

## **Introducing the Six Perfections**

Over the next six weeks we shall be looking, in some detail, at the model of the ‘Six Perfections’, which comes from the *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism, in which one of the most important figures is that of the *bodhisattva*. A *bodhisattva* is an archetypal character who is Awakened, and who embodies compassion as one of the two main aspects of his or her Awakening (the other being wisdom). Such a being dedicates his or her Awakened qualities to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings. These qualities, in turn, can be described in terms of the six *pāramitās* – this Sanskrit word can be translated as ‘the supremely established’, suggesting human qualities that are taken to their utmost by the *bodhisattva*. For ourselves, at least for now, we can think of the *pāramitās* as goals that we can aspire to in our own, un-awakened way. You might like to consider – and this reflection is crucial to the course - how useful is the idea of ‘perfections’ to ordinary, unenlightened beings like us?

The Six Perfections, in overview, can be seen diagrammatically in the graphic overleaf (with acknowledgements to the BBC). This sets out the six in their traditional order, reading from the top clockwise, and it gives the Sanskrit terms and their most frequently-used English translations. On this course we’ll make a slight deviation from this order, and cover morality this week, and generosity in week 2. This arrangement recognises that you’ve probably had a pretty good introduction to the basis of Buddhist ethics already, on your Foundation course. We’ll also sometimes use some slightly different translations, in the belief that these are more complete.

## **Ethics**

We’re probably already familiar with the basics of Buddhist ethics. By way of recap, they’re based on the principle of *karma* as an application, at the level of human choices, of the universal law of Dependent Arising and Cessation. This level of the law, which we sometimes call the volitional level, can be summarised in the aphorism ‘actions have consequences’. Depending on which actions we choose, and the degree of skill that we put into them, the consequences might be unhappy, for ourselves and others (at the ‘unskilful’ or ‘reactive’ end of the spectrum), or they might result in happy consequences (at the ‘skilful’ or ‘creative’ end).

This view of our volitions seems fairly simple, at first sight, but the problem is that life is usually complicated! It’s very often difficult to anticipate what the consequences of given choices might be, and we might often have to make compromises for a ‘greater good’. To help us in this very difficult arena, the



Buddha proposed the famous Five Precepts, which can be stated in both negative and positive forms, with which we're very likely familiar.

Asaṅga, who lived around the fourth century CE in modern-day Pakistan, was the co-founder of the important *Yogācāra* tradition within the *Mahāyāna* school. He suggested that we can identify 3 levels of ethical behaviour:

1. The level of **restraint** – this corresponds to our observance of the 5 negative precepts, by which we consciously restrain ourselves from unskilful behaviours.
2. The level of **accumulation of skilful mental states** – in this, we actively cultivate the 5 positive precepts.
3. The level of **benefitting living beings** – this is the true realm of the *bodhisattva's* ethics. *Bodhisattvas* are spontaneously skilful, without the need consciously to consider their actions. This level is the one of collective, as well as personal, ethics, as behaviours are chosen that benefit the greatest possible number of living beings.

This, then is the first (or, strictly, the second!) of the Six Perfections or *pāramitās*. Next week we shall be taking a look at generosity, and there is a separate document giving you a little preparatory background. As a general rule for the course, it will be really helpful if you could read each week's document in advance of the class – this should help you to make the most of the discussions that will take place within the latter.