

0. Introduction to the Practices

February 9, 2017

Tonight we begin a rather ambitious series, exploring what is known in buddhist circles as the Ten Paramis. These universal ideas show up in many traditions and philosophies. I'll be teaching from the buddhist point of view, since that is what I am most familiar with, and what most resonates with me, but the teachings are applicable regardless of one's beliefs.

The Pali word *parami* is usually translated into English as "perfection." I don't like this translation, because it immediately makes me think I have to try to achieve the impossible, yet again, and I immediately lose interest in hearing anything more about it.

I looked up the etymology of the word to see if there was a way of translating it that didn't have so much western baggage attached. There are two different schools of thought on the roots of the word. One finds as the root a word meaning "highest," "most distant," "supreme," "most excellent." *Parami* is a noun, though, and there aren't a whole lot of common noun forms of these adjectives in English. One can see why the word "perfection" was chosen. Perhaps it would be better, at least in the US, to translate the 10 Paramis as "The Supremes." Then we could take "You Can't Hurry Love" as our theme song, as a reminder that this practice unfolds at its own pace.

But in case someone doesn't like R&B, I think that "Excellences" might be a better alternative. Or "most excellent" things.

The second school of thought divides the word into two roots. One means "beyond," or "the further bank" or "further shore" or "further boundary." The second means either "that which has arrived" or "that which goes." (Pali grammar makes it impossible to know which without context.) By this logic, the word means "that which goes to the other shore" or perhaps "that which has arrived at the other shore."

It doesn't matter which school of thinking is correct. Both translations work well. What we end up with are the ten most excellent things you can do that will bring you to the other shore. And indeed it is said that if you do actually *perfect* all ten of these things, you will be a fully enlightened buddha. It apparently took Gautama Buddha innumerable lifetimes to perfect them in himself before his awakening. But enlightenment is not the sole benefit of cultivating these things. Even working on them in small ways is well worth the effort.

The 10 Most Excellent Practices for Enduring the Flood and Reaching the Other Shore

So what are these "things?" Well, they are both states of mind and character, and activities. I'll use the term "practice" to indicate that these things must be worked at and cultivated, and that there are both internal and external manifestations of each. It is sometimes thought that the Buddha's starting point for new students was the Four Noble Truths, but these were introduced as a first lesson only to monks and aesthetes who had already dedicated their lives to contemplation and the seeking of truth. For householders like you and me, the first instruction he would give was to cultivate the practices listed in the 10 Supremes.

Actually, while the Buddha taught these practices individually, it was not until after his death that they were collected together into the lists we now have. (The list of the Most Excellent Practices varies somewhat from school to school, but a list of *Paramis* in general is present in some form in most Theravada and Mahayana schools of buddhism.) It seems that with the Buddha gone, the monks wanted some sort of framework for directing their minds' energy while they went about their various activities. And for householders (that is, people like you and me, practitioners who lived in society, not in a monastery as full-time monks), this provided some guidance about how to take their practice off the cushion and into their daily lives.

Lucky for us those early monks developed such a collection of Excellences. We seem to have the same challenges of applying the fruits of our meditation to our day to day lives as they did, and so we, too, can fall back onto these Most Excellent Practices to support, develop, and guide our steps toward liberation in this life.

So what are the 10 Most Excellences? I'll give you the list now, but be careful about jumping to conclusions about what each means. Over the next months, we'll be looking at these in depth, both through talks, and also through exercises and practices that will enable us each to explore and experience the Supremes personally.

The 10 Most Excellent Practices for navigating the flood and reaching the other shore are:

1. Generosity - giving
2. Virtue/Ethics - appropriate conduct
3. Renunciation - giving up clinging
4. Wisdom - insight into the true nature of things: impermanence, suffering, not-self

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5. Energy - diligence, effort, enthusiasm
6. Patience - forbearance, endurance, forgiveness
7. Truthfulness - seeing and manifesting what is actually true each moment
8. Determination - having firm resolution, stick-with-ness
9. Loving Kindness - extending goodwill and care toward all beings
10. Equanimity - a steady mind, internal balance, non-resistance.

You can see that these mind states and actions mostly have to do with our interactions in the world. Generosity, loving kindness, good conduct, patience, and manifesting truth are directly related to our personal relationships. Seeing the true nature of things and giving up clinging reduce our inner suffering, which enables us to open to others. These are the step-by-step instructions for transforming relationships, and for reconnecting with our source, God, The Universe, Love, whatever you want to call it. It may take lifetimes to perfect each one, but cultivating even a tiny bit of each in this life can change the world.