

Born for the Perfections

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When you ask most Buddhists in Thailand about their practice, they'll answer either that they're developing merit or that they're developing the *paramis*, the perfections. This applies not only to lay people but also to monks and nuns.

Years back, when I was working on *The Buddhist Religions*, I mentioned this in a description of Buddhism in Southeast Asia: the role played by the *paramis*. One of my readers was surprised. Her background was in Mahayana. She assumed that the *paramis* were exclusively a Mahayana teaching, but they're not. You find them in the Pali Canon, the later parts of the Canon, especially associated with the *Jātaka* tales. The word *parami* appears in three suttas in the four *Nikāyas*, which are considered a more authentic part of the Canon—but only three. And there, it's just a general term: *Parami* means bringing a good quality to perfection.

The list of the ten *paramis* comes later, as I said, associated with the *Jātaka* tales. And because the bodhisattva is portrayed as a layperson so often in the *Jātaka* tales, the *paramis* are a good way of looking at lay practice. But there are also many tales in which he is a renunciate, so the *paramis* are a good lens for looking at monastic practice as well. There are ten altogether: generosity or giving, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. The list doesn't have a progressive nature, which is why I like to discuss it under the headings of determination.

There are four qualities that go into determination, and the different *paramis* can fit neatly under the four qualities. The first determination is discernment. That includes the perfection of discernment, of course, and the perfection goodwill. The second is truth. There you've got truth, virtue and persistence. The third is generosity, where you have giving and renunciation. And the final one is calming, where you have equanimity and endurance. So you could say that all the *paramis* come under determination because, after all, they portray the qualities the Buddha was trying to develop as he was going through lifetime after lifetime, determined on awakening.

The *paramis* also cover the factors of the noble eightfold path. Discernment comes under right view. Right resolve would correspond to renunciation, goodwill, and equanimity. Virtue would cover right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Persistence would be the same as right effort. And then renunciation again would come under right mindfulness and right concentration, because in both cases you're trying to get away from sensuality to find well-being inside.

Think of the image of the monkeys straying out, away from their ancestral territory, and getting caught. But if they stay inside their ancestral territory, they're safe. Inside the territory is the territory of right mindfulness; outside is the territory of the five strings of sensuality. So mindfulness is very closely related to renunciation. And then, of course, with first jhana, you're secluded from sensuality and you find a sense of well-being inside. You work up to the fourth jhana where you have equanimity. So the perfections cover the noble eightfold path. There are a few left over—truth, giving, and endurance—but those are implied in the path.

So as you develop the perfections, you're working on the path. And as Ajaan Fuang would often say, the Buddha was born for the perfections. What are *we* born for? You can make them the purpose of your life. So many people ask, "What is the meaning of life?" From the Buddha's point of view, life doesn't come with a meaning predetermined. But you can *give* meaning to your life by determining it yourself, by deciding you want to develop the perfections.

One of the ways of protecting yourself, or providing a blessing for yourself, as the Buddha said, is to direct yourself rightly. If you decide that you want awakening, okay, this is how you direct yourself in that direction. You work on the perfections. Now, some of them are not very glamorous. Persistence, endurance, truth and determination: Those are the workhorses. But often they're the ones we have to work on the most.

Sometimes you find yourself in circumstances where you don't have 24 hours a day to practice meditation. Other things come up. Other responsibilities are there. You can sometimes wonder, "Is my life is being frittered away with these responsibilities?" But you can look at them in another light. These may be precisely the perfections you have to work on as you meet those responsibilities.

I remember when we had our first big construction project at Wat Dhammasathit. We were going to build a chedi, one of those spired monuments, and our first wave of workers came. I noticed that life in the monastery wasn't as peaceful as it had been before, and I was kind of frustrated. I had enjoyed the first years there where nothing was going on at the monastery, and you could meditate all day every day. All of a sudden, there was the disturbance, and I found that I had new responsibilities that cut into my meditation time.

We had an old monk, one of those guys who waits until he's really too old to practice before he ordains. He spent his afternoons listening to his radio. He decided the construction work was going to cut into his quiet time. I remember the last *Pātimokkha* at the rains retreat before he left: He said he was going to have

to go find a place where he could find some more peace and quiet. And Ajaan Fuang said, “Well, as for me, I still have to develop some more *paramis*.”

That really struck me. If Ajaan Fuang had to work on his *paramis*, what about me? So that helped to change my attitude. With all the extra work that came as the workers left and then the volunteers came, I was responsible for the practical details of looking after the volunteers. I kept reminding myself, okay, I obviously need to develop these perfections. That gave me a sense that every part of my life was part of the practice.

If you can look at it that way, you begin to realize that, yes, as you develop the endurance that goes with your responsibilities, then you can apply that endurance to your meditation. Your determination to do something well: You can apply that to your meditation. When you make up your mind you’re going to do something, you’re true to that determination. You’re true to that decision. That applies to your meditation, too.

So these qualities don’t go anywhere else. They finally get channeled into the mind. And when you think in that way, then you’re practicing what Ajaan Fuang would call a timeless practice. For most of us, our days get divided up into times. There’s the time to work. There’s the time to get together for the Q&A. There’s the time for this, the time for that. He said the whole day gets chopped up into times. But if you decide that the whole day is a time for practice, then whatever you do, look for the aspect of what perfection you need to develop, or what perfection you’re developing as you work on that. You see it all as part of the whole.

If things seem to be going slowly, remind yourself that you’re working on lots of perfections all at once. Ajaan Lee’s image is of a tree. There are some trees where you can look at them and in just a few hours, you see that they grow—like a banana tree in Thailand. You cut off the top of the banana tree, come back in an hour, and it’s already started a new leaf at the part where you cut it off. But banana trees give one set of fruits and then they die.

That’s not us as we’re meditating. The tree that corresponds to us is the one that has lots of branches and grows slowly. But the fact that it grows slowly means that its hardwood is solid. In my own case, I’ve seen many monks whose practice went really fast for a while and then it crashed. Whereas those who stuck with it, who were willing to see the good in slow progress and made sure the progress was solid: Those were the ones who lasted.

So you’re growing hardwood. Hardwood takes time. But it can form the basis of a tree that has lots of branches. And you know the role that that image plays in the Pali Canon: A tree with lots of branches is a place where birds can come and

eat fruit. People can come rest in the shade. You benefit, and the people around you are going to benefit as well. We need more trees like that.