

Last week we introduced the model of the Six Perfections (or *pāramitās*) – these, according to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, are qualities that are seen in *bodhisattvas* - archetypal beings who use their wisdom and compassion in the service of all who suffer. By understanding them better, even though we're not ourselves Awakened, we can try to cultivate these same six qualities at an everyday level, and make a positive difference to our lives and those of people around us. We began by looking at the quality of **ethics** (although, traditionally, this is listed as the second rather than the first!)

This week we look at the *pāramitā* of generosity. Of course, we met this on our Buddhism Foundation course, as the positive aspect of the second ethical precept: “With open-handed generosity, I purify my body”. What might not be immediately clear is that generosity benefits the giver just as much as the recipient. The act of giving helps to weaken our in-built attachment, and the more we give, the weaker our tendency to be attached to possessions can become. In turn, our giving can become more natural and spontaneous, not really a matter of conscious thought at all. We might find that our appreciation of the world is enhanced, and things seem more attractive or ‘aesthetic’, as we relate less to the idea of ‘possession’.

In looking at generosity more deeply, it’s helpful to look at three questions – (1) What is given by a *bodhisattva*? (2) How is a gift given? and (3) With what motive?

What is given by a *bodhisattva*?

The *Mahāyāna* makes it clear that generosity amounts to quite a lot more than giving **material things** (although these are certainly important, and we should include supporting people or organisations with money under this heading). Beyond this, there is a list of five other ways in which generosity can be exercised.

We may give **fearlessness** – for example, when we remain strong and calm in an emergency, maybe encouraging others to stay calm too. We might think of professions like paramedics or the police in this regard. Next, we may give **education** – maybe a gift that isn’t as fully appreciated in our entitled culture as it would be ideally. The next in the list is the giving of **life & limbs** – this may seem quite extreme to our ears, but we can probably think of examples, in desperate conflict situations, when individuals may willingly give their lives or their accustomed degree of health in support of a desirable outcome. Then again, we may choose to give our **merits**. This is quite a metaphysical notion, and an important one in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. If we have gained any

recognition, reward, reputation or enhanced status as a result of our skilful actions, we can let go of any attachment to these, and instead dedicate our merits to those beings who still need our help. This notion appears in a verse within the devotional *pūja* that is known as ‘Transference of Merit and Self-Surrender’.

*May the merit gained
In my acting thus
Go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings.
My personality throughout my existences,
My possessions,
And my merit in all three ways,
I give up without regard to myself
For the benefit of all beings.
Just as the earth and other elements
Are serviceable in many ways
To the infinite number of beings
Inhabiting limitless space;
So may I become
That which maintains all beings
Situated throughout space,
So long as all have not attained
To peace.*

Finally, and rated the highest form of giving, we can give the gift of **the Dharma** itself – so you might recognize that your teachers on this course are carrying out a hugely important act of generosity!

How is a gift given?

The *Mahāyāna* tradition lays out a sort of code of conduct for how a *bodhisattva* gives, and which also serves as an example to us unawakened beings. The following passage, collated by Sangharakshita (in his ‘A Survey of Buddhism’) from various sources, sets out how the act of giving might be undertaken:

(The bodhisattva) should always be very courteous to the supplicants, and receive them with every mark of respect and deference. He should also be happy and joyful, when he gives away anything. This condition is important and essential. The donor should be even happier than the recipient of the gift. A bodhisattva should not repent of his generosity after bestowing gifts on others. He should not talk of his charitable deeds. He should give quickly and with a humble heart. He should make no distinction between friends and enemies, but should give to all alike. He should give to the deserving and the undeserving, the wicked and the righteous, everywhere and at all times. But he should not lose the sense of measure and proportion in his charity.

With what motive is a gift given?

We might reasonably think that the motivation for our giving is a reasonably straight-forward affair. We have something (perhaps from the list of 'What is given', above), whilst another person doesn't have it, and needs it. This relationship is set out in the following passage, taken from the *Mahāyāna* 'Perfection of Wisdom' scriptures:

*The **wordly** perfection of giving consist in this: the bodhisattva gives liberally to all those who ask, all the while thinking in terms of real things. It occurs to him: "I give, that one receives, this is a gift. I renounce all my possessions without stint. I act as one who knows the Buddha. I practice the perfection of giving. I, having made this gift into the common property of all beings, dedicate it to supreme enlightenment, and that without apprehending anything. By means of this gift and its fruits may all beings in this very life be at their ease, and may they one day enter Nirvāṇa!" Tied by three ties he gives a gift, Which three? A perception of self, a perception of others, a perception of the gift.*

However – and this point is very typical of *Mahāyāna* thinking – this 'worldly perfection' is ultimately missing the point, as the very ideas of 'giver', 'gift' and 'recipient' are actually reflections of our habitual (and understandable) belief that we stand separate from the rest of existence – 'me in here' as opposed to 'the world out there'. This is seen as the most profound delusion, and the *bodhisattva* ultimately exercises an attitude to giving that's entirely beyond mundane perceptions (i.e. 'supramundane'):

*The **supramundane** perfection of giving, on the other hand, consists in the threefold purity. What is the threefold purity? Here a bodhisattva gives a gift, and he does not apprehend a self, nor a recipient, nor a gift, also no reward of his giving. He surrenders that gift to all beings, but he apprehends neither beings nor self. He dedicates that gift to supreme enlightenment, but he does not apprehend any enlightenment. This is called the supramundane perfection of giving.*

Before we feel too discouraged, we need to remember that, as long as we're not actually *bodhisattvas*, the 'worldly' practice of giving is an excellent step in the right direction!