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## THE SIX PERFECTIONS

This homepage is about Tibetan Buddhism and the Six Perfections.

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## THE SIX PERFECTIONS

A true practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism wants to Become enlightened like the Shakyamuni Buddha for the sake of all living beings. Tibetan

Buddhism is a part of the Mahayana tradition and according to this tradition there are six practices to be cultivated in order to be able to reach enlightenment. These practices are known as the six (transcendent) perfections, or the six paramitas. Some Buddhist teachings mention ten perfections

in stead of six. The six perfections are: 1. Generosity, 2. Ethical discipline, 3. Patience, 4. Enthusiastic effort, 5. Concentration, 6. Wisdom

The six perfections must be cultivated in order to become enlightened. Enlightenment is to become a buddha, an exalted being that has cut off the roots

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

## A PROGRESSIVE SYSTEM OF ACTION

The six perfections are not placed in this order by accident. The order is explained as going from lower to higher practice or from the gross to the subtle

level. As one makes progress in this scheme of action, the practices are growing in importance and difficulty. The practice of each of the perfections is impossible without the cultivation of the preceding one from which it is developed.

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

## WHY PRACTICE THE SIX PERFECTIONS?

It is not difficult to agree with the Buddhist teachings that say all human beings want happiness and want to avoid suffering. According to these teachings human beings desire happiness, but in fact they are creating the causes for suffering. Since the teachings explain happiness as being the result

of a peaceful mind, in order to become happy it is necessary to train the mind. When practicing the six perfections the mind is trained to perfection.

The bonus is that the practice of the perfections also benefits other people, not only oneself. If the goal is that of a bodhisattva to attain enlightenment for the sake of all living beings, the practice of the perfections is indispensable.

### TRANSFORMING THE PERFECTIONS INTO HABITS

The ideal practitioner of the six perfections is the bodhisattva, but the perfections are virtues for everybody. To practice the six perfections one must have the wish to transform oneself. The teachings say that the first step to cultivate each of the perfections is to reflect on the advantages of practicing and the drawbacks of not practicing the perfections. The teaching called

"The 37 practices of Bodhisattvas" say that one should make the six transcendent perfections one's habits. If happiness is sought it is necessary to transform the way of thinking, feeling, and acting. All actions of body, speech, and mind must conjoin with the six perfections and this means to become familiar with the perfections by practicing them in everyday life. The

Buddhist teachings say that if each of the perfections is meditated upon, if only for a short time, gradually one's capabilities will increase.

In the Mahayana teachings the bodhisattva's way of practicing stands as the excellent example for all followers of the Mahayana tradition: Their aim is

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

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

Netlink: The Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Geshe Rabten, explains the six perfections in detail:

<http://fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenParamitas.html>

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## 1 GENEROSITY

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

According to the Buddhist scriptures, the perfection of generosity is of three kinds:

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

## BENEFITING ONESELF AND OTHERS

Why is it important to practice the perfection of generosity? The perfection of generosity cuts off disturbing emotions and creates non-clinging.

Clinging and possessiveness prevents us from any further progress along the path to enlightenment. Generosity is of great benefit to others and it generates compassion, the greatest virtue for a bodhisattva.

The Tibetan Buddhist master Gampopa explains how the perfection of generosity benefits others. He says that the giving of material things will stabilize others body, the giving of protection from fear will stabilize others lives, and the teaching of dharma stabilize others minds.

According to the Buddhist teachings one cannot bring along anything at the time of death except one's karma. What is not given away will anyhow

pass away in the end. So, the Buddhist teachers encourage the listeners to be clever and to be generous towards living beings now. One of the

Mahayana texts imaginative reasons for practicing generosity is that if one is not generous, one will be reborn as a hungry ghost!

## DEVELOPING AND INCREASING GENEROSITY

According to Buddhist philosophy, it is clinging and attachment that prevents one from being generous. To develop and increase generosity it is

necessary to generate the wish to give away everything and practice generosity in as many ways as possible. Also the fruits, i.e. the merit gained through being generous, should be abandoned. This is called "dedication of merit" and it is a very important part of every practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Dedicating the generosity practice to the enlightenment of all living beings is said to increase ones perfection of generosity.

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

### THE GIVING OF WISE GIFTS

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

when one reflects on when to give, what to give and not to give, how to give, the recipient of the gift, and reflecting on why one is giving.

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

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## 2 ETHICAL DISCIPLINE

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

1. Restraint from harmful actions of body, speech, and mind. A monk or nun should keep the rules of monastic discipline, the pratimoksa vows

(Tibetan: so sor thar pa), and laypersons should act in accordance with the lay precepts (not kill, not steal, no sexual misconduct, not lie, and no intoxicants). 2. Cultivating, protecting, and increasing virtue. 3. Helping and benefiting living beings, working for their aims in this and the next life.

Helping others can be the giving of friendship, support, protection, and material things for those in need.

### LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

Although we practice generosity, the first perfection, it can be spoiled through unethical conduct. The Buddhist teachings say that according to the law

of karma the effect of unethical conduct is a bad rebirth were one cannot accumulate fresh stores of merit.

The Shakyamuni Buddha said that ethical discipline is the basis of all good qualities and compared it with the earth that supports everything. That is the reason why it is important to cultivate and protect ethical discipline. It is said that the cultivation of inner discipline lays the foundation of a peaceful mind. A peaceful mind is needed in order to make any further progress along the path to enlightenment. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Patrul

Rinpoche invites us to take control of ourselves and practice ethical discipline: (Extract from Patrul Rinpoche / Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) &

K. Brown and S. Sharma (eds.): *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. kunzang lama'i shelung p.238. Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997 (1994))

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

### PURIFYING KARMA

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

1. The power of reliance: Taking sincere refuge in the Shakyamuni Buddha (Tibetan: sangs rgyas), his teachings (Sanskrit: dharma, Tibetan: chos), and the spiritual community (Sanskrit: sangha, Tibetan: dge dun).
2. The power of counteractive behavior: Counteractions are any positive action done in order to purify one's thoughts and behavior. The most powerful

counteraction is meditation practices that seek to eventually uproot ignorance, the very source of disturbing emotions, which prevent enlightenment.

This decreases unwholesome acts and it is possible to engage in ethical discipline.

3. The power of regret: Acknowledging and truly regretting negative actions. This counteraction is described as genuine when one is feeling like having accidentally swallowed poison and thus intensely regret the wrongdoing.
4. The power of promise: Promising not to repeat the action.

### PRACTICING INNER DISCIPLINE AND AWARENESS

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

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

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

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### 3 PATIENCE

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

1. Taking no account of those who harm, applying patience as the antidote to anger. Anger destroys the ability of distinguishing between right and

wrong. The Buddhist teachings say that even a single instant of anger destroys the merit gained from former wholesome actions. Anger leaves no peace

in mind so spiritual maturing becomes impossible. Therefore anger is said to be ethical disciplines worst enemy, and it is important to be armored with patience, the antidote to anger. Patience calms the turbulence of disturbing emotions and is the best way to protect bodhicitta. Not expressing anger is no indication of patience. The Tibetan teacher Geshe Sonam Rinchen points out that patience is not the suppression of anger but the ability to remain calm and feel at ease.

2. Accepting hardships and suffering. While practicing the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings one has to investigate the nature of suffering and accept the

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

3. Persistent study of the dharma, the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings. This is the patience of continuous investigation of the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine in order to acquire firm faith in his teachings. It is listening to the teachings, critically reflecting on the meaning, and putting into practice what is learned. The practitioner applies patience in facing the truth of reality without fear and accepting the doctrine that all phenomena's nature is emptiness.

#### SUFFERING AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTICE PATIENCE

If one wants to develop a bodhisattva's patience, the first step is to reflect on the advantages of suffering and hardships. According to the Buddhist teachings the nature of cyclic existence is suffering. Thinking about suffering as the outcome of past negative actions, suffering works as a reminder to

avoid those harmful actions and instead delight in what is good. If there was nobody who stirred up one's anger, no unfavorable circumstances, no suffering at all, it would be impossible to develop patience and in the end also impossible to become a buddha. For the bodhisattva, hardships are the teachers of patience, the great chance to cultivate the perfection of patience.

#### INNER DEBATE

Buddhist teachers advise the practitioners to undertake reflection and a kind of inner debate. The intention of inner debate and investigation is to

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

When an angry person is hitting you with a stick it is not appropriate to become angry at the stick that causes you pain, because the stick is wielded by

the angry person. It is not appropriate to be angry with the person, because anger and the causes for anger (disturbing emotions) move him to hit you.

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

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

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#### 4 ENTHUSIASTIC EFFORT

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

#### THE ROOT OF ALL PERFECTIONS

All the other perfections need to be strengthened and increased through enthusiastic effort. Creating and stabilizing the other perfections depend on enthusiastic effort. As the energy to set out on the bodhisattva path and to continue until one reaches enlightenment and becomes a buddha,

enthusiastic effort makes it possible to complete what is undertaken. Without enthusiastic effort the other transcendent perfections would be useless and

enlightenment would not become a goal possible to reach. According to the traditional Buddhist teachings there are three aspects to enthusiastic effort:

1. Enthusiastic effort as armor: The courage and energy that prepares one to withstand difficulties and continue until one's goal is achieved. This means to take on heavy burdens and being prepared to make sacrifice for the benefit of others.

2. Diligence in positive actions: Striving to create virtue through the practice of the perfections. This means to conjoin all actions of body, speech, and mind with the perfections.

3. Insatiable enthusiastic effort: Devoting all energy in working for others. Patrul Rinpoche wants the practitioner to be determined to keep going with the constant power of a great river until enlightenment is achieved.

#### LAZINESS: A WASTE OF HUMAN POTENTIAL

In order to understand enthusiastic effort one has to understand its opposite: laziness. The Buddhist teachings say it is very foolish to be lazy and not

take the opportunity of the very fortunate fact that one is born as human beings and thus can do whatever is wanted. Since the possibility to become a buddha is present in every human being, it is said to be a waste of human potential not to make use of it.

A bodhisattva applies enthusiastic effort to counteract and remove laziness, self-contempt, and discouragement, which are obstacles in the practice of the perfections. The Buddhist teachings point out that it is important to combat laziness by discovering and stopping its causes and investigate how to support enthusiastic effort. Laziness can be hesitation and postponement, discouragement, and involvement in trivial activities. Patrul Rinpoche compares trivial activities to ripples on the water, they are endless, and thus it is never possible to find time to practice the transcendent perfections.

That is why it is necessary abandoning one's engagement in trivial activities.

#### URGENT ACTION

The Buddhist teachings urge the practitioners to oppose the laziness of postponement. Since it is impossible to predict death, it is necessary to take to

action immediately. Shantideva's advice to the practitioner is to reflect on which great opportunity it is to be born as a human being. Death may take this opportunity away from one at any moment and the teachings say that later it can be very difficult to obtain such favorable conditions as having a

human body. When one understands that there is no time to lose the feeling of urgency should trigger one to start practicing Buddhism. Patrul Rinpoche calls on immediate action: (Extract from Patrul Rinpoche / Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) & K. Brown and S. Sharma (eds.): The Words of My Perfect Teacher. kunzang lama'i shelung p.246. Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997 (1994))

"Do not wait another second to practice. Do something about it immediately, like a coward finding a snake in his lap or a dancing-girl whose hair has just caught fire. Totally abandon worldly activities and devote yourself to the practice of the Dharma right now."

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## 5 CONCENTRATION

The fifth perfection, concentration, is called dhyana in Sanskrit, and the Tibetan term is bsam gtan. The perfection of concentration is the mind's ability

to stay focused. To develop concentration, one has to discipline and stabilize the mind and refine the intellect. It is also necessary to pay constant attention to the first four perfections. An ethical lifestyle is essential, since unwholesome physical and verbal actions make the mind turbulent.

Everybody has some ability to concentrate. The Tibetan teacher Geshe Sonam Rinchen points out that when the ability to concentrate is transformed

into the perfection of concentration, it becomes a cause for attaining enlightenment, to become a buddha. By cultivating the fifth perfection the mind is

said to become steady like a mountain, invulnerable to distractions and one's actions are as a consequence more effective. The perfection of concentration is not an end in itself, but lays the foundation of wisdom.

## MEDITATION

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

range of meditation practices. There are two essential kinds of meditation:

1. Calm abiding meditation (Sanskrit: shamata, Tibetan: shi gnas). Calm abiding is called the perfect absorption of mind within mind. It is to cultivate a mind that is not being disturbed by mental wandering.

2. Special insight meditation (Sanskrit: vipashyana, Tibetan: lhak mthong). It is analytical meditation that makes it possible to gain insight into the true nature of reality. In that way it is the perfection of wisdom.

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

#### DEVELOPING CALM ABIDING AND SPECIAL INSIGHT

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

The Buddhist teachers point out that it is important that the meditation practice is within one's capacity. In the beginning people can concentrate single-pointedly only for a short time, but as one gets more familiar with meditating, one can hold the concentration longer. The actual calm abiding is only possible through again and again familiarizing with meditative stabilization. When the practitioner has made progress in calm abiding meditation,

he or she can investigate the nature of the meditation-object through analytical meditation. The practitioner alternates between analytical meditation and

calm abiding meditation and by repeated alternation special insight is generated. When meditating with special insight the mind can understand the

nature of the object and it becomes possible to realize directly the nature of the meditation object as being emptiness. When developing the perfection of concentration the final object for meditation is emptiness. (Meditation is also described in the section about the perfection of wisdom.)

#### BLISSFUL SOLITUDE

The Buddhist scriptures give plenty of advice on how to create the proper environment for meditation. According to the teachings, personal attachment or

desire for material things causes the most frequently experienced distractions in meditation. Shantideva advises the practitioner to renounce loved ones

and seek solitude. He was a monk himself and thought that what he called "blissful solitude" was ideal for meditation. Most texts on the perfection of concentration are aimed at monastic circles, but the instructions apply to laymen as well: The Buddhist teachings ascertain that it is impossible to make any progress in meditative concentration without reducing one's preoccupation with worldly affairs.

### CONCENTRATION LIKE A GOOD BOWSTRING

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

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

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

Netlinks: The quote above is an extract from a teaching by Geshe Rabten where he explains the six perfections:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenParamitas.html>

Two very good traditional Buddhist teachings on the perfection of concentration is provided by Tibetan teachers Geshe Rabten and Lama Gelek Rinpoche:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/samadhi.html>

## 6 WISDOM

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

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

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

## DEVELOPING WISDOM

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

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

1. Wisdom through hearing and studying the teachings' words and meaning.
  2. Wisdom through critical investigation of reality.
  3. Wisdom through special insight meditation (Sanskrit: vipashyana, Tibetan: lhak mthong).
- Special insight is only possible if one has developed a calm abiding mind as perfected in the practice of concentration.

#### STUDYING THE MAHAYANA CONCEPT OF WISDOM

The first phase in developing wisdom is to listen to and study the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine. The Buddhist teachers give oral teachings where

they explain the doctrine with references to the scriptures and to their own teacher's oral explanations. The students of Mahayana Buddhism have to listen to and study the oral and written teachings again and again. The teacher's guidelines and explanation are very important in order to grasp the meaning of the words.

The Mahayana texts on the perfection of wisdom are quite difficult to approach and they are full of paradoxes and puzzles for the mind. The many contradictions met with in the teachings attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha are explained by Mahayana teachers by referring to the Buddha's ability to suite his teachings in order to fit the needs of his listeners: There is different wisdom for different people. That is why it seems like contradictions, but

actually there are none, they argue. As an example ordinary people are taught the theory of a non-existing self or ego, because they may be able to intellectually grasp that. People who have spiritually matured learn that all phenomena are beyond existence and at the same time are beyond non-existence, beyond both existence and non-existence, and beyond neither existence nor non-existence. To study and try to understand the Mahayana concept of transcending wisdom can be a difficult and confusing task.

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

#### INVESTIGATING REALITY

A student of Mahayana Buddhism should not be content with just hearing and reading about the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine. Instead of just

leaning on a theory, which explains the nature of reality the Mahayana teachers want the students to examine reality critically themselves by investigating the nature of each and every phenomenon intellectually. One way of analyzing reality is through debate, as can be seen at the Tibetan monasteries where two or more monks question each other using logic and reason. Another important way of investigating reality is through one's own reflections. A fundamental investigation, that the Mahayana teachings advise one to undertake, is to start searching for what you call your "self" or "ego". Close examination will reveal that the ego is impossible to locate within oneself. In fact all phenomena one investigates do not exist as they appear to do. They seem like they have an inherently existent essence, but through analyzing them, one will see that they have not. The teachings explain that this means that all phenomena's nature is emptiness. By analyzing reality repeatedly one can develop a firm intellectual understanding of reality. This conceptual understanding is a necessary step to developing transcendental wisdom, but the direct realization of emptiness is only possible through meditation.

## MEDITATION

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

Through meditation it becomes possible to develop a mind that rest in equanimity and special insight. By cultivating special insight one can directly perceive emptiness when meditating, not only intellectually grasp it. Special insight arises from meditation and this is contrasted to the wisdom arisen from reflecting in the second stage, and the wisdom from hearing and studying in the first stage. When one is meditating on emptiness, one develops

direct experience with emptiness by watching how it appears. (Meditation is also described in the section about the perfection of concentration.)

## ULTIMATE WISDOM IS BEYOND DESCRIPTION

Tibetan Buddhist philosophy consider the Madhyamika teachings as the supreme expression of the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings on transcendental

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

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

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

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

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

## DECONSTRUCTING THEORIES

The Madhyamika method of attaining buddhahood is called "the middle way". They reject reasoning and state that reasoning is insufficient because it will always end in contradicting itself. The Madhyamika tradition uses the method of philosophical criticism to deconstruct theories. They take a theory and gradually refute it without taking a counter position. All theories, including Buddhist theories, are targeted in this deconstruction. There are

two viewpoints that are especially exposed by the Madhyamika: the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Gampopa demonstrates what he thinks of the

two viewpoints by quoting Saraha: (Extract from Gam-po-pa/Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (trans.) & Ani K. Trinlay Chödrön (ed.): The Jewel

Ornament of Liberation. The Wishfulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings p. 243. Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1998.)

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

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

#### LEAVE THE MIND TO IT SELF

The ultimate cannot be expressed in conceptual terms, but this does not mean that it cannot be reached. The purpose of deconstructing all theories is to

reduce the intellect to total silence so that wisdom beyond thought construction is possible. When the mind is left as it is and aware, transcendental

wisdom experiencing emptiness directly is possible. So, the Madhyamika method is to stop being caught up in thoughts and theories, and to stop grasping after or rejecting the phenomena of existence. Tilopa sums up the method of becoming a buddha:

(Extracted from Gam-po-pa/Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (trans.) & Ani K. Trinlay Chödrön (ed.): The Jewel Ornament of Liberation. The Wishfulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings p. 247. Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1998.)

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

Netlink: For a detailed explanation of the history and philosophy of the Madhyamika tradition:

<http://www.cyborganic.com/People/Gizard/Tibud/Mad/mad2.htm>

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#### SOME OF THE WORDS EXPLAINED:

##### BODHICITTA

The Sanskrit term bodhicitta is often translated as "the mind of enlightenment" (Tibetan: byang chub kyi sems). Bodhicitta has two aspects that can be

compared to the wish and intention to set out on the path, and the subsequent act of actually setting out on the journey:

- Altruistic intention (Sanskrit: bodhipranidhicitta): The wish to reach enlightenment, i.e. to become a buddha in order to benefit all living beings.

This mind of aspiration arises from compassion so strong that one has a genuine desire to help everybody without distinction.

- Active bodhicitta (Sanskrit: bodhiprasthanacitta): The accumulation of merit and knowledge. In order to accomplish the wish to benefit everybody, the bodhisattvas have to act out of altruistic intention and train themselves in the six perfections.

### SELF AND OTHERS

There are special techniques to generate bodhicitta and two practices are worth special attention: meditation on equalizing self and others (Tibetan: bdag

gzhan mnyam pa) and meditation on exchanging self and others (Tibetan: bdag gzhan brje ba).

When meditating on exchanging self and others one imagines placing oneself in the position of others and in this way learn to understand the feelings

that drive oneself and others to act. By meditating like this again and again, one gradually cultivates the antidotes to disturbing emotions. The real exchange is possible when one is perfectly trained in equalizing self and others. In order to generate bodhicitta this training is indispensable. By meditating on equalizing self and others one seeks to wipe out the ego strength and the illusory barrier between self and other. This is only possible when one understands that all phenomena by nature are emptiness. The Indian master Shantideva explains that what the person refers to as his body and

referring to as "I", is only a name applied to a collection of elements. When exchanging self and others, one applies the name "I" to the whole

collection of suffering beings. After familiarizing oneself with the thought that everybody is oneself, the distinction between self and others will disappear and one thinks of others as "I". In that way one experiences others sufferings as if it was personal sufferings and love towards others increases.

Netlink:

This link takes you directly to Kyabje Ling Rinpoche's teaching about bodhicitta: the bodhimind:

## BODHISATTVA

The Sanskrit term bodhisattva is compounded of bodhi that means "enlightened", and sattva meaning "mind", "intention". Sattva can also mean "strength" or "courage". The Tibetan translation byang chub sems dpa' contains all these meanings: Byang chub is "enlightenment", sems is "mind", and dpa' means "hero". In that way a bodhisattva is "one who is a hero in his intention to achieve enlightenment". Enlightenment means to dispel ignorance to become a buddha.

### THE IDEAL MAHAYANA PRACTITIONER

A bodhisattva is a person who has developed the altruistic intention called bodhicitta. Bodhisattvas resolve to become enlightened beings, buddhas, because as buddhas they will have the most effective means and the ability to release all living beings from the suffering of cyclic existence.

The theory of the bodhisattva probably originates from around 100 AD in India and gradually replaced the arhat ideal of earlier Buddhism. The arhats (Tibetan: dgra bcom pa) sought liberation only for themselves, and this was seen as an inferior goal for the Buddhist practitioners of the Mahayana tradition. The bodhisattva doctrine was modelled on the life and former lives of the Shakyamuni Buddha.

### THE BODHISATTVA DEEDS ARE GUIDED BY COMPASSION

The bodhisattvas are always ready to make any sacrifice in order to help all living beings without exception and without distinction. The 14th century scholar Gyalse Togme Sangpo's short text on the 37 Practices of bodhisattvas presents the deeds of the bodhisattva that includes the six perfections.

These deeds distinguish the bodhisattvas from the arhats.

The Mahayana teachings describe bodhisattvas as compassionate beings who love everybody as a mother loves her only child. The Mahayana concept of compassion (Sanskrit karuna, Tibetan: snying rje) is the union of wisdom and love. Through compassion and wisdom one will be able to transcend the notion of having an essential and unchanging self (as understood in the theory of emptiness). In that way distinctions between personal suffering and others suffering disappears. There are important meditation practices for developing this kind of compassionate bodhicitta.

Netlink:

In Professor Epstein's dictionary there is an explanation of the term bodhisattva:

## BUDDHA

Buddha is a Sanskrit term translated as *sangs rgyas* in Tibetan. A buddha is one who is totally cleansed (*sangs*) of disturbing emotions and who has completely developed (*rgyas*) the transcendental wisdom of knowing all phenomena and knowing them as they truly exist. A buddha has attained enlightenment (Sanskrit: *bodhi*, Tibetan: *byang chub*) that is to wake up from ignorance and be released from cyclic existence. That does not automatically transform one into a buddha in the Mahayana sense of the word. It is also necessary to possess the qualities of a buddha and act like one:

Being enlightened one has the best possible means of helping others, and a buddha makes use of these qualities by helping all living beings without exception.

## BUDDHANATURE

A buddha is not an external, divine power like the God we know from Christianity or Islam. Enlightenment is not searched for outside ourselves, but

is found within. All living beings have the potential for eventually becoming a buddha. This potential is called the buddhanature or buddhaessence (Sanskrit: *tathagatagarbha* or *sugatagarbha*, Tibetan: *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*). Since everybody has this potential and the means for inner development, the Buddhists work with themselves in order to become enlightened.

## THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

2,500 years ago Siddharta Gautama, an Indian prince from Lumbini (today South Nepal) spent many years searching for truth so that he could be released from the sufferings of cyclic existence. He did reach his goal, but he found enlightenment within himself and became the Shakyamuni Buddha.

He propagated the wisdom he had found, and with his teachings the philosophy known as Buddhism was founded. The Buddha recognized that his

audiences had varying mental capacities for understanding so he suited his teachings to the different needs of his listeners.

The Buddhists have as their highest goal to become buddhas themselves, and the Shakyamuni Buddha is their teacher and role model. He encouraged his followers to investigate for themselves what he had taught. Shakyamuni Buddha said: "You've received my teachings, now examine it for yourself, in your own wisdom".

Netlinks:

Professor Ronald Epstein presents the Shakyamuni Buddha's life story:

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhist%20Dict/BDS.html#Shakyamuni>

There is also a very interesting online article by Professor C. Hallisey, professor in Sanskrit and Indian studies: "Buddha in his time and ours":

<http://www.worldandi.com/public/1999/october/Hallisey.cfm>

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## CAUSATION AND INTERDEPENDENCE

According to Buddhist thought, all phenomena arise due to causes and conditions external to themselves and all phenomena are dependent on something external to themselves. The theory of causation and interdependence is explained as a twelvefold sequence of dependent arising (Sanskrit:

pratityasamutpada, Tibetan: rten 'brel yan lag bcu gnyis). The process of dependent arising is often described as a circle, the wheel of existence, explaining how the cycle of rebirth functions. One's rebirth is determined by one's former actions as explained in the law of karma. Only a buddha can break this chain of cyclic existence.

In the twelvefold sequence of dependent arising it is explained that ignorance, a wrong perceiving of reality motivates one to act. Actions caused by

ignorance give rise to consciousness, and eventually ignorance gives rise to birth and death. The most basic type of ignorance is the belief in an inherently existent self (explained in the theory of emptiness). Through the perfection of wisdom that a buddha possesses, ignorance is dispelled and conditioned action ceases, thus the chain of rebirths is broken.

## THE CHAIN OF DEPENDENT ARISING

1. ignorance (Sanskrit: avidya, Tibetan: ma rig pa)
2. action (samskarakarma, 'du byed kyi las)
3. consciousness (vijñana, rnam par shes pa)
4. name and form (namarupa, ming gzugs)
5. sources of perception (ayatana, skyed mched)
6. contact (sparsha, reg pa)
7. feeling (vedana, tshor ba)
8. craving (trsna, sred pa)
9. grasping (upadana, len pa)
10. existence (bhava, srid pa)
11. birth (jati, skye ba)
12. aging and death (jaramaranam, rga shi)

Netlinks:

For a closer reading on the twelwefold chain:

<http://www.online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhist%20Dict/BDT.html#Twelvefold>

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/12links.html>

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## CYCLIC EXISTENCE

Cyclic existence (Sanskrit samsara, Tibetan 'khor ba) is the beginningless and endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. One's rebirth is determined by one's former actions according to the law of karma. The Buddhist scriptures state that living beings are prisoners of cyclic existence, bound to the wheel of life by the chains of disturbing emotions and ignorance. The law of causation and interdependence explains that the cycle is driven by ignorance and that freedom from cyclic existence is gained through dispelling ignorance.

## SUFFERING

The Buddhist teachings describe cyclic existence as being predominated by suffering (Sanskrit: duhkha, Tibetan sdug bsngal). Suffering is not only physical pain, but also emotional turbulence and sorrow. Buddhism does not deny happiness in life, but says that cyclic existence is characterized of constant change so that happiness is always the beginning of experiencing suffering. Happiness is temporary; in the end it will be replaced by suffering. The Buddhist scriptures describe the enjoyment of temporary pleasures as tasting the honey from a razorblade.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The four noble truths (Sanskrit caturaryasatya, Tibetan 'phags pa'i bden pa rnam bzhi) sum up the Shakyamuni Buddha's understanding of cyclic existence, and how to be released from the sufferings of cyclic existence. The four noble truths are:

1. The truth of suffering is compared to the disease: Those who are caught up in the cycle of existence must suffer over and over again.
2. The truth of origin is compared to the diagnosis: The cause of suffering is ignorance as explained in the theory of causation and interdependence.
3. The truth of cessation is compared to the prognosis: Since suffering depends on causes, it is possible to overcome suffering. When the causes are removed, suffering will disappear. The end of suffering is the uprooting of ignorance.
4. The truth of the path is compared to the cure: walking the eightfold path dispels ignorance. The eightfold path is to have right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

Netlinks:

This link takes you to H.H. the fourteenth Dalai Lama's teaching about the four noble truths:

<http://www.fpmt/Teachings/4nobletruths.html>

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Geshe Rabten provides another good explanation:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/Rabten4truths.html>

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## DISTURBING EMOTIONS

The Sanskrit term klesha (Tibetan: nyon mongs) is translated as disturbing- or afflicting emotions. The disturbing emotions are called the roots of suffering because they leave no peace in the mind. Disturbing emotions are thoughts, fleeting mental states like desire, aversion, jealousy, pride, and arrogance. Ignorance, the state of not knowing the mind's nature, lets disturbing emotions obscure the clarity of the mind. When ignorance is dispelled

and one is free of disturbing emotions, one becomes enlightened like the Shakyamuni Buddha.

## THE ANTIDOTES TO OBSCURING THOUGHTS

The best antidote to disturbing emotions is according to the Indian master Shantideva, meditation on the nature of reality, which is emptiness. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Gampopa has this cure:

- To remedy attachment, contemplate ugliness.
- To remedy hatred, contemplate loving kindness.
- To remedy ignorance, contemplate the law of causation and interdependence.
- To remedy jealousy, meditate on "equalizing self and others" (explained in the section on bodhicitta).
- To remedy pride, practice "exchanging self and others" (explained in the section on bodhicitta).
- To remedy equal amount of disturbing emotions and discursive thoughts, practice watching your breath.

Netlink:

The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Geshe Rabten calls disturbing emotions "mental defilements" and gives an extensive explanation:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenKlesha.html>

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## EMPTINESS

In order to become a buddha, one has to cut off ignorance and replace it with transcendental wisdom: To understand the nature of ultimate reality as emptiness. In Sanskrit, emptiness is shunyata, and in the Tibetan texts, emptiness is translated as stong pa nyid. According to the Mahayana texts ordinary persons do not conceive emptiness, as they ignorantly believe that the phenomena of the world, including themselves, are endowed with an essence, which are unchanging and existing independently.

## SELFLESSNESS

According to the Madhyamika school of the Mahayana tradition, emptiness is conditioned existence: No phenomena exist independent of causes and conditions. The doctrine of universal causation and interdependence explains how everything arise dependent on conditions and causes, and cease to exist when the causes and conditions are lacking.

The Madhyamika's understanding of emptiness denotes the absence of an unchanging, self-existent essence or "self" in all phenomena. It is essential to understand the theory of selfless-ness (Sanskrit: anatman, Tibetan: bdag med) since this theory pervades all Buddhist thought and practice. What people refer to as a "self" or "I", looks like one single entity. But upon closer examination one will see that the "I" is comprised of many parts. This collection of elements that together constitute the "I" is in Buddhist philosophy called "the five aggregates". Not only the "self" or "I" lack this essence; every phenomenon is empty of an independent and unchanging essence.

## THE FIVE AGGREGATES

None of the five aggregates (Sanskrit: skanda, Tibetan: phung po) are the self or the "I". The self is a label that one's thoughts put onto the constantly changing aggregates. The five aggregates that constitute the personality are:

1. Forms (Sanskrit rupa, Tibetan gzugs) are the things that constitute the physical world, including the sense organs and their objects.
2. Feelings (vedana, tshor ba) are our sensation of things, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. They are the result of the senses' contact with objects.
3. Perception/discrimination (samjña, 'du shes) is the differentiation we make regarding objects of perceptions.
4. Formation/composite factors (samskara, 'du byed) are actions.
5. Consciousness (vijñana, rnam par shes pa).

## SEARCHING FOR AN ESSENCE

In order to make a conceptual understanding of what emptiness is, the Buddhist teachings instruct one to start searching for the essence in phenomena.

If one for example investigates a house, in which part of the house is its essence? Is it in the house's furniture? Nails? Roof? Walls? Wallpaper? When searching for the essence of the house in any of its parts, the essence is impossible to locate. Close investigation will reveal that many parts comprise the house. These parts exist dependent on other things external to them.

When trying to locate the "I" within oneself, none of the body parts will reveal the "I". The "I" is not in the heart, the head, nor one's fingers or any other bodypart. The "I" cannot be said to be any of the fleeting mental states or consciousness. According to Buddhist theory, the "I" is just a way of thinking. By undertaking close investigation one will come to realize that neither one's own person, nor any other phenomena, have any independent existing self or essence. All phenomena comprised by many parts exist dependent on other phenomena and are under constant change.

#### THE SELF DOES NOT EXIST AS IT APPEARS

Because one cannot find any essence in the phenomena of the world, it does not imply that phenomena do not exist at all, just that they do not exist in a certain manner. The Buddhist teachings argue that because there is no water in a mirage, it does not imply that water does not exist. When we search

for a self as an entity, one cannot find it even though this is how it appears to exist. The self appears to exist independently, but according to Tibetan Buddhism, the self cannot be isolated from body and mind, even though the body, mind, and the self are different. Investigating phenomena simply reveals that things appear in one way and exist in another way.

#### THE NATURE OF EMPTINESS MAKES CHANGE POSSIBLE

Through meditation practices, this intellectual understanding of emptiness can be experienced directly. This is what Buddhist call realizing emptiness.

One can for example train in the meditation on equalizing self and others (as explained in the section on bodhicitta). This meditation seeks to realize the non-existence of "I" and thus dissolve the notion of "other", as the two terms are dependent on each other. In that way it is no longer possible to make a separation between the "I" and the "other" and this results in that wanting to protect others as protecting oneself.

If the self was an independent, unchanging essence of ones personality, transforming oneself would be impossible. Because there is no essence, people constantly change. The Buddhist teachings encourage one to start practicing the six perfections in order to learn how to control the process of change and to transform oneself into a buddha.

Netlinks:

As a part of meditation on causation and interdependence, the Tibetan teacher Geshe Rabten talks about holding the view of having an essence called

"I" and searching for this "I":

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/12links.html>

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## GAMPOPA

The most famous disciple of Milarepa was the Tibetan scholar Gampopa (1074-1153). Milarepa had chosen Gampopa as the upholder of his teachings and thus the upholder of the Kagyupa lineage of the Mahayana tradition.

Gampopa wrote many important philosophical texts, but his most famous work is "The Jewel Ornament of Liberation" (Tibetan: dam chos yid bzhin nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan). This highly revered work explains buddhanature, the sufferings of cyclic existence, karma, bodhicitta, the six perfections and other important concepts of Tibetan Buddhism. The English translation by Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche is highly recommended reading for those who really want to dig into the Mahayana teachings:

Gampopa / Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen Rinpoche (trans.) & Ani K. Trinlay Chödrön (ed.): *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation. The Wishfulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings* Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1998.

Netlinks:

This link gets you to The Office of Tibet, The Tibetan Government in Exile's own website. Here you can read about Gampopa and the different lineages in Tibetan Buddhism.

<http://www.tibet.com/Buddhist/Kagyuu.html>

Another good site is:

<http://www.kagyu.org/karmapa/kag/kag00.html>

There is also an excerpt from Gampopa's "A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path" available in English:

<http://www.lehua.ilhawaii.net/~kcraw/tenthings.htm>

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## HARMFUL ACTIONS

The Buddhist teachings define positive and negative actions according to the cause and effect explained in the law of karma. Actions are considered negative and harmful when they cause suffering in this or future existence. Negative actions can bring short-lived pleasure, but ultimately they cause

suffering. According to the Buddhist teachings, actions are also negative if the intention behind the action is a bad one.

A bodhisattva has to eliminate ten actions of the body, speech, and mind, which are considered to be harmful (Sanskrit: dashakushalani, Tibetan: mi gde ba bcu). The first seven of these are in some teachings called the seven non-virtues.

### TEN HARMFUL ACTIONS

The actions to be eliminated in order to purify and control the body are: (1) Taking life, (2) stealing, and (3) sexual misconduct.

The speech can be controlled and purified by refraining from: (4) Lying, (5) sowing discord or slander, (6) harsh or offensive speech, and (7) senseless talk.

The mind can be controlled and purified by refraining from: (8) covetousness, (9) wishing harm on others, and (10) wrong views.

Many Buddhist texts describe the terrors that will fall upon those who violate the ten precepts. One Indian scholar, Har Dayal, gives this comment: "As the Indians are past masters in the art of exaggeration, there is no lack of burning, boiling, baking, rending, tearing, wounding, bleeding, freezing, shivering, piercing, sawing, splitting, mauling, mutilating and other pains and torments in these purgatories." (Extracted from Har Dayal: The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature p. 205, Motilal Banarsidass, India, 1970 (1932).)

Netlinks:

More reading about the ten harmful actions:

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhist%20Dict/BDT.html#TenWholesome>

<http://fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenCause.html#karma>

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### KARMA

The concepts of karma and rebirth were present ideas at the time of the Shakyamuni Buddha 2500 years ago. Karma is a Sanskrit term translated as

in Tibetan teachings and it means "action". Actions refer to the activity of body, speech, and mind. The law of karma, is the law of cause and effect meaning that all actions inevitably produce a result corresponding to the action.

According to Buddhist thought, one's present life is only one in a beginningless series of rebirths. Each rebirth is determined by one's actions in

previous lives. This means that right now, one's actions are determining future lives. Actions can be good, bad, or neutral. These actions leave an imprint in the mindstream, and the direct result of an action is accordingly good, bad or neutral. Harmful actions leave negative imprints in the mindstream, and wholesome actions create positive merit. One's rebirth depends on whether positive or negative imprints predominate when we die.

The law of karma does not imply that one is resigned to a personal fate. There is no external, divine force that controls, judge or punish according to some law on how to behave. The Buddha taught that everybody is the author of their own destiny and creating their own future. He wanted his listeners to understand that the chain of rebirths, the cyclic existence was characterized by suffering. Since suffering is a consequence of one's own actions suffering can be avoided. The Buddha taught how to create good karma and eventually cut off the chain of rebirths.

In many other religions, good and bad actions and effects were defined by prophets that claimed they were in contact with a god and therefore could define a moral code to be followed. This differs from the Shakyamuni Buddha who told his listeners that he himself had investigated existence and by experiencing the truth of existence could advise his listeners on what was good and what was harmful actions.

Netlinks:

This link takes you to the explanation of karma in Professor Epstein's dictionary of Buddhist terms.

<http://www.online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhist%20Dict/BDK.html#Karma>

For a traditional explanation of the law of karma provided by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Geshe Rabten:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenCause.html>

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## MAHAYANA TEXTS

The Buddhist Canon (Sanskrit: tripitaka) is a collection of texts, which may be divided into sutra concerning the study of concentration, vinaya concerning the study of precepts, and abhidharma concerning the study of wisdom. The sutras are texts ascribed to the historical buddha: Shakyamuni Buddha. Other texts are the words of buddhas and bodhisattvas, teachers that explain the Shakyamuni Buddha's doctrine.

One of the earliest Mahayana sutras are said to be the "Perfection of Wisdom Sutras", the Prajñāparamita literature, which probably appeared around

100 BC to 100 CE. These teachings are essential in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan, where the Mahayana tradition is predominant. The term prajñāparamita designate over a hundred sutras (Tibetan: mdo).

"The perfection of wisdom literature" praises the ideal of the bodhisattva as opposed to the "lesser vehicles" that have the ideal of the arhat who seeks personal liberation. They also explain emptiness as being the ultimate existence of phenomena. These sutras are considered the word of the Shakyamuni

Buddha even though the texts appeared centuries after his death. There is discussions among scholars concerning which doctrines can legitimately be ascribed to the Shakyamuni Buddha. Some scholars say that these sutras are not the words of the Shakyamuni Buddha. One of their arguments is that the texts were not included in the Buddhist Canon and that some of the teachings even contradict what the Buddha promoted. The Mahayana texts explains the contradictions by stressing the importance of Shakyamuni Buddha's ability to adapt the doctrine to the individual needs and capacities of his audience.

The most famous and important sutra is probably the Heart Sutra (Sanskrit: Prajñā paramita hridaya sutra, Tibetan: shes rab snying po) which dates

from about 350 CE. The Heart Sutra answers one question: How does one practice the perfection of wisdom? This short sutra sums up the fundamentals of the Prajñāparamita teachings.

For those who are eager to learn more about the perfection of wisdom and who are not afraid of puzzles for the mind, Donald S. Lopez' book is highly recommended:

The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries Sri Satguru Publications, India 1990 (1988).

Netlinks:

The Heart Sutra is widely distributed on the Web, and E. Conze's translation is good:

<http://www.pusoksa.buddhism.org/eng/sutras/conze.htm>

There are written many commentaries on the Heart Sutra. It is a good idea to read these commentaries since the sutra has many references to important notions in Mahayana Buddhism. For a line by line explanation of the sutra: <http://www.pusoksa.buddhism.org/eng/sutras/Prajna.html>

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THE MAHAYANA TRADITION

Tibetan Buddhism with its four main schools, Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk, belongs to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The literary translation of the Sanskrit term Mahayana is "the great vehicle" (Tibetan: theg pa chen po).

According to the Tibetan legends, Buddhism came to Tibet in the 2nd century CE when a Buddhist text and some relics fell from the sky and on to the roof of the Tibetan king's palace. Tibetan historians though, say that Buddhism was transmitted to Tibet in the 7th century during the reign of Songtsen Gampo. This king is said to be the first religious king of Tibet.

By the time Buddhism arrived in Tibet, Mahayana was a well-established religious movement. The Mahayana saw itself as distinct from the earlier forms of Buddhism, which it labeled as "Hinayana" which means "the lesser vehicle" (Tibetan: theg pa dman pa). The Mahayana declared themselves as superiors to the Hinayana and saw their motivation for practicing Buddhism as superior. This motivation is known as bodhicitta, the bodhisattva's

aspiration to seek enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. This is opposed to the Hinayana practitioners who want enlightenment only for themselves. The Mahayana also claim that their wisdom, the direct experience of emptiness, is more profound compared to the wisdom of the Hinayana. The Mahayana texts portray the Hinayana as being a limited path suitable only for monks, while Mahayana has room for everyone.

#### DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING

There are different ways of understanding the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings. The teachings were very varied and sometimes even contradicting. Some

scholars explain this problem by saying that not all the doctrines are the words of the Shakyamuni Buddha. Others point to the Shakyamuni Buddha's ability to adapt his teachings to suit the needs of his audience. In that way, the contradicting teachings are seen as different levels of explanation.

Distinct philosophical systems of Mahayana Buddhism developed after the Shakyamuni Buddha's death. The philosophical schools tried to formulate and organize his teachings, and each of them claimed to express the true meaning of the Buddha's words. The Madhyamika and the Cittamatrix are two

of the most famous schools and important opponents asserting to possess the real understanding of the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings.

#### Netlinks:

The Tibetan Teacher Geshe Rabten discusses and compares the Hinayana and the Mahayana traditions in his article about the Mahayana path to

enlightenment:

<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/RabtenBodhicitta.html>

The American magazine, Tricycle, writes about all the Buddhist traditions and has an interesting website on Internet. For basic Buddhism this site is worth checking out.

<http://www.tricycle.com/buddhismabcs2.html>

"Buddhism A to Z" is a site still under construction by Professor Ronald Epstein and the Buddhist Text Translation Society. They are still updating their dictionary of Buddhist terms, Personalities, and doctrines. The entries in the dictionary are of different quality, some concepts are just listed terms in English and Sanskrit, but many entries are extensive explanations with quotations from Buddhist scriptures.

<http://www.online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhist%20Dict/BD%20Intro.htm>

Another good place to start reading more about Buddhism in general, is:

<http://www.members.aol.com/porchfour/religion/lbud04a.htm>

Here you get a list of netlinks, sorted under topics and character, to websites with relevance to Buddhism.

The Office of Tibet, The Tibetan Government in Exile's own website provides you with a basic introduction to the different lineages in Tibetan Buddhism.

<http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/index.html>

The Gelukpa organization FPMT has a very good homepage where interesting teachings are distributed:

<http://www.fpmt.org>

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## MERIT

In order to become an enlightened buddha it is very important to accumulate merit (Sanskrit: punya, Tibetan: bsod nams). This means to do any

positive action by body, speech, or mind that produce correspondingly good karma and positive energy. Accumulating merit will leave positive imprints in the mindstream, which affect the way of thinking and one's habits. One can accumulate merit by for example upholding the five moral precepts for a lay person: Not to take life, not steal, not perform sexual misconduct, not lie, and not taking intoxicants. One creates demerit by not upholding the precepts one has taken. By performing harmful actions that leave negative imprints in the mindstream and bring about negative karmic results one creates demerit.

## DEDICATING MERIT

Even though the merit one creates by positive actions is personal just like karma, it is possible to transfer it to others. This is a practice frequently

mentioned in the late Mahayana texts. The written teachings final words are often the dedication of the merit gained through writing the text, to the benefit of all living beings. In Tibetan Buddhism a ritual, meditation practice, or a recitation of a text, is often ended by dedicating one's merit gained

by one's practice to the welfare of all living beings. In this way one does not cling to one's own merit selfishly, but shares the positive energy that is created, with everybody. When transferring merit, the collection of merit is not consumed, but it actually increases one's merit since the dedication itself is a virtuous action.

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## PARAMITA

The Sanskrit term paramita can be understood as deriving from the word parama meaning "excellence". Another common explanation is that the first part of the term, para, means "beyond" or "the other shore". Mita is translated as "that which has arrived", thus paramita literary means "that which has

gone beyond" or "transcendent". The Tibetan translation of this term is pharol tu phyin pa, i.e. "gone beyond".

What is it that has gone beyond? Buddhist teachings say the perfections are transcendental, they "go beyond" because they transcend the virtues of ordinary, worldly beings. The bodhisattva's practice of the six perfections is the "going beyond", as their practice will lead them to the state of being a buddha, the "beyond". The practice of the paramitas is called by the name of the goal.

The paramitas are generally translated as "perfections" because they are practiced by the bodhisattvas who are motivated by bodhicitta. The bodhisattvas

are exalted beings and their practice surpasses other practices. With the perfection of wisdom they perfect the practice of generosity, ethical discipline, patience, enthusiastic effort, and concentration.

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## PATRUL RINPOCHE

The Tibetan teacher of the Nyingma tradition, Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887) wrote the famous book: kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung (The Words of My Perfect Teacher). He wrote down the oral teachings of his teacher Jigme Gyalba Nyugu, which explains the main concepts of Tibetan Buddhism and gives guidelines for practice.

Patrul Rinpoche's practical advice is for everybody that wants to become enlightened like the Shakyamuni Buddha. He explains different subjects to be

contemplated on, like the value of human life, impermanence, the suffering of cyclic existence, and karma. Chapter two deals with the cultivation of bodhicitta and the six perfections. The last section of the book introduces the powerful methods of the Vajrayana in Tibetan Buddhism that can bring about instant enlightenment. Patrul Rinpoche's classical introduction to Tibetan Buddhism is available in English: Patrul Rinpoche / Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) & K. Brown and S. Sharma (eds.): *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. kunzang lama'i shelung , Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997 (1994).

Netlink:

There is a translation in English of a text by Patrul Rinpoche where he gives advise to himself on Buddhist practice:

<http://www.c-level.com/patrul>

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## SHANTIDEVA

The 7th - 8th century CE Buddhist teacher, Shantideva, was a monk at the Monastic University of Nalanda in India. He was a proponent of the Prasangika Madhyamika tradition (The Middle Way School) of the Mahayana tradition. The Madhyamika tradition was founded by Nagarjuna in the

second century, and transmitted to Tibet in the 8th century CE. Tibetan Buddhist philosophy consider the Madhyamika teachings as the supreme expression of the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings on transcendental wisdom.

Shantideva's poem: Bodhicharyavatara (Tibetan: byangs chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa) is highly recommended reading for those who would like a closer study of the bodhisattva trainings as explained in Mahayana texts. Bodhicharyavatara is studied and revered by all the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This poem explains how to arouse bodhicitta, how to protect and maintain it, and how to intensify bodhicitta. All the verses from Shantideva poems cited at this website is taken from the beautifully translated English edition of Bodhicharyavatara: Shantideva: The way of the Bodhisattva. Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group. Shambala Publications Inc. USA, 1997.

Netlinks:

There is not much information about Shantideva on the Web, but this link is worth checking out:

<http://www.buddhanet.net/fdd59.htm>

For an English translation of Shantideva's chapter on the perfection of patience:

<http://www.lehua.ilhawaii.net/~kcraw/patience.htm>

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## SKILFUL MEANS

Skilful means (Sanskrit: upaya, Tibetan: thabs) is also called the seventh perfection. This skillfulness concerns the bodhisattva's practical understanding

of the Buddhist teachings, the bodhisattva's character, behavior, and knowledge. The choosing and using the best possible means for helping others, is

the same as applying skilful means. Skilful means is closely related to compassion, and is often called merit. In this way skilful means is the spontaneous positive action born from wisdom.

When the Shakyamuni Buddha adapted his teachings to the needs of his listeners, he was applying skilful means. The Buddha's application of skilful means, is compared to the doctor who know which medicine to prescribe for curing distinct diseases of individuals.

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## TEN PERFECTIONS

Some Buddhist scriptures talk about ten perfections (Sanskrit: dasaparamita, Tibetan: pha rol tu phyin pa bcu). It is suggested that the last four

perfections were added to the original six perfections in order to coordinate the perfections with the ten bodhisattva stages (Sanskrit:

bodhisattvabhumi, Tibetan: byang chub sems pa'i sa). By increasing the number of perfections, a bodhisattva can practice each of the perfections on the

corresponding level to his development (i.e. bodhisattva stage). Stage by stage the bodhisattva focuses on a different perfection.

The ten progressive bodhisattva stages start with the entry on the Mahayana path. On the tenth bodhisattva stage all the ten perfections are completely

developed. To become a buddha is considered the eleventh and final stage.

Some scholars reject the additional four perfections as playing a subordinate part, being only auxiliaries of the perfection of wisdom. The last four are:

7. Skilful means (Sanskrit: upaya, Tibetan: thabs)

8. Aspiration (Sanskrit: pranidhana, Tibetan: smon lam)
9. Strength (Sanskrit: bala, Tibetan: stobs)
10. Exalted wisdom (Sanskrit: jñana, Tibetan: ye shes)

Netlink:

For extensive reading about the ten bodhisattva levels, the dasa bhumi:  
<http://www.fpmt.org/Teachings/Rabten10levels.html>

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## THE 37 PRACTICES OF BODHISATTVAS

The poem "The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas" (Tibetan: rgyal sras lag len so bdun) is written by the Tibetan monk Gyalse Togme Sangpo (1295-1369).

The teaching encourage one to take advantage of one's fortunate birth as a human being, to give up bad habits and transform the way one thinks and acts in accordance with the way the bodhisattvas practice (Verse 1):

Having gained this rare ship of freedom and fortune,  
Hear, think and meditate unwaveringly night and day  
In order to free yourself and others  
From the ocean of cyclic existence-  
This is the practice of Bodhisattvas.

The poem explains the bodhicitta, the causes for bodhicitta and gives guidelines and advice to the practitioner. Though the text were written a long

time ago, it is still very popular among Buddhist practitioners today. The verses 25 until 30 present the 6 transcendent perfections.

The extracts from "The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas" are in Geshe Sonam Rinchen's commentary to the poem translated by Ruth Sonam. It is a good idea to read the Buddhist teacher's commentaries in order to understand the meaning of the words, and the concepts that the text refers to. Geshe Sonam

Rinchen has a very practical and comprehensive way of explaining: Geshe Sonam Rinchen / Ruth Sonam (trans./ed.): The 37 Practices of Bodhisattvas, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1997.

Netlink:

Gyalse Togme Sangpo's poem can be found on Internet:  
<http://www.energyenhancement.org/bodhi.htm>

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