

The Ten Perfections

In the early centuries after the Buddha's passing away, as Buddhism became a popular religion, the idea was formalized that there were three paths to awakening to choose from: (1) the path to awakening as a disciple of a Buddha (*savaka*); (2) the path to awakening as a private Buddha (*pacceka-buddha*), that is, one who attained awakening on his own but was not able to teach the path of practice to others; and the path to awakening as a rightly self-awakened Buddha (*samma sambuddha*).

Each path was defined as consisting of perfections (*paramī*) of character, but there was a question as to what those perfections were and how the paths differed from one another. The Theravadins, for instance, specified ten perfections, and organized their Jataka collection so that it culminated in ten tales, each illustrating one of the perfections. The Sarvastivadins, on the other hand, specified six perfections, and organized their Jataka collection accordingly.

All Buddhists agreed that the third path took by far the longest to follow, but disagreements arose as to whether the perfections developed along the different paths were *quantitatively* or *qualitatively* different. In other words, did a Buddha develop more of the same sort of perfections that an arahant developed, or did he develop perfections of a radically different sort? Those who believed that the perfections differed only quantitatively were able to take the early Buddhist canons as their guide to the path to Buddhahood, for they could simply extrapolate from the path of the arahant as described in those canons.

Those seeking Buddhahood who believed that the perfections differed qualitatively, however, had to look outside the canons. People in this latter group often practiced a form of meditation aimed at inducing visions of bodhisattvas treading the path to full Buddhahood, along with Buddhas in other world-systems. These Buddhas and bodhisattvas — it was hoped — would provide an insider's knowledge of the full Buddha's path. The teachings that resulted from these visions were very diverse; not until the 3rd century C.E., with the development of the Yogacara school, was a concerted effort made to collate these various teachings into a single body — what we now know as the Mahayana movement — but the differences among these teachings were so great that the Mahayana never achieved true unity.

Thus, historically, there have been two major ways of following the path to full Buddhahood: (1) Following guidelines gleaned from the early canons, and (2) following the traditions set in motion by the experiences of visionaries from the beginning of the common era. The materials in this study guide (see source reference at end of article) take the first course.

There's a common misunderstanding that the Theravada school teaches only the savaka path, but a glance at Theravada history will show that many Theravadins have vowed to become bodhisattvas and have undertaken the practice of the ten perfections as set forth in the Theravadin Jatakas. Because these perfections differ only quantitatively for arahants, Theravadins who aspire to arahantship cite the perfections as qualities that they are developing as part of their practice outside of formal meditation. For example, they make donations to develop the perfection of generosity, undertake building projects to develop the perfection of endurance, and so forth.

For people in the modern world who are wrestling with the issue of how to practice the Dhamma in daily life, the perfections provide a useful framework for developing a fruitful attitude toward daily activities so that any activity or relationship undertaken wisely with the primary purpose of developing the perfections in a balanced way becomes part of the practice.

The perfections also provide one of the few reliable ways of measuring the accomplishments of one's life. "Accomplishments" in the realm of work and relationships have a way of turning into dust, but perfections of the character, once developed, are dependable and lasting, carrying one over and beyond the vicissitudes of daily living. Thus they deserve to take high priority in the way we plan our lives. These two facts are reflected in the two etymologies offered for the word 'perfection' (*paramī*): (1) They carry one across to the further shore (*param*); and (2) they are of foremost (*parama*) importance in formulating the purpose of one's life.

The material in this study guide is organized under the heading of the eighth perfection — *determination* — for several reasons. The first reason is that determination is needed for undertaking the path of perfections to begin with, in that it gives focus, motivation, and direction to the practice. The second reason is that the four aspects of skilled determination — discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm — when studied carefully, cover all ten of the perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, good will, and equanimity.

In this way, the material gathered here illustrates the general principle that each of the perfections, when properly practiced, includes all ten. The third reason is that the four aspects of skilled determination highlight the importance of establishing wise priorities and sticking to them regardless of the temptation to sacrifice them for lesser aims. In this way, they help guard against a common problem in approaching practice in daily life: a tendency to indulge in the self-delusion that can justify any activity, as long as it's done mindfully, as part of the path.

The fourth, and perhaps most important, reason for organizing the material in this way is that skilled determination begins with *discernment*, the ability to make wise distinctions that help keep each of the perfections on path to the goal of ending suffering. If they are not informed by these distinctions, the perfections are simply generic virtues, common to all cultures, leading to pleasant results but not necessarily to the transcendent. Thus, the material here has been chosen to highlight the need to use discernment in making important distinctions in developing the perfections in a wise and effective way.

For instance, under the theme of *good will*, [passage §18](#) shows that good will is not necessarily loving-kindness: Wishing happiness for others is not necessarily a desire to become involved with them. [Passages §§20-21](#) show that, although one should extend good will to all, one should be selective in one's friendships. [Passage §22](#) makes the point that good will should not be practiced to the point of entanglement.

Similarly, under the theme of *persistence*, [passage §36](#) points out that persistence is not simply a matter of brute force. One has to discern which type of effort is appropriate for the issue at hand. [Passages §§37-38](#) show that the amount of effort appropriate in a particular situation has to be gauged both by the nature of the problem and by one's own level of energy.

Under the theme of *renunciation*, [passages §§55-56](#) teach standards for determining how much physical pleasure is compatible with progress on the path.

Under the theme of *patience*, [passage §68](#) points out the need to distinguish what should and should not be tolerated, at the same time counseling common sense in avoiding unnecessary dangers.

Under the theme of *equanimity*, [passages §§70-71](#) distinguish between levels of equanimity on the path, and between them and the equanimity that results from awakening.

This makes the point that — contrary to a common misunderstanding — equanimity in the face of sensory input is not the goal, or even the highest level of equanimity on the path. Instead, it is simply a means to a higher end: the highest bliss of *nibbana*.

Passages in the guide (reference given below) are drawn from the Pali canon and from the teachings of Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo.

The Four Determinations:

One should not be negligent of *discernment*,
should guard the *truth*,
be devoted to *relinquishment*,
and train only for *calm*.
— MN 140 (Majjhima Nikāya)

Organization of the Ten Perfections:

I. Discernment

Good Will

II. Truth

Virtue

Persistence

III. *Relinquishment*

Generosity

Renunciation

IV. *Calm*

Endurance

Equanimity

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