

The Six Paramitas

Perfections of the Bodhisattva Path

A Commentary

by Chan Master Sheng Yen

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The Six Paramitas

Buddhism can be approached by *studying* the teachings and by *practicing* the teachings. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two. Deliberating upon and profoundly discerning the teachings can itself become a way of practice. Similarly, practicing to attain wisdom (*prajna*) requires stabilizing the mind (*samadhi*) through understanding the teachings. Study and practice, like *prajna* and *samadhi*, are thus intimately connected.

Hinayana and Mahayana

By a hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana, approximately twenty different schools of Buddhism had arisen and had begun interpreting the teachings in different ways.¹ About 400 years later, Mahayana (Great

Vehicle) Buddhism first appeared, and distinguished itself from the earlier schools by referring to them as Hinayana (Small Vehicle).

The term 'Hinayana' refers to those Buddhists who mainly practice the Four Noble Truths¹ and the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment², and 'Mahayana' refers to those who also engage in the Six Paramitas and the Four Ways of Gathering Sentient Beings³. However, there is no scriptural basis for this distinction. In fact, the earliest Buddhist scriptures (the *nikayas* in Pali and the *agamas* in Sanskrit) encourage the practice of the Four Noble Truths and the Thirty-Seven Aids as well as the Six Paramitas. The early schools did not refer to themselves as Hinayana, and the term can be viewed as derogatory if used by Mahayanists to designate other Buddhists as practitioners of a lesser path.

Nevertheless, upon closer examination, we do see a distinction between the two schools in that Mahayana Buddhism places a greater emphasis on generating a supreme altruistic intention to help others. This aspiration to alleviate the suffering of others without concern for one's own nirvana is the *anuttara* (unsurpassed) bodhi-mind.⁴ While diligently practicing the Dharma, such a practitioner realizes that nirvana is not a blissful, abiding state in which one rejects samsara, the existential realm of suffering. Without rejecting or clinging to nirvana, the bodhisattva vows to return to the world to help sentient beings. This is the correct scope of mind on the Mahayana path. As ideals of this we point to Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom;

Samantabhadra, Bodhisattva of Great Actions and Great Functions; Avalokitesvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion; and Ksitigarbha, Bodhisattva of Great Vows. These great bodhisattvas vowed to help sentient beings reach liberation before attaining their own buddhahood. Therefore, if we must make a distinction between Hinayana and Mahayana, it should be based on the bodhisattva's more expansive scope of mind rather than on methods of practice.

At the time of the Buddha, and after, the idea that the ultimate goal of practice was to transcend this world and attain nirvana was very prevalent among practitioners of Buddhism, and of other paths as well. This idea of transcending the world and abiding in a heavenly realm is also common in many Western spiritual disciplines. To distinguish their own practice from the path of personal liberation, the Mahayana teachers used the term 'Hinayana.'

Some people, of course, are so attached to the material and sensual delights of this world that they do not want to leave it. Their attitude is "Why would anyone want to leave this wonderful world?" But bodhisattvas realize that even as people immerse themselves in sensual delight, they create unending afflictions for themselves and others. They realize that the world is characterized by inherent suffering, and they wish to end the cycle of suffering for themselves and for others; they have aroused a desire to help others break free from the endless cycle. Realizing they have awoken from

false dreams, they want to help others awaken too. This is the proper attitude of bodhisattvas. When we reflect on their sincerity and genuine intentions, we feel quietly touched and grateful.

Practicing the Paramitas

In Sanskrit 'paramita' literally means 'having reached the other shore.' It also means 'transcendence,' or 'perfection.' If we exist on the shore of suffering, reaching the other shore would mean leaving suffering behind and becoming enlightened. Hence, transcendence means to become free from mental afflictions, (the causes of suffering) and from suffering itself. The true practice of the paramitas is to be free from self-attachment and self-cherishing. Based on this definition, the Four Noble Truths and the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment can also be considered paramitas, because they accord with the teachings of non-attachment and no self-cherishing. All Buddhist practices can thus be viewed as paramitas as long as they accord with the above principles.

From the Mahayana standpoint, practicing the paramitas is to practice in accordance with selflessness and non-attachment, and for the dual benefit of self and others. Practicing for one's own benefit is not truly paramita practice. Therefore, when we do not practice to benefit others, whether we practice Hinayana or Mahayana, we are not truly practicing the paramitas.

Except for a few to whom helping others is of primary importance, most people believe in defending and caring for themselves first. Once, after a lecture I gave on the Six Paramitas, a gentleman said to me, “I never entertained ideas of benefiting others, because I am feeble. If I can’t help myself, how can I vow to deliver others? I would be very happy if someone could help me. But it is not possible for me to help others.”

The truth is that when you seek to benefit only yourself, what you can reap is limited. Your own rewards will be greatest when you strive to benefit others. As a simple example, if you seize all the wealth in your own family—from brothers, sisters, parents, spouse or children—how will you survive in that household? Conversely, if you are careful and considerate of your family members, they will be appreciative and reciprocate. Your family will become very happy and harmonious. Therefore, Buddhism espouses benefiting others as the first step on your path to liberation. The Six Paramitas are precisely the means to do this.

What then are the Six Paramitas? They are: generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), diligence (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*). Their purpose is to eradicate the two types of self-attachment, to sever the two types of death, and to transcend the ocean of suffering.

Self-Attachment

What are the two types of self-attachment? First is attachment to one's own body, the extension of which is our concept of life span. The five *skandhas*⁵—the material and mental factors that together lead to our sense of self—are the fundamental source of our vexations and afflictions. To break away from this self through practicing the Six Paramitas is to give rise to wisdom that will sever the attachment to one's physical body. Eradicating this kind of self-attachment means transcending our illusions about the world.

The second type of self-attachment is aversion to the afflictions and sufferings of worldly existence. Eradicating this type of self-attachment means transcending our aversion to the phenomenal world, and no longer fearing the cycle of birth and death.

Death

What are the two types of death? First is the physical death that ordinary people experience as they migrate through samsara (the cycle of birth and death). The second type of death consists of the stages of transformation on the bodhisattva path. There are ten such stages, or *bhumis*⁶, that a bodhisattva traverses on the way to buddhahood. Bodhisattvas experience samsara, but their death is not the ordinary physical death mentioned above. It is rather, the death of progressively subtler layers of attachment that are

shed as great bodhisattvas progress through the *bhumis*⁸, transforming their own merit and virtue, and finally attaining the *dharmakaya*, the body of reality, perfect buddhahood. The tenth and last stage is the complete fulfillment of all practices and realizations; thereafter transformation death will not recur. In accordance with the ten *bhumis*, bodhisattvas practice the Ten Paramitas.⁹ Thus, when you generate bodhi-mind, the altruistic mind of benefiting others, you benefit yourself as well.

¹ Of the schools of early Buddhism, only one still is still prominent, the Theravadin, concentrated mostly in Southeast Asia.

² At his first sermon after his enlightenment, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths (Pali: *Dhammacakka-pattavana Sutta*). They are the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way out of suffering by means of the Eightfold Noble Path, which consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

³ The Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, the *bodhipakshika-dharma* ('things pertaining to enlightenment'), are divided into seven groups:

- 1) The Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*): mindfulness of breath, mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of mental objects (dharmas).
- 2) The Four Perfect Exertions (*samyak-prahanani*): to avoid unwholesome acts not yet committed; to cease unwholesome acts already committed; to engage in wholesome acts not yet done; to continue wholesome acts already engaged in.

- 3) The Four Roads to Samadhi Power (*riddhipada*): concentration of intention, of effort, of mind, and of daring.
- 4) The Five Mental Faculties (*indriya*) of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.
- 5) The Five Corresponding Powers (*bala*) of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.
- 6) The Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*bodhyanga*): mindfulness, knowing between right and wrong, exertion in practice, delight in the teachings, purification of the passions, equanimity, and non-discrimination.
- 7) The Eightfold Noble Path (*ashtangika-marga*). See endnote no. 2.

⁴ Also known as the four immeasurable and outwardly radiant states of mind (*brahma-viharas*) cultivated by the bodhisattva: loving-kindness to all beings (*maitri*), compassion to those in suffering (*karuna*), joy in the liberation of others from suffering (*mudita*), and equanimity (non-discrimination) to all beings, whether friends or foes (*upeksha*).

⁵ Bodhi-mind (*bodhicitta*) in the narrow sense is the initial arousal of the aspiration to enlightenment experienced by the incipient bodhisattva. Coincident with the aspiration to enlightenment, the bodhisattva also vows to help sentient beings even before achieving self-enlightenment. More broadly, bodhi-mind also refers to 'awakened mind,' or enlightenment.

⁶ The fives *skandhas* ('heaps' or 'aggregates') are the constituents of a sentient being: form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. The first skandha, form, is the material factor, the other four are the mental factors.

⁷ The ten *bhumis*, or transformation stages of the bodhisattva path to buddhahood, are described in various sutras, among them the Dashabhumika-sutra. At the first bhumi, the bodhisattva has aroused the aspiration to enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) and takes the bodhisattva vows. At the tenth and final stage, the bodhisattva attains complete enlightenment and is identified with the *dharmakaya*, the transcendent buddha-nature.

⁸ At his first sermon after his enlightenment, the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths (Pali: *Dhammacakka-pattavana Sutta*). They are the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way out of suffering by means of the Eightfold Noble Path, which consists of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

The First Paramita:

Generosity

The practice of generosity, *dana*, can be traced to the early teachings of the *nikayas*, the *agamas*, and to the later teachings in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, as well as the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra*ⁱⁱ, which elaborates on this practice. Among the paramitas, generosity can be the easiest to fulfill; one can reap immediate benefits from it. Generosity can be practiced in two modes: with characteristics and without characteristics.

Generosity with Characteristics

We practice generosity with characteristics when we have a motive for performing a generous deed. For example, we can give as a form of repayment for something received. We may feel indebted even though the giver does not expect anything in return. We may even do charitable work or make donations in the name of that person. We may then say that we have fulfilled our indebtedness. This kind of giving is good and may be counted as generosity.

I have a disciple who attended a seven-day retreat with me in Taiwan. Afterwards I asked him why he came to the retreat. He replied that his wife was extremely good to him, and he asked her what he could do to express his gratitude. She told him the best thing he could do for her was to attend a Chan retreat with me. So he told me his motive for coming to retreat was to repay a debt to his wife. You could say that this is practicing generosity with characteristics because it was a good deed with a motive.

Generosity with Characteristics and Intention

Generosity with characteristics and intention is giving with the intention of being recognized, being reciprocated, or earning spiritual merit. (Spiritual merit is experienced only after death, in a heavenly realm.) While these types of generosity are a little self-serving, like investments, they are still good and better than not giving anything. Then, there are people who are miserly, yet

expect others to be generous to them. This is like constantly paying for things with your credit card. Somewhere down the line, the account must be repaid with interest.

The paramitas are antidotes for mental afflictions, and the cure for greed and miserliness is generosity. Miserly people may feel that they benefit themselves when they get the upper hand, but in reality they are harming themselves. Their strong possessiveness prevents them from receiving the rewards of helping others.

The Sickness of Poverty

While this may sound strange, the poor should practice giving as a way of freeing themselves from poverty. What can a poor person give? How can his condition be improved by giving things away? But even poor people can benefit others by working very diligently. Through diligence they will acquire what they do not have and they will gain what they lack. In the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra, Nagarjuna Bodhisattva uses the analogy of a thirsty person who, being wrapped up in self-concern, does not know how to find water. Someone with a strong intention to bring water to those around him will very diligently look for water. Because of this altruistic intention, he will tend to find more water than someone concerned only with his own thirst. Similarly, the poor are more likely to find wealth if they work

diligently to benefit others. The Daoist sage Laozi said that one can gain the most by giving everything to others.

Giving Without Characteristics

Giving without characteristics means giving freely, without self-oriented motivation. It includes the gift of wealth, the gift of the Dharma, and the gift of fearlessness.

The Gift of Wealth

The wealth that one may give freely, without characteristics, includes material wealth, time, knowledge (including speech), and one's own body.

Giving material wealth, including money, is fairly obvious, but giving one's time and knowledge are also ways of practicing the first paramita. For example, for a very wealthy person to give a little bit of money may be less meritorious than for a poor person to give a lot of their time and knowledge.

Giving one's body includes one's strength and energy, but it also includes literally giving part of one's physical body, such as offering skin to burn victims, or donating organs for transplant. You can be an organ donor while alive, or after death. But when you are alive, you would want to consider carefully before donating any parts of your body.

The Gift of the Dharma

People who think that the Dharma is something very mystical and abstract can become very confused about the idea of giving the Dharma. In fact, the Dharma is nothing other than the teachings of Buddhism. For example, the teaching on dependent origination is that all existence is a result of interdependency. Something exists because it is the product of other causes and conditions, and this something will in turn condition the arising and existence of other things. Everything is constantly under the influence of something else, and nothing truly exists independently; hence, nothing is permanent. How do we relate this to our own lives? Here is a simple analogy. The reason why a woman is a wife is because she has a husband. If she does not have a husband, she is not a wife and vice versa. Therefore, husband and wife are interdependent, relative to each other. If you present this teaching to other people, then you are giving the Dharma. You need not literally tell others about the theory of wives and husbands; you just need to communicate the idea of this thing being dependent on that, and vice versa, or this ceasing to exist because of that, or the perishing of this causing the cessation of that. Simply by sharing your understanding of the Buddha's teachings, you are giving the Dharma.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that one who understands dependent origination understands the Dharma. If one understands the Dharma one

also understands Buddhism. If a person correctly expounds this idea, this can be considered giving the Dharma.

The Gift of Fearlessness

People fear many things—death, poverty, illness, imprisonment, and so on.

The gift of fearlessness is being able to respond to people's fears and needs with wisdom and compassion. As practitioners of the paramita of giving, we can alleviate people of their fears, whatever their origins.

¹ The Buddhist *sutras* are the recorded teachings of the Buddha, while *sastras* are commentaries on the sutras by later scholars.

The Second Paramita:

Morality

The second paramita is morality, or *sila*. It means conducting oneself in accordance with Buddhist precepts. The precepts one take depend on one's stage of practice. At the most basic level is the three cumulative pure precepts: to refrain from harmful deeds, to cultivate virtue, and to benefit all sentient beings.

Other types of individual liberation precepts are taken to complement or uphold the three cumulative pure precepts. These vary based on whether one is a layperson, a novice, or an ordained monastic. We can also uphold the precepts of a *shravaka* who practices for personal liberation, or we can uphold the precepts of a bodhisattva who vows to liberate sentient beings. We can

take the shravaka precepts for the present lifetime, or we can take the bodhisattva precepts continuously, lifetime after lifetime.

The Buddhist Precepts

The five basic Buddhist precepts, which complement the three cumulative pure precepts, can be taken partially. It is not necessary to take all five.

These five precepts are: not killing, not stealing, not lying, not committing sexual misconduct, and not taking intoxicants.

Why do the shravaka precepts last only a lifetime? The seed generated by taking and maintaining the Buddhist precepts can be regarded as the precept essence. Different from ordinary matter, this subtle essence is a hidden, non-manifested form-dharma¹ or phenomena of form that arises from material phenomena such as body and speech. Therefore, when physical life ceases, that precept essence also ceases.

On the other hand, the essence generated by the bodhisattva vows is established on the subtle level of one's mind-stream, or mental continuum. The virtuous seed that is generated by the bodhisattva precepts and vows is imbedded in one's subtle mind-stream, and will continue to mature until the ultimate attainment of buddhahood. It is actually a mind-dharma, not a form-dharma. Since the mind-stream is without beginning or end, the precept essence persists until one achieves full buddhahood.

While the *bhikshu* (monk) or *bhikshuni* (nun) precepts are taken once per lifetime, the bodhisattva precepts can be taken cumulatively, over and over again. This is how bodhisattvas integrate the precepts into their conduct and being over many lifetimes.

That is one difference between the precept essence of a shravaka and that of a bodhisattva. Another difference is that the shravaka vows place greater emphasis on renunciation, that is to say, on escaping suffering, on cutting off desire, and on transcending the three realms of samsara.² Although the bodhisattva precepts also involve renunciation, they go beyond renunciation and take altruistic bodhi-mind as the very foundation of the path.

In taking their vows, monastics renounce career, wealth, social status, and other things associated with lay life. On the other hand, lay people who enjoy some of these assets should also contemplate that such material things are intrinsically empty. They should understand that their worldly goods are the result of many interdependent conditions coming together, and are therefore inherently impermanent. Nevertheless, while contemplating their emptiness, one should still use one's assets wisely to benefit sentient beings. One should use one's body, speech, mind, and resources to help others without having notions of "This is mine," or "I am helping others." As one upholds the bodhisattva precepts, renunciation and bodhi-mind manifest inseparably.

The very spirit of the bodhisattva precepts is the vow to benefit others.

Through genuinely benefiting others, we ultimately benefit ourselves.

Instead of making our own concerns paramount, we first look to the welfare of our immediate family and the sangha.³ We then extend that spirit to relatives, friends, and associates. Finally, we hold this attitude to strangers, the larger society, and the environment. This truly benefits us many times over. Ordinarily, people believe that if they do not take care of themselves first, “Heaven will crush them and the ground under your feet will crumble.” However, the bodhisattva’s way of taking care of self is using expedient means to benefit others. The precepts provide us with the moral foundation for accomplishing this.

¹ Here, the word ‘dharma’ is being used in the sense of phenomenon, or ‘object’ as opposed to ‘Dharma,’ with a capital ‘D,’ which refers to the teachings of Buddhism.

² The three realms (triloka) that constitute samsara, the cycle of birth and death, are: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. Human beings exist in the desire realm. The form realm is a heavenly realm inhabited by spirits who still possess form. The formless realm is a heavenly realm inhabited by pure spirits.

³ The term sangha specifically refers to the community of Buddhist monks and nuns, but it may also refer to the larger community of Buddhist practitioners.

The Third Paramita:

Patience

The third paramita is patience or *ksanti*. The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* (Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom) describes the practice of patience as ‘pacified patience.’ This means that when there is patience, the mind will be pacified. Not only will the mind be stable, but the body will also enjoy a sense of well-being. Patience in one’s livelihood will extend to other aspects of one’s life, and vice-versa. Without patience we could not endure the conflicts and obstacles we encounter in life. Without a pacified mind and body, we can become very agitated and consumed with internal turmoil. A Chinese proverb says, “When tigers fight, death or great injury will result.” With humans, the conflict is often between the external world and the mind within.

I once watched on TV an Olympic event between swimmers from Japan, the USA, and the Soviet Union. A Japanese swimmer came in first. When the winner emerged from the pool a reporter asked him, “Did you know that the Soviet swimmer was only a few inches behind you?” The swimmer replied, “I was absorbed in exerting my whole being and skills in swimming. If I had worried about who was next to me, I would have lost.” The reporter said, “You seem very proud and self-confident.” The swimmer replied, “For months I studied these swimmers from videos. By incorporating their skills into my training, I gained confidence in my own abilities. I would not say that I am proud. I am just learning, not competing.”

This story relates to the perfection of patience because the Japanese swimmer’s mind was at peace through his patient learning from his opponents, and his consequent confidence. To learn from one’s opponents, to be confident without arrogance or pride, is the bodhisattva spirit, and worthy of emulation.

Three Kinds of Patience

There are three ways to practice patience: patience with those who wish to harm us, patience with regard to the environment, and patience in enduring the dharmas.

Patience with Those Who Would Harm Us

If we do not respond in a harmful way when confronted by those who wish to harm us, we can avoid hurting others and ourselves. If we do not habitually respond negatively, it may seem that we always surrender, but we are actually developing the courage and skill to protect ourselves as well as others. In the long run it will be better for everyone. By analogy, if you refrain from chopping down a tree every time you need firewood, in the long run the forest is preserved for future use.

You may question these ideas and say that if you do not fight back, you will be preyed upon and taken advantage of by others. If you are the only one who is practicing patience among a large group, you may feel overwhelmed and even fear bodily harm or your livelihood. In a situation like this, how can you practice patience?

In ancient China, General Sun Tzu mastered the art of war. He taught that the best strategy is to persuade the enemy to surrender without fighting. The same strategy is used in Chinese martial arts, where the skilled fighter does not harm or kill, using the least amount of effort to subdue the opponent. A martial arts axiom says: "Use four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds." This means using the opponent's own force to defeat him. This same principle can be used in the perfection of patience, where the critical pivot is in applying of wisdom to turn around difficult situations.

To resolve confrontations, you must extend compassion to those who would harm you. Using wisdom may transform at least half of such difficult times into favorable conditions. This is not to say that if you are the only one practicing patience you should let them take advantage of you. Rather, you should respond with wisdom and compassion. Not all of them may become very good people, but if half of them treat you fairly, this is already very favorable. The sutras say that practicing patience is manifesting wisdom and compassion. Therefore, one should not mistake surrender for patience.

Patience with Regard to the Environment

Patience with regard to the environment means enduring pain and difficulty when faced with natural calamities, hurricanes, great storms, extreme cold or heat, and so on. Furthermore, Buddhists view their physical bodies as being made up of the same four elements that make up the environment: earth, fire, water and wind. When the body is not in harmony, or when we are ill, it is the result of an imbalance of the four elements. Therefore, patience with regard to the environment includes patience with one's own body and its troubles.

Patient Endurance of Dharmas

Patient endurance of all dharmas is regarding all phenomena, including our own experiences of pleasure and pain, as having the nature of emptiness--- that all dharmas lack independent self. This kind of patience encompasses all favorable and unfavorable conditions, and embraces the two previous patience practices.

Contemplating Emptiness

When we practice the three kinds of patience we are actually contemplating emptiness. In principle, the three practices progress from enduring those who wish us harm, to enduring difficulties in our body and in the environment, to enduring the emptiness of dharmas. In a sense, the third kind of patience is the easiest, since you can practice it at anytime and anywhere by contemplating the emptiness of dharmas. As a result you can also perfect the previous two patience practices. When we contemplate the impermanence of all our experiences—whether painful, pleasurable, or neutral—we gain an insight into selflessness. We can understand the meaning of emptiness through this insight of selflessness, and directly engage the Dharma.

Worldly and World-Transcending Patience

Patience can be worldly or world-transcending. Worldly patience is manifested in coping with the environment, enduring extreme heat, cold, hunger, thirst, pain, joy, criticism, and physical and mental fatigue. World-transcending patience goes beyond the experiences of pleasure, pain, fatigue, etc. It is forbearance in integrating the Dharma into one's life, in accepting the difficulties that come with exertion in practice, and in using one's time wisely and fully.

By its nature, perfecting patience is a long process. I once encouraged an overweight person to engage in more meditation and exercise. Two weeks later he returned and said that he had followed my advice, but had not lost much weight. Besides, he was getting tired of the routine. I countered that I had been a monk for several decades without feeling that I had made any progress. Nevertheless, I had to be patient and continue to fulfill my vows as a monk. I told him that he should also be patient and continue to practice.

On the other hand, yesterday one of my disciples remarked that practicing the Dharma had been much help to him lately. Yet I see him showing up again today. Even though he feels stagnant for the moment, he keeps coming to our center to learn the Dharma. This is world-transcending patience.

The ability to endure, to have forbearance is integral to living; without it we cannot accomplish anything. To practice patience is to integrate it into our daily lives, our careers, our studies, and so on. These all require various

degrees of patience, without which it would be very difficult to maintain a basic sense of humanity and to have harmony with others.

In one of the sutras, Shakyamuni Buddha said that patience is the greatest wealth, and without it, he would not have attained buddhahood. We are all probably aware that there has never been a war among Buddhists, or an extended war against Buddhists. This is probably due to the sense of tolerance and patience, which are at the core of Buddhism.

In a Chinese martial arts novel, there was an arrogant master swordsman who used his skills to bully others to get what he wanted. At the same time, there was also a monk who was well-trained in using his cloth belt to defend himself. One day the overbearing swordsman and the monk crossed paths. The monk knew that this swordsman had evil intentions and decided to block his path. The swordsman demanded that the monk get out of his way or feel the fury of his sword. When the monk stood his ground, the swordsman attacked. The monk simply flicked his belt around the swordsman and his weapon, and tied them both up. When confronted with forbearance and patience, even an expert warrior can be defeated.

The Fourth Paramita:

Diligence

The paramita of diligence, or *virya*, nurtures zeal in one's practice. It is a keenness without fear of demanding work, and is the antidote for laxity. The Buddhist scriptures say that Shakyamuni and Maitreya both gave rise to bodhi-mind at the same time, but Shakyamuni, the buddha of this era, attained buddhahood first. The scriptures also say that 5.6 billion years after Shakyamuni, Maitreya will become the buddha of the future era. Perhaps Shakyamuni became a buddha first because he practiced more diligently, but the more likely reason is that Shakyamuni's causal grounds for attaining buddhahood were different from those of Maitreya.

Vows and Aspirations

Without vows and aspirations, one can quite easily become lax. You may think all day long, “I should be more diligent.” But as the time draws near, physical discomfort, headache, or fatigue may cause you to fall prey to laziness. “I feel tired and I really need to rest. As soon as I feel better, I’ll practice very hard.” Attitudes like these come from laziness. We can give ourselves all kinds of excuses for not practicing.

Once there was a lazy student who never studied. He made excuses throughout the year. In the spring it was a nuisance to study when the weather was beautiful outside. During the summer it was too hot to stay indoors and study. In the autumn he wanted to go out and enjoy the cool breezes. When winter arrived and the end of the year approached, he figured he might as well wait till the next school year to study.

There is a Chinese poem that summarizes this attitude succinctly:

Springtime is not meant for studying.

The heat of summer is good for sleeping.

Fall slips away, and winter arrives,

Time for spring-cleaning to prepare for the new year.

Diligence is pivotal for a practitioner who has generated the bodhi-mind of benefiting others. The Thirty-seven Aids to Enlightenment[i] include the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, for which diligence in practice is essential. The Thirty-seven Aids also include the Four Proper Exertions: to avoid

unwholesome acts not yet committed, to cease unwholesome acts already committed, to engage in wholesome acts not yet done, and to continue wholesome acts already started.

Making vows is essential to the Buddhist practitioner. They can be small, great, or ultimate. A small vow can be just for a day; a great vow can be over a span of time. The highest form of vow is an ultimate vow that is made continuously, and that is to attain buddhahood for the sake of others. With diligence, one will persevere in helping sentient beings regardless of whatever calamity or obstacle may occur. Having made vows like these, you dare not become lax; you will constantly remind yourself to go forward.

When we reflect upon our own physical condition, we can see that our energy and life force are impermanent and limited. But with diligence and vows, it is possible even with limited resources to accomplish unlimited results. We reap according to what we sow. Great effort will gain great results; partial effort will only get partial results. If we put forth no effort at all, we will get no results. The point is that we have the choice to exert all of our effort, and to accomplish our vows. If we absorb ourselves diligently in the task we wish to accomplish, we will be very surprised by what we can achieve. We will be amazed that we can actually do so much for so many, despite having a limited physical body. This is all due to diligence.

Among my disciples are those who are diligent and those who are lazy. Some make excuses every time they are assigned a task. One disciple excuses

himself by saying that someone more qualified should do the job. When I tell him that he should adopt the bodhisattva spirit and practice diligence, he says that he is satisfied to become the last bodhisattva to attain buddhahood. He once said, “Haven’t you heard that Ksitigarbha, the Earth Store Bodhisattva, vowed not to accomplish buddhahood until the last sentient being had attained buddhahood? Well, let me tell you, I’m that last person. Everyone else can become a buddha before me”. His self-disparagement will lead to self-pity and an overall negative perception about himself and his abilities. But in reality, he is simply lazy and causes trouble for himself and others. People like this will rely on others to care for them, and drag everyone else’s efforts down. As a result, they cannot gain genuine benefit from their practices.

A healthy body with a lazy mind will eventually drag the body down. This will cause afflictions of the mind to flourish. Individuals who cultivate diligence have strong and healthy minds, and are more likely to have healthy bodies and feel elation in the Dharma.

According to one ancient treatise, there are three types of diligence. The first is diligence that is like armor; the second is the diligence that is able to gather all virtues; the third is the diligence that benefits all sentient beings.

Diligence that is like Armor

The diligence that is like armor manifests as fearless courage, enabling one to overcome all obstacles. One sees no enemy because nothing appears as an obstruction, and therefore nothing causes problems. One's diligence impels one forward fearlessly. When assigned a task, some people complain before even getting started. "Shifu, I see so many problems with this." These complainers see trouble rather than an opportunity. But there are others who take all impediments and difficulties as part of the process of spiritual growth and learning. They perceive problems as opportunities to enhance their own skills. As a result, they profit from even the most difficult challenges. Such people are practicing the paramita of diligence.

Virtuous Diligence

The second diligence is one that gathers all virtues. Virtues here refer to the Dharma practices of the Four Noble Truths, the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, and the Six Paramitas. Practitioners who engage this type of diligence use the experiences of body, speech, and mind, and all the phenomena in the environment as opportunities to practice. Whatever they experience, whatever they see, their whole being is filled with the aspiration to practice, from instant to instant. This is genuine diligence.

There are also people who practice the Four Noble Truths, the Thirty-Seven Aids to Enlightenment, and the Six Paramitas, but sporadically and not so diligently. They tend to separate their practice from their daily lives, and therefore miss many opportunities to practice. It is as if they are poised to get onto the Mahayana vehicle, and then they excuse themselves by saying, “Maybe I’ll take the next bus. In this life, it is too hard for me. Maybe in my next life, I’ll really begin to practice.” The problem is that it is uncertain when the next bus will come, or if it will ever show up again.

A diligent practitioner’s eyes are wide open for opportunities to practice anywhere and at any time. If they miss an opportunity to practice they will chase it down and to grab it. To use the metaphor of the bus, if the bus is pulling away from the stop, they will chase after it, unwilling to give up an opportunity to practice.

Compassionate Diligence

The third type of diligence is that which benefits sentient beings. This is the diligence of great bodhisattvas who will pursue sentient beings to hell, heaven, or any other realm of existence, to ensure that they will gain liberation. This kind of dedication to assure the liberation of ordinary people is very different from the romantic pursuits of men and women. Bodhisattvas don’t want anything from sentient beings and they are not there to impose any ideas on them, or to force anything upon others. Bodhisattvas are there

to benefit sentient beings, to make them feel secure and at ease, and to provide them with opportunities to move towards liberation.

Practicing the Three Types of Diligence

To summarize, the vocation of monastics is to practice these three types of diligence—the diligence like armor, the diligence that gathers all virtues, and the diligence that benefits others. The first type of diligence gives rise to vows that will be like armor to protect practitioners from obstructions on the path to buddhahood. The second type of diligence is realized through personal experience of the Dharma while engaging in virtuous deeds. The third type of diligence is to share with other sentient beings the benefits of personal practice. This is precisely the undertaking of a monk or a nun—to make full use of their rare opportunity for practice and cultivation. If they miss the opportunity in this lifetime, they may not get it again in future lives.

During my last visit with Master Thich Nhat Hanh at his Dharma center, I noticed that his disciples hugged each other. I asked them whether monks hug nuns. They replied, “No, monks hug monks and nuns hug nuns.” I further asked, “Why do you hug?” They explained that hugging is an expression of extending care to one another. It is a kind of closeness, of sharing and comforting between people. “That is what we practice.” After hearing this, I thought to myself, “It must be a very good feeling to hug

people. After all, little kids like to be hugged. Adults also like to be hugged.”

Therefore, I hugged the master when I bade him farewell.

In the Mahayana Code of Conduct for monastics, monks and nuns are strictly not allowed to hug anyone. The Buddha said that such a gesture is a sign of laxity, a loosening of one’s diligence in practice. For that reason, the rules for monastics are set out this way. However, upon reflection, I thought that Thich Nhat Hanh has sound reasons for allowing hugging between his monastics. When people hug each other, they have a sense of sharing and it feels very good and comfortable. Besides, it is a natural part of Western culture to hug. Maybe that is the reason why he has so many western monks and nuns but I have so few.

The Fifth Paramita:

Meditation

The fifth of the Six Paramitas is meditation or *dhyana*. In the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra, there is the phrase: “Don't abide in dharmas, abide in prajnaparamita.” This means that one should not abide in any dharma (phenomenon), but one should abide in non-scattered mind, one that has ‘no taste’. A non-scattered mind does not abide in samadhi (deep meditative concentration), nor craves the bliss of samadhi. This is the meaning of ‘no taste’. It is important to understand that dhyana is not necessarily the same as samadhi, although it includes samadhi. Master Tsungmi talked about five levels of dhyana, including the dhyana practices of

both the Indian and Chinese traditions. We will briefly describe the five levels without going into great detail.

First Dhyana Level

First, there is the outer path dhyana, practiced by non-Buddhist schools and religions where the most important goal is to attain samadhi. In this samadhi state one avoids influences and conflicts within one's body, mind, and the environment, and abides in the bliss of samadhi. Their highest aspiration is to enter some kind of heaven. One can say that the Indian yoga or Chinese Daoist practices belong to this category.

Second Dhyana Level

The second dhyana is the dhyana of ordinary beings who have learned about the Buddhadharma and the laws of causes and effect (karma). People practicing at this level place great emphasis on samadhi and abide in it, taking it to be liberation. Often what they experience is just the unity of body and mind, of the inner and outer environments, of previous and following thoughts. This is often described as being one with the universe. In their samadhi, they experience the four dhyana heavens of form and formlessness, including the dhyana heavens of thought and no-thought. They experience a kind of emptiness, but not the true emptiness of genuine wisdom. Thus they

will often mistake the four dhyana heavens as the four fruition levels of the arhat¹, and think they are liberated.

While experiencing samadhi, they will have no greed, no doubt, no burden of body and mind, and will think they have been liberated. But once they come out of samadhi and deal with loved ones, family, property and wealth, their vexations inevitably return. When this happens they will want to enter samadhi and experience bliss again. The main difference between the first two kinds of dhyana is whether or not the practitioner has been exposed to the teachings of Buddhadharma.

Third Dhyana Level

The third dhyana is that of the Hinayana, also called the dhyana of liberation. This dhyana is guided by the teachings of karma and emptiness, but it still requires the practice of the four dhyanas² and the eight samadhis.³

In this dhyana one practices according to the four fruition levels of the arhat. So one can apply the gradual practice of the four dhyanas and the eight samadhis of the realms of form and no-form. After attaining the level of the eight samadhis in the realm of no form, one will be able to enter the ninth samadhi, which is the dhyana of cessation (of sensation and thought), and thus attain arhatship and liberation.

Entering the dhyana of cessation requires the practice of the four dhyana heavens, which I will not explain, but I will explain how to practice in accordance with the four dhyana heavens using the seven expedient means.

The Seven Expedient Means

The first expedient means are the basic practices of the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind. The second expedient means are the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The third are the four mindfulnesses practiced together, as described below. The fourth through sixth expedient means are warmth, summit, and forbearance. I will not discuss these but go straight to the seventh, supreme in the world.

As we said, the first expedient means correspond to the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind. The remaining six means are actually based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, with the stages from one to the next being manifestations of one's level of practice.

Among the Five Methods the most commonly used are the first two: contemplation on the breath and contemplation of the impurity of the body. The remaining methods are supplementary: third is contemplation of causes and conditions, and the fourth is contemplation of the four boundless mentalities (including compassion). Depending on your source of information,

the fifth method will be either the contemplation of mindfulness of the Buddha, or the contemplation of the kinds of dharmas.

Of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the first is mindfulness of the body, the second is the mindfulness of sensation, the third is the mindfulness of the mind, and fourth is the mindfulness of dharmas.

Let's look again at the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind. The first method is the contemplation of breath. The second method is contemplation of the impurity of the body. Thus, the first two of the Five Methods are definitely related to the first of the Four Foundations, having to do with the body.

When we contemplate impurity, it is the mind that contemplates. When using the method of breathing, one is really contemplating the sensation in the nostrils. When thoughts arise in one's mind, mindfulness of such phenomena or dharmas is the fourth foundation practice.

Thus, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are really the continuation of the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind, and practicing them as a whole can actually lead to liberation. Very often, people think mindfulness is a simple, low-level practice, but being related to the seven expedient methods, it can lead to liberation.

The seventh stage-- supreme in the world-- is the first fruition level of Buddhist sainthood, or arhatship. The distinction between the dhyana of ordinary beings and the dhyana of the Hinayana is that the former utilizes

the four dhyanas and eight samadhis, while the latter employs the seven expedient means.

Basics Aspects of Dhyana Practice

The basics of dhyana practice can be summarized in six aspects: seeking, waiting, enjoyment, bliss, oneness, and putting down.

Seeking is the starting point of practice, wherein one actually engages in contemplation. For example, if we are practicing counting the breath, the mind is aware of, and focused on, counting the breath. This is seeking.

Waiting is the state of stillness, when one stays on the focus of the meditation, such as the breath. This is not the literal meaning of “waiting.” Moment after moment one is clear of being on the method. Having the same thought after thought after thought is waiting.

Enjoyment, bliss, and oneness are states one may experience during dhyana that one should not attach to, and should put down. Whatever one experiences at this stage should be let go. So, these six aspects are the entry to practicing the four dhyanas and eight samadhis. After getting to the sixth stage, one continues putting down until there's nothing left, and that is when one enters to the seventh and last stage, supreme in the world.

Before entering the first dhyana, one must use the Five Methods of Stilling the Mind and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Seeking and waiting are

present during the first dhyana, and persist after leaving the first dhyana.

Prior to entering the second dhyana, the dhyana of in-between, there is only seeking and no waiting.

In the second dhyana, there is neither seeking nor waiting. Only enjoyment, bliss, oneness, and putting down remain. One lets go of everything, including ideas of existence and emptiness, and continues practicing to attain enlightenment.

The Fourth Dhyana Level

The fourth dhyana is the dhyana of the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) also known as the dhyana of the bodhisattva. The main difference between the dhyana of the Hinayana and the Mahayana lies in the meaning of liberation. Hinayana practice is for the sake of liberation from samsara—the three realms of existence.⁴ According to the dhyana of the Mahayana, transcendence means neither attaching to, nor fearing the cycle of birth and death, and this distinguishes it from the Hinayana.

Not attached to birth and death, one does not fear birth and death and will have the compassion to return to the world to deliver sentient beings. Could one at this stage be practicing the four dhyanas and eight samadhis? Of course one could, as those are among many methods for attaining transcendence.

For example, sitting meditation is one of the practices in the dhyana of Mahayana, but is only one gate of entry. In fact, one can be practicing in any situation—reading and reciting sutras, prostrating, walking meditation, or engaging in any task or work as long as one’s mind is concentrated on the task at hand. One can be doing anything and still be practicing.

In *The Great Cessation-Contemplation (shamata-vipassana)*, Master Zhizhe talked about four kinds of samadhi: the samadhi of always sitting, the samadhi of always walking or standing, the samadhi of half walking and half sitting, and the samadhi of neither walking nor sitting. The first samadhi is always cultivation through sitting meditation, specifically the cultivation of the four dhyanas and eight samadhis. The second samadhi of always walking or standing is rarely practiced, because it requires practitioners to be standing all the time—one cannot lie, sit, or sleep, only move around or stand. The third samadhi of half walking and half sitting allows sitting, standing, and moving, and that is largely the practice in Chan. In the fourth samadhi of neither walking nor sitting, any posture or situation is appropriate so long as one is applying the principle of Chan.

Fifth Dhyana Level

The fifth dhyana is the dhyana of the Supreme Vehicle, also called the dhyana of the Tathagata.⁵ It is also called the dhyana of the Patriarch because it refers to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism. This

is the dhyana of sudden enlightenment and does not require the four dhyanas and eight samadhis. In fact, it is basically the method of no method. When there is no wandering thought in the mind, that is, the wisdom of Chan. Though originally transmitted by Bodhidharma, it underwent further development within the Chan School. The dhyana transmitted by Bodhidharma has two aspects: entry by practice, and entry by principle. Entry by practice is through cultivation of the methods of enlightenment; entry by principle is through directly perceiving emptiness.

The sixth patriarch Huineng, on the other hand, describes the fifth dhyana level in this way: as long as there is no attachment or self-centered thought in the mind, it is liberation or sudden enlightenment. In Huineng's Platform Sutra, there is this very important sentence: "Prajna and dhyana are the same. Where there is prajna there is dhyana, where there is dhyana, there is prajna." This view characterizes the school of sudden enlightenment.

In the gradual enlightenment school, one must sequentially cultivate dhyana for prajna to arise. On the other hand, the sixth patriarch talks about dhyana and prajna arising simultaneously, and importantly, says that sitting meditation is not necessary as long as one's mind and body are not in conflict or contradiction. When that happens, it is the Dhyana of the Patriarchs. Such a person is always in dhyana—while eating, sleeping, working. The idea is that life itself is dhyana.

¹Four fruition levels of the arhat: 1) The stream-entrant, who has erased all doubts about the path. 2) The once-returner, who will be reborn in samsara only once more. 3) The non-returner, who will not be reborn in the human realm. 4) The arhat, who has attained liberation in nirvana.

²Four dhyana stages: 1) relinquishing of desires, 2) joy and one-pointedness, 3) equanimity, and 4) equanimity and wakefulness.

³There are nine Samadhi levels, of which the ninth is the liberation experience of true emptiness by an arhat.

⁴The three realms of existence constitute samsara, where sentient beings are subject to the cycles of birth and death. The three realms are desire, form, and formlessness.

⁵Tathagata: one of the epithets of the Buddha, meaning 'thus come.'

The Sixth Paramita:

Wisdom

The sixth and last paramita is wisdom, or *prajna*. The Sanskrit 'prajna' is translated into Chinese as *zhihui*, often translated into English as wisdom. *Hui*, the second character, refers to having sharp roots with a very clear mind. *Zhi*, the first character, refers to using this clear mind to handle situations appropriately. One can say that *hui* is the essence and *zhi* is the function. There is another character for *prajna* in Chinese, which means brightness, being absolutely transparent and at ease without obstruction. Another meaning for *prajna* is the quality of being very acute, perceptive, flexible.

I will discuss prajna in the context of the practice methods towards enlightenment for an arhat or a bodhisattva. These methods include the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, the Six Paramitas, and the triple studies of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom.

Prajna is an essential part of Buddhadharma. Shakyamuni Buddha said that even if one practices all the principles of enlightenment, without the guidance of prajna, one is really not practicing Buddhadharma. For example, when you uphold the precepts or practice generosity without prajna, you are really only cultivating merit, which allows you to receive good retribution, such as being reborn in the human realm. Also, cultivating samadhi without prajna, you may experience the dhyana heavens, but once this samadhi is gone you will come back to the world in the same state as before.

To achieve wisdom you need to be guided by correct prajna. What is correct prajna? In the agamas, the early Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha said, “This arises, therefore that arises; this perishes, therefore that perishes.” The Buddha meant that when ignorance and vexation arise, we do certain deeds, and then we receive the retribution from those deeds. In receiving retribution, our vexation causes us to commit more deeds, prolonging this long chain of suffering, which is ultimately the chain of birth and death. This is the meaning of, “This arises, therefore that arises.”

What does, “This perishes, therefore that perishes,” mean? Ignorance is the root cause of our vexations. When ignorance perishes, all vexations in the rest

of the chain perish. Therefore, as one practices towards enlightenment and ignorance is eliminated, the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death also perish, along with worry, sorrow, agony, and emotional affliction.

Ways of Looking at Prajna

We can look at prajna in three ways. The first way is to distinguish prajna according to three dichotomies. The second classification distinguishes prajna into three functional categories. The third classification distinguishes prajna into five functional categories. This is somewhat complicated so please bear with me. If you cannot understand the theory, that is fine, as long as you understand the last section, where I will talk about prajna in practice.

General Prajna and Specific Prajna

The first dichotomy in kinds of prajna is that the Buddha taught general prajna to people with duller karmic roots, and specific prajna to people with sharper karmic roots. People with duller roots include shravakas (people who have heard the Dharma), as well as those already on the bodhisattva path. For them, the Buddha taught liberation methods like The Five Skandhas and The Twelve Links (nidanas) of Dependent Origination.¹ Of course, since we are ordinary beings with duller roots, this general prajna is good for us. For

those with sharper roots, Buddha taught specific prajna. It is important to remember, however, that specific prajna always includes general prajna.

I will give an analogy to explain the difference between general and specific prajna. I recently read about a sixteen-year-old boy who has already earned his doctorate and is ready to teach in a university. Does this young boy with a Ph.D. also have the knowledge of an elementary, high school, and college student? If this is an appropriate analogy, then you can see that this boy has both the general knowledge of all his education, as well as the specialized knowledge associated with his degree. Would you say that this boy has sharp intellectual roots?

The central teaching of general prajna is that there is no self. This is the essential meaning of the Five Skandhas. The first skandha is form, the material aspect of our existence. The other four skandhas—sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness—make up the mental aspects of our existence. General prajna teaches that the interactions between the skandhas give us the illusion of having a self, but since each of the skandhas are in fact empty, there is no abiding self.

The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination describe the origin of our existence in time as a causal sequence. It begins with ignorance and goes step by step to the last link, which is death. When we truly understand the twelve links, we see that nowhere in the chain arise a true self.

Now what is the content of specific prajna? It teaches that we should not attach to, nor fear, ignorance itself, or any of the other links from birth to death. Rather, one should not be affected by ignorance; one should be able to be in the midst of samsara and not be affected. In principle, general prajna has more to do with escaping from ignorance, the source of our suffering. One tries to liberate one's body and mind from suffering to another state. On the other hand, specific prajna says that one need not escape from one's body and mind to gain liberation. If one can exist in samsara and not be affected by ignorance and by one's body and mind, this is liberation itself. There is no need to escape to another world in order to gain liberation. As long as you can put down attachment to one's body and mind, it is already liberation. If we can remain in samsara and still be liberated, that would be the bodhisattva ideal. Specific prajna says that one should not think about benefiting ourselves, but only about benefiting all sentient beings, whether close to us or distant. We should think about how we can best serve others, without thought of gain or loss to ourselves. With an attitude no longer troubled by self-centeredness, we will be practicing the way of a bodhisattva, the Mahayana way.

Suchness Prajna and Illumination Prajna

A second way to dichotomize prajna is from the point of view of function.

First is suchness prajna, which is present whether one knows it or not. Then

there is illumination prajna, which is present when one has attained wisdom. When one's wisdom eye has opened, we have a mind that is not self-centered; one can apply this prajna to the benefit of people and the environment. One has no specific view of the world; there is only this prajna that one uses to perceive and understand the world. Illumination prajna refers to an active function, whereas suchness prajna is inactive. Suchness prajna is there whether one has wisdom or not, and illumination prajna refers to the function of wisdom seeing the world around oneself.

Worldly Prajna and Non-Worldly Prajna

A third way to dichotomize prajna is based on its different levels. First, there is worldly prajna, which is wisdom applied to a relative world, where we deal with people and the environment in relation to the self. Within such a relative world, there is a subject (oneself), and there are objects (other people and things).

Second, there is the non-worldly prajna of liberation, in which one does not see people and things around oneself as objects. Since there is no subject and no object, this kind of prajna is absolute, not relative. There is no idea of 'me' versus an object out there. This non-worldly prajna of liberation also functions when one is alone, but the main point is that one does not treat people and things in the environment as objects. Does this mean that worldly prajna is bad, since it perceives subjects and objects? Not necessarily. As long

as we apply the attitude of non-worldly prajna, that is to say, not treat people and the environment as objects, we are still in the state of liberation.

Three Kinds of Prajna

Prajna can be further classified as suchness prajna, illumination prajna, and expedient prajna. We have just described suchness prajna as always present, whereas illumination prajna is attained wisdom. We also talked about worldly prajna and non-worldly prajna, both being aspects of illumination prajna. Methods are needed to realize illumination prajna, and such methods are expedient prajna. Because the methods need to be communicated, we use language, such as through a sutra or Dharma talks. When we use sutras and lectures as tools to communicate methods of practice, these tools are considered expedient prajna.

Five Kinds of Prajna

A third classification of prajna divides prajna into five categories. We have just discussed the first three--suchness prajna, illumination prajna, and expedient prajna. We will mention the fourth and fifth, but will not go into detail. The fourth is phenomenal prajna, which is illuminated by illumination prajna. The fifth is auxiliary prajna that is there to assist our cultivation of

prajna. As with the first three, the last two are really about attaining illumination prajna.

Methods of Practicing Prajna

Now I want to talk about methods of practicing prajna, or more precisely, practicing illumination prajna. The first practice is to see that this body, this mind, and the environment are transitory and impermanent. Next come the four kinds of contemplation: subjective contemplation, objective contemplation, direct contemplation, absolute contemplation.

Subjective and Objective Contemplation

Most of the time we have a subjective view of the world. The interesting thing is that most of the time we actually think we're being objective. In fact there is no such thing as being absolutely objective. Objectivity really is just several people's subjectivity. When a group of people agree on something, it becomes objective.

Once, I was in a meeting when it was time to make a decision, and there were two sides that could not agree. I was the chair, so I abstained. The two sides tried different ways of voting and each time came up with a tie. Finally they said, "Shifu, you have to cast a vote to solve this problem." So, I cast a vote. After that, some asked me, "Shifu were you objective?" I said, "If I was really

objective, I would have abstained and just watched you fight. That's more fun." There is no absolute objectivity in the world. What is regarded as objective is sometimes just the subjective view of a few influential people. Everybody will follow and regard it as objective.

Hence, we should be aware in daily life of our habit of contemplating things from a supposedly 'objective' point of view, and regarding others as holding 'subjective' views. For instance, people often offer me food that they think is good for me. Sometimes I will decline to eat it and they will say, "Shifu, this food is good for you. If you don't eat it, you're not being objective." Are these people being objective or subjective? What they have done is objectively denied me of my personal preference.

Direct Contemplation

In the method of direct contemplation, whatever you see or encounter, you do not apply any interpretation or judgment to it. You do not label or compare. You just are aware that this is this, and this is going on. However, this is not prajna itself; all you can say is, "This is happening." Direct contemplation cannot be applied to solving your problems. When it comes down to what to do, "I don't know" is a correct response. Therefore, direct contemplation, while a useful practice, does not prajna.

Absolute Contemplation

The fourth prajna method is absolute contemplation. In fact, absolute contemplation is *madhyamika*—realizing emptiness to achieve liberation. In absolute contemplation, without imposing one's preferences, one applies common sense, experiences, and skill in dealing with people's problems. The important thing is to perceive what is really going on, without reference to one's own likes or dislikes, and to do what is most appropriate for helping someone. This involves communicating with and understanding that person, and doing what is most appropriate and beneficial for them. This is absolute contemplation, *madhyamika*, is not a question of supernatural powers; we are just talking about dealing with people without interjecting one's own self-centered perspective. We still need to rely on professional knowledge and specialized skills. When people are sick and ask me for help, I refer them to a good doctor. Otherwise, if I tried to cure someone's illness, I would be "getting medicine from heaven."

To conclude, I emphasize that prajna is wisdom, and wisdom is the attitude of no self. This means not having an attitude that is based on a self-centered perspective. Please do not misunderstand that this attitude of no self means there's nothing there. The self of wisdom is there to solve problems; the self of compassion is there to benefit people. One applies both the self of wisdom and the self of compassion to develop and cultivate a self that is pure and happy; one that eventually we will grow into the perfect being, a buddha.

¹The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (also known as the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising) are (1) fundamental ignorance, (2) action, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) the six sense faculties, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) desire, (9) grasping, (10) coming into existence, (11) birth, and (12) old age and death.