

# Perspectives on the Paramitas: Finding the Other Shore Right Here

**Editor's Note:** This issue is dedicated to the practice of the paramitas. At their foundation, the paramitas are all an expression of our fundamental nature, which we can't know, and has no essential shape, quality or name. A good jewel can be described by its hue, luster, color, brightness and so forth. Some of us see one of these qualities more readily, some others, but before we see that, we only behold the jewel. Without the jewel, it is meaningless to speak of its qualities. Likewise, each of us already contains all of the paramitas. One aspect may glow more brightly for one person, and a different aspect for another. It is the same as one face having more prominent cheekbones and another more prominent eyes. These qualities also do not exist outside the person. So to practice the paramitas is not to practice at all. They are each contained in the other. True generosity also embodies wisdom. True samadhi also embodies patience, and so forth. To trust our own nature is already to practice the paramitas. If one aspect comes more naturally, let that shine forth. It is the voice of your own true self. So they can't really be practiced. But if you suffer, please take heed of them, and take refuge in them. You may find something of value there. And if you want to practice something, practice seeing them in the person next to you.

We asked the European teachers group to offer their views, and they generously responded with the following essays. We offer them to you, in support of the dharma.

## 1. Generosity

Arne Schaefer JDPSN

*The Chinese Emperor Wu from Liang asked Bodhidharma: "The Buddha has taught that one will go to heaven if one donates robes and bowls to a monk. But I gave countless monks food and clothing. I have paid many times for copies of the sutras. Also I have founded many, many temples. Tell me sir, how much merit have I earned?"*

*Bodhidharma answered: "None."*

This is a very famous story in the Zen tradition, talking about generosity. It shows the ordinary understanding of what we think that generosity is: giving money for a charity or at least giving something of material value to somebody in need. This is not wrong, but it is a very limited aspect of generosity.

First, generosity is not limited to money or material goods. You can be generous with anything you have and that you can give. As Shantideva taught, nothing is of any use unless it is for the wellbeing of others.

If we want to practice generosity, then we make sure that those around us have everything they need to live and work. So we give material things, give compassion, give wisdom. If we want to be happy, we should refuse to tolerate suffering, injustice and inequality. We should take personal responsibility to create change. And we should learn how to eliminate anger and violence in our life and in our thoughts. If we want to have harmony we

should learn to share resources and especially we should learn to share power, since trying to control others will fail anyway. So we can be generous with the time we spend with someone who is lonely or in need of someone to care about him. We can be compassionate when we feel with someone who is suffering. It can be the ear we open for someone's request. It can be our thoughts, thinking about how to help others. It can be the hands, feet, body and mind we are willing to offer for somebody's welfare.

To sum this up, there are four kinds of giving:

Giving material things

Giving protection or freedom from fear

Giving love and compassion

Giving wisdom or teaching

Second—and this is what makes the teaching of that story about the Chinese Emperor so much more precious—if you are giving because you want to get something in return, then it is not really giving anymore. It becomes wanting, and thus exactly the opposite of generosity.

For example, I work as a life coach, and I have some clients that have a Buddhist background and that want to apply Buddhist ethics to their work or businesses. Most of these clients are familiar with the concept of karma, which is basically saying that every effect has a cause. So for "getting" something (effect) you have to create the right conditions (causes) first, and this will make it more possible that your wish might come true. For instance, it is said that if you want to experience prosperity you have to give

first. Or to look at it the other way: people that experience material welfare must have planted the appropriate conditions before in this or another lifetime. That understanding of karma is very basic and does not take into account the complexity of how karma truly functions, but let's keep it so simple to get the point of cause and effect. One big problem is: even when you plant a seed you do not know when it will ripen and grow. If we would experience all karmic results right away—for instance for stepping on an insect and killing it with intention, so that in reaction we would feel our chest crushing right away—then this lesson would be easily understood. But it can take this lifetime or even more until a karmic seed ripens. Since we often do not experience results right away, it can become something like a point of faith whether karma works or not. We can only investigate this thoroughly and examine our experiences.

I had clients that really wanted to be good Buddhist businesspeople and who were very generous to their employees and customers, hoping their generous actions would benefit them and their company. But if there were not such great results or even when something went differently than expected, they got annoyed, as if somebody had betrayed them. Then they did not want to believe in cause and effect anymore. This means they should look closer at the intentions behind their actions and the seeds—the causes—planted by those actions. This thinking is like wanting to make a deal with the universe: I pay and you pay me back ten times, OK? This is what the Chinese emperor had in mind too: I have supported so many monks. Where will your place be when you get to heaven if you have only supported one monk? So he needed some strong medicine because he was not acting truly out of generosity, but rather out of greed. So that is why Bodhidharma hit him by saying: “None!”

*Bodhisattvas benefit sentient beings,  
But do not see any sentient beings.  
This is indeed a very difficult point,  
Superb and ungraspable.<sup>1</sup>*

So what makes generosity “true generosity”?

The Brahmaviśeṣacintipariṇchāsūtra declares: “Not reflecting is generosity.”<sup>2</sup> That means to act spontaneously for the benefit of all beings without thinking or meditating about it. If we are in a state of mind where we are not attached to anything, our true nature can appear



and express itself in so-called virtuous actions as the six paramitas. Our true nature shows naturally when we are not caught in dualism and we are not making any difference between “me” and “others” or between favorable or unfavorable conditions. In our tradition we call this correct situation, relationship and function. That means also that there is no such thing as the three spheres of the giver, the recipient and the act of giving, as it is taught in Buddhist scriptures explaining the action and function of generosity.

If we act like this spontaneously and without thinking then this is what is called “perfection of wisdom” or “perfection of insight”—that is, Prajnaparamita.

So we have to try, try, try for ten thousand years to just do it and stop checking for any personal results.

## 2. Ethics: In Order to Help

*Ja An JDPSN (Bogumila Malinowska)*

The sila (ethics) paramita is not separate from the other paramitas; in fact, all paramitas support each other.

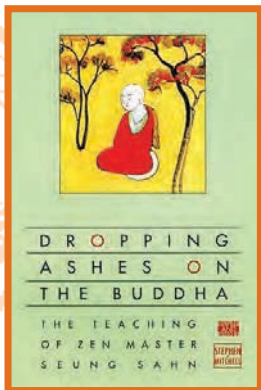
In Buddhist practice we often hear about a Middle Way, staying between extremes. This goes back to the story of the historical Buddha. In his pursuit of enlightenment, the young Prince Siddhartha gave up a life of pleasure and took up a life of extreme asceticism. He fasted nearly to the point of death. Eventually he realized that his correct path actually was between these extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial.

This example shows us that we should take care not to become too rigidly attached to precepts. Attachment to rules can obscure the larger purpose of morality, which is benevolent care for others. Focusing only on the rules can hinder rather than help. We see how this hindrance is a danger in our modern life. It is very clear it can become a cause of many conflicts in the family, in communities and among countries. Blind attachment to the rules can ruin the whole world.

Buddhism—and Zen particularly—encourages us to respond with compassion to the suffering in front of us. And sometimes, that requires breaking rules. Buddhism teaches that our actions should be guided by wisdom and compassion, with no trace of selfishness, not even the urge to do good to “feel good about myself.” For example, this selfishness might mean you want to help others in order to feel holy, perfect or clear.

The sila paramita is about ethical behavior, morality, self-discipline, personal integrity and harmlessness. The bone of this paramita is that through our love and compassion we do not harm others; we are virtuous and harmless in our thoughts, speech and actions. This practice of

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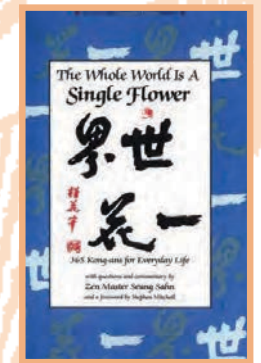
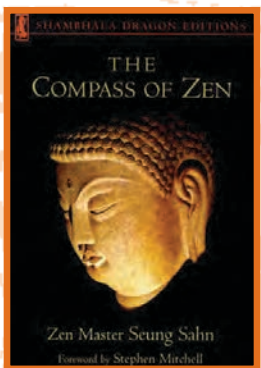
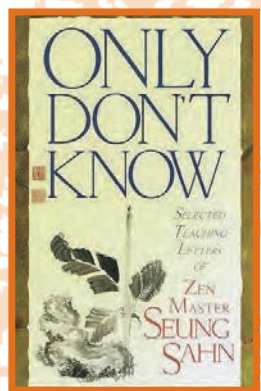
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ethical conduct is the very foundation for progressing in any practice of meditation and for attaining all higher realizations on the path. We should perfect our conduct by eliminating harmful behavior and following the bodhisattva precepts. We abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, taking intoxicants, divisive speech, harsh speech, greed, malice and wrong views. Following these precepts or guidelines is not meant to be a burden or a restriction on our freedom. We follow these precepts so we can enjoy freedom, happiness and security in our lives, because through our ethical behavior we are no longer creating suffering for ourselves and others.

At some stage we realize that unethical behavior always causes suffering and unhappiness. Practicing the perfection of ethics, we are free of negativity, we cause no harm to others by our actions, our speech is kind and compassionate and our thoughts are free of anger and wrong views. When we are strongly committed to the practice of ethics we are at ease, naturally confident, without stress and happy because we are not carrying any underlying sense of guilt or remorse for our actions; we have nothing to hide, we can be *ourselves*.

Self-honesty is very important. What we think can make us happy can also make us miserable. If our direction is to help and our mind is clear—before thinking—then we don't need to worry about precepts. "Good" and "bad" are created by mind; if our mind is extinguished, then our karma is extinguished—it works both ways. So we try to keep our correct direction: Why am I doing something? If I am not sure, then precepts give us an obvious answer.

Some of our actions are not visible to others, and the results will only appear in the future, but inside we know already what we are doing. Our true self—our intuition—is guiding us. If we are aware of this guide—in touch with it, hearing it—then there should be no problem deciding what to do. There should be no problem in quickly understanding the situation, choosing the correct action, keeping the correct action from moment to moment.

In Zen stories we have many examples about keeping and breaking precepts, and we know that the most important is to keep a correct direction and then to choose the correct action. We see this again and again in the familiar stories about the greedy monk; the rabbit and the hunter; the Zen teacher who admitted his affair with a girl from a village, took responsibility for her baby for one year, and was shunned by his village; and another teacher who decided to have an intimate relationship with a very ill woman to give her great feelings of love and acceptance. We see that sometimes the effect of "wrong" action may

not be understood by other people for a long period. It may look like we did something terribly wrong, society may reject us and exclude us, we may even face death. In that time great faith, strong center and not-moving mind is necessary.

These stories teach us to be flexible, open-minded, honest, careful and quick. In everyday life we do not usually have time to think through our decisions—we need a very clear and sharp mind. Sometimes our actions will be in opposition to common beliefs and traditions. We have to be brave. Sometimes the price of keeping clear, of keeping the sila paramita, is to give up our money, position, fame, health, love and even our life. We take this risk and accept the loss in order to help. So we are actually not losers at all.

Correct direction is not something we are born with. Some of us have less, some have more. But we can develop this ability and make it strong. When we hear about direction we understand: "Yes, this is good, this makes sense," but it takes time to find direction and to make it work. It involves hard training. So we need tools to develop clear direction in order to *skillfully* use ethics and all the other paramitas for others. These tools are great question, great courage and great faith, which we learn step-by-step; but that is a topic for another essay.

Buddha said:

*All happiness comes from desire  
for others to be happy.  
All misery comes from the desire  
for oneself to be happy.*

### 3. Patience

*Zen Master Ji Kwang*

Does the path of cultivating certain virtues (Sanskrit: *pāramitāyāna*) lead indeed to perfection and attainment? Does this Buddhist path differ from our practice of Zen? Or is it the same or part of it?

If you say it differs, I will hit you. If you say it is the same or part of it, I will also hit you. If you say nothing, I also hit you.

Then what is the meaning of cultivating virtues for us Zen students?

I will here focus on the third of the Mahayana paramitas, which is called ksanti paramita, the perfection of patience or forbearance or tolerance.

When I came to Korea in 1993 to live and work, I was so happy that I had found a place where I could live with my Korean wife, work as a cultural scientist and, most of all, that I could practice Zen with our Korean sangha and be close to Zen Master Seung Sahn, who at that time mostly stayed and taught in Korea. Soon I became a regu-

lar visitor at our Hwa Gye Sa Temple in Seoul, and met and listened to Zen Master Seung Sahn's dharma teachings.

However, I soon discovered that many foreign Zen monks and nuns, including some of my dear dharma friends from Europe, wouldn't stay long in Korea, and that many of them disrobed and left the school. One time I asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, "It looks like this traditional environment here in Korea makes it very difficult for our Western Zen students. How can we help them to stay and practice here?" Then he answered me in a strange way: "The first rows in Napoleon's army used to be only drummers. They walked on the battlefield right in front of all the other soldiers, and so they were among the first to fall."

I am sure that Zen Master Seung Sahn was sorry for all those Western monks and nuns in Korea who endured difficulties and hardships, and he tried to help them. But he knew that Korean Buddhism would not change in a short time, and that all those who really wanted to practice with him in Korea needed to accept this.

This ability to accept is what the Buddhist scriptures call *ksanti paramita*, or patience. It has several dimensions: first, the ability to endure personal hardships, at least temporarily; second, patience with others; and third, accepting whatever appears and what cannot be changed right away. In short, the *ksanti paramita's* meaning is: "No problem!"

In order to do this, we must get clear. Which means that we must first accept and believe in ourselves. Then we can develop trust. If we are clear, the situations we face and our relationships become clear. We experience truth and can accept whatever appears, just as it is. No doubts. No battle. No despair. Only then can we do what is necessary and help this world.

This is Zen. And this is the practice of cultivating the virtues of perfection.

Today we have a wonderful and growing sangha with monks and nuns and laypeople from East and West in our temples in Korea. Thank you to our teachers. And congratulations to all of you who have struggled hard and have finally attained the *ksanti paramita*: no problem!

#### **4. Effort: My Father Walking to the Other Shore**

*Koen Vermeulen JDPSN*

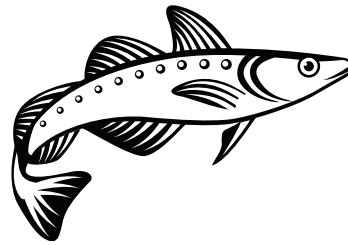
When I started meditation I was very determined. So, when I was sitting in meditation I was giving all I had. After some time I noticed that there was something not in balance. So I started to check: "Maybe I'm putting in too

much effort. Maybe I should fine-tune my effort." We call that checking mind. That's a big mistake. But how can we avoid this checking mind?

Once, my father told me a story. When he was a kid he lived on the coast of Belgium. Of course the sea is very dangerous for children. There he learned a very effective way to avoid any risk: just don't swim! And indeed, he never got in danger. Later, he fell in love with my mother and they decided to go to the Italian coast. So they spent a good time at the beach. And the sea was so inviting, the water was so calm. So he used a big inner tube and went into the sea.

He closed his eyes and started to doze off. He was in heaven. After a while he opened his eyes and noticed that the beach was very far away. He started to swim back to the beach, but there was a strong current. No matter how much he tried he only got farther and farther away from land.

Now heaven was far away. He got really worried and started to wave his arms and shout for help. After a while somebody swam out to meet him. This man tried to pull



my father back to the beach, but it just wasn't possible. Now both of them started waving their arms: "Hey! Help us!" Soon they saw another man approaching very fast. Right away, he said, "Don't worry, I'm

into competitive swimming. I will get you back." But no matter how hard he tried, the current was too strong. So he said, "You are too heavy. I will swim back to the beach and get help." But after some time he was back, completely exhausted. Luckily my father had this very big inner tube to help these two men, so that they could rest a bit. Again, the three of them started to shout for help. This time, it was the lifeguard who jumped in the water. When he arrived, he said, "Guys, you are swimming in the wrong direction! Just follow me." They swam about ten meters to the right, and then—big surprise—they could stand on their feet! The current had made a sandbar, so they could simply walk back to the beach.

Our mind is always making something, and then we enter the ocean of suffering. So we want to go back to the shore. And if we see somebody who is about to drown, naturally we want to help. We all have this direction. Everybody in this story has a clear direction and understands his job. Sometimes, just relax. Sometimes, ask for help. Sometimes, help others. From moment to moment, just do it. That is

correct practice. That is correct effort. We call it try-mind.

In this story, everybody has this try-mind. Everybody trains in the paramita of effort, and also generosity, ethics or precepts, perseverance and unmoving mind or meditation. This does not happen by accident. We all have something precious in our heart: How can I help you? This is what drives us on this path.

However, even if our direction is OK, we still have a problem. We make “I,” and as a result we perceive the ocean as suffering. Within this I-view, we cannot see clearly and we think that the other shore is far away. Then it is impossible to see that the way out of suffering is nearby. No matter how much effort we put forth, we cannot reach the other shore. The paramitas, which are an expression of our true self, are blinded by our ignorance, by our small “I.” Only when our wisdom sword cuts through the wall of *I-my-me*, then the sandbank appears clearly.

This “I” is created by our thinking. So, only cut off your thinking and return to *before thinking*. Then you can see clearly and walk the bodhisattva path on the sandbar, transcending the ocean of suffering. This is called the perfection of the six paramitas.

## 5. Meditation

Igor Piniński JDPSN

*Zen* means meditation. *Dhyana* also means meditation. So practicing the dhyana paramita means perfecting our Zen practice. How can we perfect our Zen practice, how can we perfect our meditation?

When the eighth patriarch, Ma Tsu, was a young monk, he tried to perfect his meditation by sitting Zen for many hours every day. His posture was straight, his body never moved. One day, his teacher, Huai Jang, who was the seventh patriarch, asked him:

“Why are you sitting Zen for so long every day?”

“To become a Buddha,” answered Ma Tsu.

Hearing this Huai Jang sat in front of him and started to polish a roof tile.

“What are you doing, Master?” asked Ma Tsu after a while.

“Making a mirror,” answered Huai Jang.

“How can you make a mirror out of a roof tile? That’s impossible.”

“It’s the same with you. How can you become a Buddha by sitting Zen?”

That was a perfect hit. Ma Tsu’s mind stopped. He bowed and asked, “Please, show me my mistake, Master.”

“If you want a horse to pull a cart, do you whip the cart?”

Hearing this Ma Tsu attained enlightenment and became a Buddha.

In Lodz Zen Center I often hear from my co-practitioners about their meditation frustrations. “My mind is almost never still and I’m trying so hard. What’s wrong?” “I feel this mantra stopped working for me. Should I try a new one?” “How can I make my meditation better?” “Maybe I’m not really meditating at all. Maybe I’m only wasting my time on a cushion.” Most of our teachers’ answer for such questions is “Don’t check. Just do it.” So how can we practice the dhyana paramita? How can we perfect our meditation without checking?

For me it is putting down the concept of perfecting at all and starting every day from the very beginning. If I start every day from the very beginning then I have no chance to perfect my meditation. I’m in the same situation as a newcomer who just received an orientation talk, only my legs feel better. I don’t know how to meditate, I have no meditation skills. There is only one thing I have: it’s a decision. The decision to meditate, the decision to put everything down, the decision to return to this very moment with a wordless question. It’s only because of this decision that I can meditate. I never perceive a moment when my mind catches something and starts to move. I can only perceive a moment when it stops. It’s like finding myself on a crossroads. Should I continue to follow this thought? Should I continue to nourish this feeling? Well, I could, and sometimes it would be very nice to, sometimes it feels so important to, but there is a decision. So I let go, so I put down whatever my mind is holding at the moment and for a short while I’m a newborn baby buddha. *Dooooon’t know.*

Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say: “One more step is necessary.” How can I make one more step from don’t know? How can I go deeper into the primary point? How can I make my great question greater? How can this baby buddha grow? How can I perfect my meditation? Oh! I’m on a crossroads again! Should I continue this very tempting thinking about meditation practice? Maybe I will discover something important? Well, I could, but there is a decision, so I’m putting it down and finding myself again at the very beginning of my meditation practice. Can’t make it bigger. Can’t make it better. One more step is necessary? Yes, but it’s a step back to the starting point. The same step again and again. I’m not whipping a cart, I’m not whipping a horse. The whip falls down on the ground, the horse can go free, the cart stays still. There’s nowhere to go. Oh! I’m on a crossroads again! Decision. Don’t know. Crossroads. Decision. Don’t know. Forever.



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Photo by Sven Mahr



## 6. Wisdom

*Muchak JDPSN (Nambhee Chon)*

What is wisdom? Is wisdom something that we can attain? Or is it our inherent original nature that we only need to return to?

Zen Master Lin Chi says if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. With his dramatic statement he is urging us not to create something in our mind, not even “not Buddha,” and not to become a slave of our thinking. It is the same with wisdom. Once we have an idea of the perfection of wisdom (prajna paramita), we strive to attain it using every possible means. Are we aware where this idea of perfection of wisdom comes from? Where can we look for this wisdom? If it is outside of us, where is it? If it is inside of us, where is it to be found? There is nothing either outside or inside of us that we call wisdom. Yet it appears spontaneously as an answer to a question, situation or problem. So it seems not to be something static, but rather a dynamic response to a concrete situation. What can we do in order that this dynamic response can appear unhindered?

As soon as we think of perfection, the idea of no perfection appears in our mind. Yet we cannot even say definitely what perfection is. We only can declare what is no perfection. So what do we do? “Kill” the idea of the perfection of wisdom in order to go beyond this dualistic thinking? What happens, if we let go of any kind of ideas like wisdom and perfection completely? The mind before thinking reveals itself. Out of this before-thinking mind all wisdom actions appear spontaneously, moment by moment, like a tree responding to the wind with rustling leaves. What is the way to live according to that? Zen Master Lin Chi says again: “Followers of the way, the dharma of the Buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything in particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down.” This “without trying to do anything in particular” makes the ordinary acts extraordinary! It is indeed more a matter of how we are doing something than what we are doing: drop all ideas and just do it!

Recently I was teaching in a retreat. There was one woman and one man who did not like each other. Both of them were sincere and dedicated Zen practitioners and



worked in this retreat as head dharma teacher and kitchen master. The kitchen master, a twenty-year-old young woman, said, “The head dharma teacher hates me. He is looking at me always critically and stern. He is like my mother, looking grim and rigid. This kind of person makes my life so sad.” The head dharma teacher, who was in his fifties, and in fact usually very kind outside retreats, complained, “The kitchen master is selfish and arrogant, exactly like my daughter. I cannot bear this kind of person.” Since they came together for the first time to this retreat from different countries and never talked much because of the rule of silence that we practice during retreats, it is hard to say they knew each other well. Yet they were suffering due to their strong negative feelings toward each other.

Like in this story, we unconsciously make pictures of others or ourselves according to our ideas or past experiences. The consequence is that we suffer and blame others for our suffering. But once we notice that we are trapped in our own thinking and it causes us suffering, we get to know the nature of all problems. This thinking makes us act and react in a conditioned and predictable way, so we end up repeating the same behavioral pattern, which we call karma. The karmic acts of comparing, judging and assuming hinder us in perceiving the uniqueness of the very moment and the person with whom we interact. The incomparable uniqueness of this very moment can reveal itself only when the attachment to thinking stops. As Zen Master Seung Sahn says, our mind becomes then like a mirror, clear like space. Red comes, it reflects only red, and yellow comes, only yellow. That means, red doesn't have to become yellow and yellow does not need to be changed into red. And also yellow itself is enough and complete without depending on red at all. Only out of this hundred-percent mirrorlike mind can clear action appear.

The above-mentioned kitchen master wrote me a short message soon after our talk: “Now I understand. The problem is not between the head dharma teacher and me. The problem is that we are following our karma. He is OK. I am OK.” This OK-mind is the seed out of which great love and great compassion mind emerge. The other name for this is supreme wisdom or prajna paramita. Without attachment to thinking our mind can perceive clearly. Then it is possible to just do it for all beings without distinction.

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### Notes

1. Nagarjuna, Bodhisambhara, verse 72, quoted in Karl Brunnhölzl, *The Heart Attack Sūtra* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2012).
2. Quoted in *Heart Attack Sūtra*, p. 26.