to practice. Do something about it immediately, like a coward finding a snake in his lap or a dancing-girl whose hair has just caught fire. Totally

abandon worldly activities and devote yourself to the practice of the Dharma right now."_____

5 CONCENTRATION

The fifth perfection, concentration, is called dhyana in Sanskrit, and the Tibetan term is bsam gtan. The perfection of concentration is the mind's ability to stay focused. To develop concentration, one has to discipline and stabilize the mind and refine the intellect. It is also necessary to pay constant attention to the first four perfections. An ethical lifestyle is essential, since unwholesome physical and verbal actions make the mind turbulent.

Everybody has some ability to concentrate. The Tibetan teacher Geshe Sonam Rinchen points out that when the ability to concentrate is transformed into the perfection of concentration, it becomes a cause for attaining enlightenment, to become a buddha. By cultivating the fifth perfection the mind is said to become steady like a mountain, invulnerable to distractions and one's actions are as a consequence more effective. The perfection of concentration is not an end in itself, but lays the foundation of wisdom.

MEDITATION The method to make the mind stable and attentive is meditation (Sanskrit: bhavana, Tibetan: bsgom pa). A concentrated mind that is familiar to meditation, makes it possible to attain states of meditative absorption (Sanskrit: samadhi, Tibetan: ting nge 'dzin). Buddhist teachings describe a wide range of meditation practices. There are two essential kinds of meditation:

1. Calm abiding meditation (Sanskrit: shamata, Tibetan: shi gnas). Calm abiding is called the perfect absorption of mind within mind. It is to cultivate a mind that is not being disturbed by mental wandering.
2. Special insight meditation (Sanskrit: vipashyana, Tibetan: lhak mthong). It is analytical meditation that makes it possible to gain insight into the true nature of reality. In that way it is the perfection of wisdom.

The ultimate goal is the union of a mind that rest in equanimity and a mind that understands reality with perfect clarity. The union of a stabilized, calm abiding mind and special insight is necessary in order to overcome disturbing emotions. According to Gampopa, calm abiding is the actual meditative concentration that serves as the indispensable basis of special insight; the perfection of wisdom where one can realize emptiness directly.

DEVELOPING CALM ABIDING AND SPECIAL INSIGHTGampopa explains calm abiding as the powerful state of mind that can control mental activity and disturbing emotions. Calm abiding enables one to meditate on an object effortlessly without mental wandering. Anything can be an object for meditation. It can be the figure of a buddha or one's own breath. An object like the body of a buddha, which has a good influence on one's concentration and energy, is considered the optimal meditation object. By gazing at the object, visualizing it, or concentrating one's mind on it, one can develop a calm

abiding mind that is in a way dissolved with the object of meditation.

The Buddhist teachers point out that it is important that the meditation practice is within one's capacity. In the beginning people can concentrate single-pointedly only for a short time, but as one gets more familiar with meditating, one can hold the concentration longer. The actual calm abiding is only possible through again and again familiarizing with meditative stabilization. When the practitioner has made progress in calm abiding meditation, he or she can investigate the nature of the meditation-object through analytical meditation. The practitioner alternate between analytical meditation and calm abiding meditation and by repeated alternation special insight is generated. When meditating with special insight the mind can understand the nature of the object and it becomes possible to realize directly the nature of the meditation object as being emptiness. When developing the perfection of concentration the final object for meditation is emptiness. (Meditation is also described in the section about the perfection of wisdom.)

BLISSFUL SOLITUDEThe Buddhist scriptures give plenty advice on how to create the proper environment for meditation. According to the teachings, personal attachment or desire for material things causes the most frequently experienced distractions in meditation. Shantideva advises the practitioner to renounce loved ones and seek solitude. He was a monk himself and thought that what he called "blissful solitude" was ideal for meditation. Most texts on the perfection of concentration are aimed at monastic circles, but the instructions apply to laymen as well: The Buddhist teachings ascertain that it is impossible to make any progress in meditative concentration without reducing one's preoccupation with worldly affairs.

CONCENTRATION LIKE A GOOD BOWSTRINGIn order to make meditative concentration more effective, it is important to know what kind of problems that may occur during meditation and how to counteract them. The Mahayana teacher Patrul Rinpoche says that the intensity of one's concentration should be like a good bowstring: not too tight, nor too loose. When practicing calm abiding, the two obstacles one is most likely to encounter are dullness and agitation. If one's concentration is too loose, dullness sets in. If concentrating too tight, agitation arises. When obstacles appear one has to counteract them. The antidotes to the disturbing emotions that agitate the mind can for example be to focus on another object and in that way heighten one's concentration. Dullness can be remedied by "brightening" the object of meditation. One has to judge for oneself whether concentrating too loose or too tight. In order to be able to recognize incipient dullness and agitation mental awareness is indispensable. Mindfulness that allows the mind to examine itself is also needed.

In his teaching on the six perfections, Tibetan teacher Geshe Rabten, points out that mindfulness and awareness is very important when practicing the perfection of concentration:

"Each time the mind leaves the object, mindfulness has to bring it back. Awareness has to

be used to see if disturbances are coming or not. If we carry a bowl full of hot water along a rough road, part of our mind has to watch the water and part has to watch the road. Mindfulness has to keep the concentration steady, and awareness has to watch out for disturbances that may come."

Netlinks: The quote above is an extract from a teaching by Geshe Rabten where he explains the six perfections:<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenParamitas.html>

Two very good traditional Buddhist teachings on the perfection of concentration is provided by Tibetan teachers Geshe Rabten and Lama Gelek Rinpoche:<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/samadhi.html><http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/concentration.html>

6 WISDOM

The last and sixth perfection, transcendental wisdom, is called prajñāparamita in Sanskrit and shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa in Tibetan. The perfection of wisdom is omniscience, the knowledge of every aspect of reality.

Only an enlightened being, a buddha can possess this kind of wisdom. In that way transcendental wisdom is the final goal and the effect of practicing the perfections. At the same time it is the path to, and the cause for, enlightenment. Thus the perfection of wisdom is named both after its cause and its effect. The perfection of wisdom is not only knowledge, but also the name of a special group of Mahayana texts.

Wisdom is practiced while performing the other perfections. Transcendental wisdom is compared to a sighted guide capable of leading the otherwise blind practice of the perfections to the city of enlightenment. Patrul Rinpoche says that on a conventional level the perfection of wisdom enables one to be self-guided in virtue: One gets rid of disturbing emotions, and compassion toward living beings arise. The ultimate result is that one becomes a buddha: When ignorance is replaced by transcendental wisdom, one sees clearly the truth about how things really exist and the chain of cyclic existence is broken.

DEVELOPING WISDOMThe Mahayana scriptures say that without wisdom one's experience of the world is like an illusion. This is because one has wrong presuppositions about what reality is. Practicing the perfection of wisdom is to develop the ability to see the reality of existence without false conceptuality. A person who perfects wisdom will understand the theory of emptiness: that all phenomena are empty of an inherently existent "self" or essence. One will understand that everything is created by causes and conditions external to themselves as explained in the theory of causation and interdependence.

In general when the Buddhist teachings explain the development of wisdom it can roughly be described and divided into three phases of practice. Each phase is important because the latter phase depends on the former. The more one practice, the more wisdom is revealed:

1. Wisdom through hearing and studying the teachings' words and meaning. 2. Wisdom

through critical investigation of reality. 3. Wisdom through special insight meditation (Sanskrit: vipashyana, Tibetan: lhak mthong). Special insight is only possible if one has developed a calm abiding mind as perfected in the practice of concentration.

STUDYING THE MAHAYANA CONCEPT OF WISDOMThe first phase in developing wisdom is to listen to and study the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine. The Buddhist teachers give oral teachings where they explain the doctrine with references to the scriptures and to their own teacher's oral explanations. The students of Mahayana Buddhism have to listen to and study the oral and written teachings again and again. The teacher's guidelines and explanation are very important in order to grasp the meaning of the words.

The Mahayana texts on the perfection of wisdom are quite difficult to approach and they are full of paradoxes and puzzles for the mind. The many contradictions met with in the teachings attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha are explained by Mahayana teachers by referring to the Buddha's ability to suite his teachings in order to fit the needs of his listeners: There is different wisdom for different people. That is why it seems like contradictions, but actually there are none, they argue. As an example ordinary people are taught the theory of a non-existing self or ego, because they may be able to intellectually grasp that. People who have spiritually matured learn that all phenomena are beyond existence and at the same time are beyond non-existence, beyond both existence and non-existence, and beyond neither existence nor non-existence. To study and try to understand the Mahayana concept of transcending wisdom can be a difficult and confusing task.

Not only will the reader meet many contradictions when reading the different Mahayana texts, but to add to the confusion there are also different philosophical schools within the Mahayana tradition. The Mahayana philosophical traditions of the Cittamatin and that of the Madhyamika have different understandings of what kind of reality transcendental wisdom reveals. The different philosophical systems have distinct ways of reasoning to prove their different understandings of reality.

INVESTIGATING REALITYA student of Mahayana Buddhism should not be content with just hearing and reading about the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine. Instead of just leaning on a theory, which explains the nature of reality the Mahayana teachers want the students to examine reality critically themselves by investigating the nature of each and every phenomenon intellectually. One way of analyzing reality is through debate, as can be seen at the Tibetan monasteries where two or more monks question each other using logic and reason. Another important way of investigating reality is through one's own reflections. A fundamental investigation, that the Mahayana teachings advise one to undertake, is to start searching for what you call your "self" or "ego". Close examination will reveal that the ego is impossible to locate within oneself. In fact all phenomena one investigates do not exist as they appear to do. They seem like they have an inherently existent essence, but through analyzing them, one will see that they have not. The teachings explain that this means that all phenomena's nature is emptiness. By analyzing

reality repeatedly one can develop a firm intellectual understanding of reality. This conceptual understanding is a necessary step to developing transcendental wisdom, but the direct realization of emptiness is only possible through meditation.

MEDITATION Analyzing the phenomena of existence intellectually is a fundamental step to perfecting wisdom, but one has to go further. The conclusions one has arrived at after repeatedly debating and intellectually analyzing have to be experienced through meditation. By familiarizing with meditation practices like fixing the mind single-pointedly on an object for meditation, one stabilizes the mind and one's ability to concentrate is heightened. A calm abiding mind is the prerequisite for special insight, the perfection of wisdom.

Through meditation it becomes possible to develop a mind that rest in equanimity and special insight. By cultivating special insight one can directly perceive emptiness when meditating, not only intellectually grasp it. Special insight arises from meditation and this is contrasted to the wisdom arisen from reflecting in the second stage, and the wisdom from hearing and studying in the first stage. When one is meditating on emptiness, one develops direct experience with emptiness by watching how it appears. (Meditation is also described in the section about the perfection of concentration.)

ULTIMATE WISDOM IS BEYOND DESCRIPTION Tibetan Buddhist philosophy consider the Madhyamika teachings as the supreme expression of the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings on transcendental wisdom. The philosophical school of the Madhyamika (The Middle Way School, Tibetan: dbu ma) was founded by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century and is still today very important within the Mahayana tradition. Their method for developing transcendental wisdom differs on some points from other philosophical schools within Mahayana Buddhism, but all of them can be systemized into the scheme described above. According to the Madhyamika tradition there are two kinds of truths or levels for wisdom:

1. Conventional truth (Sanskrit samvrtisatya, Tibetan kun rdzob bden pa): Knowing and understanding phenomena in terms of their relative levels of existence. This is to know the phenomena's mode of appearing.
2. Ultimate truth (Sanskrit paramarthasatya, Tibetan don dam bden pa): Realizing directly the emptiness of reality. This is to know the phenomena's mode of being.

Wisdom of the conventional is to understand that all phenomena are like illusions. In ultimate reality emptiness is experienced. Shantideva is a proponent of the Madhyamika tradition and concludes that (The Way of the Bodhisattva, Chapter IX, verse 2):

"Relative and absolute, These the two truths are declared to be. The absolute is not within the reach of intellect, For intellect is grounded in the relative."

The ultimate cannot be expressed in conceptual terms, so words and thoughts cannot express emptiness. The Madhyamika tradition takes the consequence of this theory by rejecting all intellectualization. This means that all statements and theories, anything emerging from intelligence, have the nature of relative truth. Theories can be very

practical, but they cannot express the ultimate nature of all phenomena.

DECONSTRUCTING THEORIESThe Madhyamika method of attaining buddhahood is called "the middle way". They reject reasoning and state that reasoning is insufficient because it will always end in contradicting itself. The Madhyamika tradition uses the method of philosophical criticism to deconstruct theories. They take a theory and gradually refute it without taking a counter position. All theories, including Buddhist theories, are targeted in this deconstruction. There are two viewpoints that are especially exposed by the Madhyamika: the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Gampopa demonstrates what he thinks of the two viewpoints by quoting Saraha: (Extract from Gam-po-pa/Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (trans.) & Ani K. Trinlay Chödrön (ed.): *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation. The Wishfulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings* p. 243. Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1998.)

"Grasping existence is like cattle. Grasping nonexistence is even more stupid."

To believe that phenomena really and permanently exist, like an eternalist, is to be as stupid as cattle. But it is worse to negate the existence of phenomena, like a nihilist, through intellectual analysis and believe that nothing exists. It is ignorant to be an eternalist or nihilist, and the ignorant will not become buddhas.

LEAVE THE MIND TO ITSELF The ultimate cannot be expressed in conceptual terms, but this does not mean that it cannot be reached. The purpose of deconstructing all theories is to reduce the intellect to total silence so that wisdom beyond thought construction is possible. When the mind is left as it is and aware, transcendental wisdom experiencing emptiness directly is possible. So, the Madhyamika method is to stop being caught up in thoughts and theories, and to stop grasping after or rejecting the phenomena of existence. Tilopa sums up the method of becoming a buddha: (Extracted from Gam-po-pa/Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (trans.) & Ani K. Trinlay Chödrön (ed.): *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation. The Wishfulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings* p. 247. Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1998.)

"Do not ponder, think, or cognize. Do not meditate or examine. Leave the mind to it self."

Netlink: For a detailed explanation of the history and philosophy of the Madhyamika tradition: <http://www.cyborganic.com/People/Gizard/Tibud/Mad/mad2.htm> _____
