

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #4-A: Look of Great Wisdom

Dear Thay,¹ dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

The Six Paramitas²

In the *Lotus Sutra* we learn that the Six Paramitas are the foundation of the bodhisattva path. In **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**, Thay called them the “doors to action.” The usual translation of the Sanskrit term “paramita” into English is “perfection,” but Thay said that in Chinese Buddhist literature it is always rendered in a character that translates literally as “crossing to the other shore.” So practicing the six perfections carries us to the shore of well-being.

Through cultivating and perfecting these six ways of being, “we can reach the shore very quickly—it may take only a few seconds for us to cross over the river of suffering and arrive on the shore of wellbeing. We may have thought it would take many years of practice in order to get free of the afflictions, but if we know how to cultivate and manifest these six qualities we can cross over right here and now.”³

The six paramitas⁴ include:

1. The first door of action: *dana*, **giving and generosity**;
2. the second door: *shila*, **the precepts, mindfulness trainings, and guidelines for ethical behavior**;
3. the third door: *kshanti*, **all-embracing inclusiveness**;
4. the fourth door: *virya*, **right diligence, energy, effort, and steadfastness in the practice**;
5. the fifth door: *dhyana*, **meditation, the practice of stopping and calming and looking deeply**; and
6. the sixth door: *prajna*, **wisdom, understanding and insight**.

Interbeing is the nature of the six paramitas. They influence and inform each other. If you practice one paramita, you are practicing all the others at the same time. “In order to manifest ourselves in the dimension of action...we practice to cultivate and perfect these six qualities within ourselves. The moment we see the presence of all the paramitas in each paramita, we will begin to fully realize and truly live the practice.” Our feet are solidly planted on the bodhisattva path.

The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore

The *Lotus Sutra* also teaches that practicing the six paramitas for oneself alone is not the deepest teaching of the Buddha. When sincerely practiced, the six paramitas nurture our bodhicitta—the mind of love, our deep aspiration to help all beings cross over to the shore of well-being. This is the highest aspiration of a bodhisattva.

It is the sixth paramita, prajna paramita, that, when practiced deeply, offers the insight that brings us to the other shore. With such insight, the practice of each of

the other paramitas becomes easy. Prajna paramita is the realization of the truth of emptiness (*shunyata*). Emptiness means interdependent co-arising, impermanence and non-self. Thay said emptiness is the Middle Way between existent and nonexistent. When we first hear about emptiness, maybe we are a little afraid—perhaps we think this means there is no such thing as existence. “But after practicing for awhile, we see that things do exist, only in a different way than we thought.” He uses the familiar example of a flower. “The beautiful flower does not *become* empty when it fades and dies. It is already empty. ...Looking deeply, we see that the flower is made of non-flower elements—light, space, clouds, earth, and consciousness.” It is empty of a separate, independent, unchanging self. In its essence, it is not born and it does not die.

We are the same. We cannot be by ourselves alone. We are not separate self-entities. We can only inter-be with *everything else* in the cosmos. Thay said the practice is to nourish the insight of emptiness all day long—wherever we go, we touch the nature of emptiness in everything or everyone we contact. We also realize that to protect ourselves, to protect humans, we have to protect the non-human species. We have to see ourselves in things that we thought were outside of ourselves in order to dissolve false boundaries.

When we maintain awareness that we are all linked to each other, we are practicing the Concentration on Emptiness (*shunyata samadhi*). We can practice this concentration when we eat, walk, sit, or post on Facebook. And we do not practice just for ourselves. When we look at others, we see how their happiness and suffering are linked to our happiness and suffering. “Peace begins with me” is a deep concentration and practice. According to Thay, the concentration on emptiness has to be practiced and not just talked about. “Emptiness is a door of liberation when we penetrate it deeply and we realize interdependent co-arising and the interbeing nature of everything that is.” This is the bodhisattva practice of prajna paramita. With this type of understanding and insight, we can practice all of the other paramitas perfectly. **The Blooming of a Lotus**⁵ has many exercises that can help us realize emptiness.

The Holy Path Through Suffering: Touching Interdependent Co-Arising and Our Interbeing Nature

Several decades ago, neuroscientists discovered what are now known as mirror neurons in the cortex of the human brain. Mirror neurons allow us to pick up another person’s movements, as well as their emotional states and intentions. When we are in sync with another person we might find ourselves standing or sitting in similar ways, even mirroring the patterns of another person’s voice. Mirror neurons explain, in part, our capacity for empathy—the ability to “feel into” other living beings. According to Bessel Van Der Kolk:⁶

Human beings are astoundingly attuned to subtle emotional shifts in the people (and animals) around them. Slight changes in the tension of the brow, wrinkles around the eyes, curvature of the lips, and angle of the neck quickly

signal to us how comfortable, suspicious, relaxed, or frightened someone is. Our mirror neurons register their inner experience, and our bodies make internal adjustments to whatever we notice. ...While our culture teaches us to focus on personal uniqueness, at a deeper level we barely exist as individual organisms.

This is one neurobiological aspect of our interconnectedness.

One time on retreat I had an interaction with a dharma friend. I'm not sure if it was what I said, how I said it, my mannerism, tone of voice, or the topic of our conversation, but the person responded to me as if I had sent a dagger through their heart. I could see they were triggered, and I could see in that moment their response to my actions manifesting throughout their body. They went on the offensive verbally, like a mother lion protecting her young cubs. I was taken aback. We were both caught in the exchange for a bit, but finally sorted out the misunderstanding.

The energy from that interaction stayed with me. What had happened? And why? My mirror neurons were reflecting distress, and my Henny Penny⁷ nature was sure the sky was falling. But was I sure? Maybe it was just an apple falling on my head. The residue of that exchange was confusion, worry, "certainty," jumbled-ness in my body, but also wondering. Several mornings after the retreat, I woke up with what felt like ice crystals of pain piercing my skin, and then a thick cloud of suffering descending upon me. It was full of fire, lightning strikes and thunder, and I thought I was going to suffocate under its oppressive weight. In the midst of that moment I could see an image of my friend suffering. But it was like seeing into a window of my friend's suffering as a passageway to something beyond. I felt the weight of the world's suffering bearing down upon me and thought that if I had to truly experience this reality of suffering I could not survive.

I got up out of bed and went to meditate. Feeling my footsteps one by one on the hardwood floor. Carefully, quietly making a cup of coffee and then settling into my meditation chair with a lighted candle, a warm blanket, and mala beads to ground my hands and breath. As I sat, the heavy cloud began to disperse and tears began streaming down my face. Such tenderness and compassion poured through me. Toward my friend and toward all that suffers. I could see how suffering arises and how it penetrates. I could also see how it can transform into a deep sense of understanding and love.

This experience lifted yet another thin veil covering my ability to see the true nature of reality, the true nature of emptiness, and a path through suffering—a little crack of light that came through unexpectedly, allowing me to see a bit more clearly.

In **Fragrant Palm Leaves**⁸ Thay wrote: "Years ago I wrote in my journal that even if it destroys you, you must hold to the truth. I knew early on that finding truth is not the same as finding happiness. *You aspire to see the truth, but once you have seen it, you cannot avoid suffering. Otherwise you've seen nothing at all.*"

Facing into the truth of suffering is like being tenderized with a meat hammer. The process may feel intense at times, but as we gently allow (and as we are able) that process to work in us, we experience the tough sinew and tendons of our stubborn (and protective) resistance to reality soften, and the realization of suffering becomes more and more integrated into the fabric of our lives. We learn how to take care of it, soften ourselves toward it, and its oppressive weight can disperse. Understanding and great love arise from this experience. This is the holy path through suffering.

Everything the Buddha taught he realized from his own personal experience. His realization that peace and calm in the body was connected to peace and calm in the mind led him deeply into the exploration of the true nature of reality, and the nature of suffering:

In the midst of thunder crashing, great bolts of lightning flashing across the sky, black clouds concealing the moon and stars, and a drenching rain, Gautama continued to sit without wavering, shining awareness on his mind through the last watch before he reached full awakening. He saw that living beings suffer because they don't understand that they share a common ground with all beings. Ignorance gives rise to a multitude of sorrows, confusions and troubles. Negative states of mind all have their roots in ignorance. When we learn how to calm our minds in order to look deeply at the true nature of things, we can arrive at full understanding which dissolves every sorrow and anxiety and gives rise to acceptance and love.

Gautama saw that understanding and love are one. Without understanding there can be no love. Each person's disposition is the result of physical, emotional and social conditions. When we understand this about ourselves and others, we cannot hate even a person who behaves cruelly, we cannot hate ourselves for our shortcomings. Instead we try to transform physical, emotional and social conditions. Understanding gives rise to compassion and love, which in turn give rise to right action. In order to love, it is first necessary to understand, so understanding is the key to liberation.

Adapted from **Old Path, White Clouds**

When we aspire to see the truth, we run directly into suffering. As we are able to hold suffering and look more deeply into it with calm, unwavering, mindful attention, concentration deepens and understanding naturally arises. Compassion and love are born from this understanding.

Both Uglier and More Beautiful

Practicing prajna paramita is not always easy. Sometimes our practice is uneven and understanding does not come (Really? Arrrgh ☺). Sometimes it requires honesty and great courage to face ourselves head on. In **Fragrant Palm Leaves**, Thay wrote about such an experience where he saw his true nature as much more real, both uglier and more beautiful, than he ever could have imagined. It takes deep aspiration and a stable practice to experience both of these powerful truths. At some

level we realize that such full seeing will change us. Is holding onto our familiar sense of self more important than realizing something both deeply known and freshly new? If we are faced with such an experience, do we have a deep enough faith in the practice and our experience of the ultimate dimension to trust the outcome, whatever it may be? The yes or no really doesn't matter. There always will be small and large opportunities along the way. Maybe not right now. Or maybe... Holding the question is the key, AND we are perfect, right now, just as we are.

One time I asked a teacher for a practice that would scare me to death (I was going for the BIG meat hammer!). About that same time I discovered and read the history of Machig Labdrön.⁹ Dampe Sangye, a great Indian yogi and one of her teachers, once instructed her:

Confess all your hidden faults.
Approach that which you find repulsive.
Whoever you think you cannot help—help them.
Anything you are attached to let go of it.
Go to places like cemeteries that scare you.
Sentient beings are limitless as the sky.
Be aware.
Find the Buddha within yourself.¹⁰

Within this verse are examples of gathas or questions that can enliven our bodhicitta, our deep aspiration, our mind of love, and create a focus, a container for practice. Any one of these phrases could be the subject of what Thay calls “looking deeply,” and what Zen calls “great doubt.” Just reciting this verse, like reciting any potent verse, can cause questions to arise. For example, a question that arose in me was, “what are the metaphorical cemeteries of my mind?” Or, “where is the Buddha inside myself?” With this type of deep looking, we are not thinking or analyzing with our mind. It is more of a question we plant or something that arises, and then we let go of it completely. But always wondering. It works us and works in us. Maybe it pushes and pulls us at times—like pulling taffy, which aerates a lump of sugar candy making it smoother and lighter (also more chewy and real) with each fold and pull. The hidden fruits of this questioning manifest on the field of spiritual energy we have cultivated by tending to our deepest aspiration—an aspiration that is strengthened by our daily practice of mindfulness as we trek through life. And then maybe...a surprise!!!

The Great Mother

Within emerging Mahayana Buddhism, Prajna Paramita was called the Great Mother, the Tathagatagarbha,¹¹ the matrix from which all awakening occurs. The depiction of Prajnaparamita as a female has its linguistic base in the term Prajna which is a feminine word in Sanskrit similar to the Greek word Sophia meaning wisdom. According to Tibetan teachings, Prajnaparamita represented as a female satisfies the internal primal need for reverence toward the divine feminine, which has existed in human art since paleolithic times. Buddhism has an abundance of

masculine representations, so experiencing both Prajnaparamita and Avolokiteshvara in feminine form satisfies something deeply held, something wordless, within me.

Even when practicing with what scares us, we are not alone. The teachings on emptiness, prajnaparamita, show and tell us we are not alone. Through our practice, we are held and supported within the net of our interconnectedness, the matrix of emptiness, the womb *Prajnaparamita*....¹² We are deeply embraced by the Great Mother:

She lies down calmly, and gives birth to Perfect Wisdom. In that moment of release, all women are the same woman, all babies are the same baby. A mother reaches for her child without regard to its individual nature, and any wish she might have had about its form vanishes. The baby is perfect just as it is. Prajnaparamita gives birth to all beings and all things with equal love, seeing the unique perfection of each one.

Vast and deep and endless; a single, brief sound.¹³ She is short and long, fine and broad, a matrix, a womb, a nest, a web, a loom, a vessel, the ocean, the seed.

She is everything the baby needs.

Prajnaparamita comforts, guides, encourages us to explore. Like all good parents, she reveals and explains things when the child asks, and only as far as the child can understand. She waits patiently, never tired, never afraid—fierce and protective, but not indulgent. She doesn't spare us mistakes; we are transparent to her. She will always precede us.

Prajnaparamita gives us doubt, that great gift. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—disappearing into no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, and no mind. Then no disappears, and there is only yes. Birth and death disappear, until there is only life. Pursuit and hunger, disappearing, until there is nothing to pursue, no need. Until there is no I, no you, no path, no end to the path, no beginning. With such great doubt, we can awaken to possibility. She shows us space without obstacles. She shows us how to live in objectless totality with intimacy so close there is no gap.

She is the Tathagatagarbha, the Womb, the Great Mother of All the Buddhas—including you, including me. She sings a lullaby to help us rest, words beyond words:

going, going, always going on beyond, always becoming—always being—always birthing and being born Buddha—*gate, gate, para gate, para sam gate, bodhi svaha*

Avalokiteshvara is a child of the Great Mother, as are you and I. Her look of great wisdom (*maha prajna*) is born from the Great Mother's womb. It is the look that pierces the veil of our perceived separation. It is a look that is both fierce and tender. It offers us the medicine we need, just when we need it. Thay said that if we practice to nourish the insight of interbeing all day long then, wherever we go, we touch the nature of emptiness in everything or everyone we contact. With this practice, we are cultivating the Look of Great Wisdom, a super power practiced by Avalokiteshvara. With just one such Look, we are able to put an end to all kinds of suffering.

¹ "Thay" is the affectionate term Thich Nhat Hanh's student call him. The term means teacher.

² For more on the *Six Paramitas* see Thay's book, **The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings**.

³ From **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**.

⁴ From **Peaceful Action, Open Heart**.

⁵ Thay's book of guided meditations.

⁶ In his book, **The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma**.

⁷ Henny Penny (or Chicken Little) is a well-known European fairy tale story of a chicken scratching and pecking the ground under an apple tree. When an apple falls out of the tree, the chicken is sure the sky is falling and from there the story proceeds to the chicken foolishly leading her friends to death at hands of a fox. "The sky is falling!" is a common idiom in the English language indicating over-reaction, with the mistaken belief that disaster is imminent.

⁸ Thay's journals from 1962-1966.

⁹ Machig Labdrön was a renowned 11th-century [Tibetan tantric](#) Buddhist practitioner, teacher and [yogini](#) who originated several Tibetan lineages of the [Vajrayana](#) practice of Chöd. One aspect of Chöd was practicing in cemeteries and charnal grounds.

¹⁰ This teaching includes the essential instructions of her Chöd teachings.

¹¹ Tathagatagarbha has been translated as the womb, matrix, embryo or essence of the Tathagatas, or "thus gone ones," a term the Buddha commonly used to refer to himself as well as buddhas of the past. Tathagatagarbha has also been translated as buddha-nature, the potential to achieve buddhahood that is inherent in all sentient beings.

¹² This poem, "The Womb *Prajnaparamita*," is in the epilogue of Sallie Tisdale's book, **Women of the Way: 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom**.

¹³ Perhaps referring to the *The [Sutra of the] Blessed Perfection of Wisdom, The Mother of All the Tathagatas, In One Letter*. Translated by Edward Conze. Luzac & Company Ltd., 1973. The letter is "A."