

Practice the Paramitas

excerpt from Appreciate Your Life by Taizan Maezumi Roshi

THE WEEK OF THE AUTUMN EQUINOX is prajna week in Japan. During this week we contemplate the practice of the six paramitas. These paramitas are dana, or giving; sila, or precepts; kshanti, or patience; virya, or effort; dhyana, or samadhi; and prajna, or wisdom. When we speak of the ten paramitas, we add upaya, or skillful means; pranidhana, or vows; bala, or power; and the last one, jnana, or the wisdom that transcends everything.

In practicing the paramitas, it does not matter whether you are a monk, priest, or layperson. We can equally practice the paramitas. Param means “the other shore” and ita means “to have reached,” so paramita means “to have reached the other shore,” or nirvana. In other words, the other shore is this shore. The division is eliminated. Wherever we stand, here becomes there, this becomes that. The enlightened life is right here in giving, in effort, and so forth. There is another interesting interpretation for paramita that means “the best, the very best,” the so-called unsurpassable. So the paramitas are the very best giving, the very best precepts, the very best or unsurpassable effort, the unsurpassable samadhi, the unsurpassable wisdom.

Dana, the first paramita, is the unsurpassable giving, the very best giving. What is unsurpassable giving? Quite often when we give something, we naturally expect some kind of return. We are not giving unconditionally. There are many aspects to consider regarding giving. On the one hand, we consider the three wheels of giving: the giver, the receiver, and that which is given. We ask how, when, and where giving can best occur. We can appreciate this endlessly, like space expanding in the ten directions. On the other hand, it could all be pinned down to a single point.

We have a saying, “The giver, the recipient, and the things given are none other than emptiness and tranquility.” This is the meaning of dana paramita. The fundamental teaching of the Buddha is no-self. Buddha is selfless—the giver is selfless, the recipient is selfless, and the things given are selfless. Regarding giving, Dogen Zenji said, “Only fools think that other people benefit at their expense. It is not so. Both benefit.” This is so because life is altogether as one. But we are so nearsighted that we see only a very small part of the one life. The more self-centered and selfish we are, the less we see.

There is a story of a young boy named Sessan, who was said to be a previous incarnation of Shakyamuni Buddha. Even as a young boy, Sessan was hungry for the truth of life, so he went to the mountains to find a teacher. One day while deep in the mountains, Sessan heard a voice saying, “Everything is impermanent. This is the dharma of being born and dying.” Hearing this, Sessan was deeply moved. “Where does this voice come from?” he wondered. He looked around, but saw no one. Then he heard the voice again, “Everything is impermanent. This is the dharma of being born and dying.” Then Sessan saw a fierce-looking demon. But Sessan was so eager to learn the truth of life, he felt no fear. Approaching the

demon, the young boy asked, "There must be another part to this poem. Please let me know the rest of it."

The demon replied, "No, I can't. I'm so hungry I can't say another word." Sessan pleaded, "Please! I ask this favor. What do you eat? I'll get it for you." The demon answered, "I eat fresh human flesh." Sessan said, "If you teach me the rest of this poem, I'll offer my body to you." The demon recited the poem: "Realize the state of no-life, no-death, no-change. See the emptiness. Then you will be in nirvana, comfortable and peaceful." Upon hearing this, Sessan cut his finger and, with his blood wrote the poem on the trees and rocks. Then he jumped into the demon's mouth and, at that instant, the demon transformed into the god Indra.

This story brings out another interesting aspect of giving. Dana is not limited to giving something to someone. It's giving yourself away! The Japanese word is kisha, "willing to abandon" or "cast away." That's giving.

Our standard for unsurpassable giving is: the three wheels are empty. In other words, when the giver, receiver, and things given are empty and peaceful, there is unconditional giving. When the giver, receiver, and things given are empty, then we don't have any ideas attached to them; in fact, we don't know who is the giver, who is the receiver, and what are the things given. Unconditional means that all these things are in their so-called empty nature, there is no gain and no loss, energy just flows in a natural way. Giving is at its unsurpassable best when done in this way.

In our practice, what to give is divided into categories such as material possessions. This reminds me of the story of the enlightened Layman Pang. He was a rich man who dumped all of his possessions into the ocean. Seeing him do this, his friends became upset and demanded, "Why don't you give these things to others who can use them?" Layman Pang answered, "These things are not good for me. How can I give them to others?" Sometimes, having possessions can hurt us. Of course, when we know how to use things without any particular attachment or detachment, it doesn't matter whether we have possessions or not. So being selfless, we can abandon things according to necessity or the situation, and it benefits others.

Another category is giving the dharma. For example, giving a dharma talk is sharing the dharma. In a dharma talk, the giver is turning the dharma wheel, the receiver is also turning the dharma wheel, and the dharma itself is turning. All together, all are turning in emptiness, in perfect intimacy, which is the most free, most precious way that the dharma turns. We are helping others to realize the most important thing; in life, which is accomplishing the Way. The Lotus Sutra says, "Why do buddhas appear in the world? To lead everyone to buddhas' wisdom." My teacher Koryu Roshi's dharma grandfather used this as a koan. Buddha himself spent forty years of his life leading people like ourselves to realization. When the dharma is given, the giver is receiving the listeners' response. The listeners are receiving and they are also giving. In a sense, we can say that everything is giving and receiving, isn't it true?

Dana paramita is perhaps considered the most characteristic of Mahayana practices because it most obviously involves others. But this applies to all the other paramitas as well. In

fact, each paramita contains all the others. For instance, in prajna or wisdom paramita, we practice selflessness, the empty condition of life. When we practice this wisdom, compassion arises naturally. This compassion is nothing but dana, giving. Being selfless, we can't help but give. When we practice selflessly, we are functioning freely as all the paramitas.

We emphasize the importance of bodhisattva practice. In other words, sharing with others is emphasized over one's own accomplishment. How can we truly share and appreciate this Buddha dharma? Although the three wheels are unconditioned and empty and we know this unsurpassable dharma can be freely given and received, yet somehow the wheel is stuck. It does not turn smoothly. Where do we get stuck? We can check ourselves against the three aspects of ignorance, anger, and greed. When our wheel is not turning quite smoothly, what are we ignoring? How can we help each other so that our wheels turn smoothly?

Of course, the wheel not turning smoothly is itself no other than the functioning of the dharma. We are the giver and we are the receiver and we are what is given, we are the dharma ourselves. Nevertheless, how is this wheel to be turned? Don't forget, this give-and-take is always mutual, for no one is fully awakened unless the whole world is awakened. So my position and your position are the same.

Who is the giver? Who is the receiver? What is being given and received? We are giving and receiving these paramitas. We are giving and receiving giving, discipline, effort, patience, samadhi, wisdom. These are not mere principles. How are we giving and receiving all of these paramitas? Each of us is equally involved, each of us is completely responsible. We all are the Buddha dharma. Regarding this, Dogen Zenji says that the ocean does not decline any water, but rather it accepts any kind of water. That is why it exists as the ocean. And that oceanlike life is the life of each of us, do you see? How much are we truly appreciating, digesting, and turning our life in this way?

As a standard of giving, we say that the best thing to give is no-fear. How do we do this? In the Heart Sutra, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva does the practice of prajna paramita and relieves misfortune and pain. Prajna paramita is anything, everything! Literally everything! Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, in relieving all our fears and troubles, gives no-fear. How is this done? When we don't have our self-centered ideas, then there is no-fear. So who is truly Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva? You know the answer, don't you?

Each of us has abundant dharma to share. So in doing this paramita practice, the practice of reaching the other shore, all of us know that the other shore is right beneath our feet. Right here! Always here! Wherever you go, that is where here is! How can we make our realization clear and appreciate these wonderful paramitas as the life of each of us?