

THE PĀRAMITĀS AND THE EXALTED EIGHTFOLD PATH

By Gottfried de Purucker

IN BUDDHIST as well as in modern theosophical literature a great deal has been written about the 'glorious virtues' or pāramitās, but unfortunately they have been too often looked upon as being merely a noble but relatively unattainable code of conduct, which indeed they are; but they are more than this. They are actually the rules of thought and action which the would-be chela *must* follow, in the beginning as best he can, but later in completeness, so that his entire life becomes governed and enlightened by them. It is only thus that the disciple can reach what the Lord Buddha called the 'other shore' ¹ — the spiritual realms which have to be reached by crossing the stormy ocean of human existence, and doing so under one's own spiritual and intellectual and psychical power, with only such help as can be given him in view of his own past karma.

The idea of going to the other shore is commonly supposed to be typically Oriental, but this seems unjustified, as many Christian hymns speak of the mystical Jordan and of reaching the 'shore beyond,' a conception which appears to be more or less identical with that of Buddhism. 'This side' is the life of the world, the usual or common pursuits of men. The 'other shore' is simply the life spiritual, involving the expansion in relatively full power and function of the entire range of man's nature. In other words, to reach the 'other shore' means living at one with the divinity within, and hence partaking of the universal life in relatively full self-consciousness. The teaching of all the great religious and philosophical systems has been to urge upon their followers the fact that our real goal is to learn the lessons of manifested existence and to graduate from this experience into the cosmic life.

As the *Dhammapada* (verse 85) has it:

There are few people who reach the other shore;
The others run wild on this shore.

A short Buddhist writing called the *Prajñā-Paramitā-Hridaya Sūtra* or "The Heart or Essence of the Wisdom of the Passing-Over," closes with a beautiful mantra which runs as follows in the original Sanskrit:

Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasamgate, bodhi, svāhā!
O Wisdom! Gone, gone, gone to the other shore, landed on the other shore, Hail!

Wisdom in this context may be taken as referring to the cosmic buddhi, otherwise called Ādi-buddhi or 'primeval wisdom,' and also in an individualized sense to the supreme Silent Watcher of our planetary chain, Ādi-buddha. The one addressed is he

who has arrived at the other shore, the triumphant pilgrim who has become self-consciously at one with the god within him and thus has successfully perceived through the māyā or illusions of the phenomenal worlds. The highest ones who have attained this are jīvanmuktas, 'freed monads'; those less high belong to the different grades in the several hierarchies of the Hierarchy of Compassion.

The discipline of the pāramitās as H.P.B. gave them in *The Voice of the Silence* is as follows:

DĀNA, the key of charity and love immortal.

SĪLA, the key of Harmony in word and act, the key that counterbalances the cause and the effect, and leaves no further room for Karmic action.

KSHĀNTI, patience sweet, that nought can ruffle.

VIRĀGYA, indifference to pleasure and to pain, illusion conquered, truth alone perceived.

VĪRYA, the dauntless energy that fights its way to the supernal TRUTH, out of the mire of lies terrestrial.

DHYĀNA, whose golden gate once opened leads the Narjol [Naljol] toward the realm of Sat eternal and its ceaseless contemplation.

PRAJNĀ, the key to which makes of a man a god, creating him a Bodhisattva, son of the Dhyanis.

The manner in which these pāramitās are to be practiced is well illustrated by the following extract from the *Mahāyāna Śrāddhotpada Śāstra* ² which, however, mentions only six, although they are given elsewhere as seven and, when more fully enumerated, as ten:

How should one practice charity (*Dāna*)?

If someone comes and asks for anything, disciples, as far as they are able, should grant the request ungrudgingly and in a way to benefit them. If disciples see anyone in danger, they should try every means they have to rescue him and impart to him a feeling of safety. If any one comes to disciples desiring instruction in the Dharma, they should as far as they are able and according to their best judgment, try to enlighten him. And when they are doing these acts of charity, they should not cherish any desire for recompense, or gratitude, or merit or advantage, nor any worldly reward. They should seek to concentrate the mind on those universal benefits and blessings that are for all alike and, by so doing, will realize within themselves highest perfect Wisdom.

How should one practice virtuous precepts (*Sīla*)?

Lay disciples, having families, should abstain from killing, stealing, adultery, lying, duplicity, slander, frivolous talk, covetousness, malice, currying favor, and false doctrines. Unmarried disciples should, in order to avoid hindrances, retire from the turmoil of worldly life and, abiding in solitude, should practice those ways which lead to quietness and moderation and contentment. . . . They should endeavor by their conduct to avoid all disapproval and blame, and by their example incite others to forsake evil and practice the good.

How should one practice patient forbearance (*Kshānti*)?

As one meets with the ills of life he should not shun them nor feel aggrieved. Patiently bearing evils inflicted by others, he should cherish no resentment. He should neither be elated because of prosperity, praise, or agreeable circumstances; nor depressed because of poverty, insult, or hardship. Keeping his mind concentrated on the deep significance of the Dharma, he should under all circumstances maintain a quiet and equitable mind.

How should one practice courageous vigor (*Vīrya*)?

In the practice of good deeds one should never become indolent. He should look upon any mental or physical suffering as the natural following of unworthy deeds done in previous incarnations, and should firmly resolve that henceforth he would only do those things which are in keeping with a spiritual life. Cherishing compassion for all beings, he should never let the thought of indolence arise, but should ever be indefatigably zealous to benefit all beings. . . .

How should one practice meditation (*Dhyāna*)?

Intellectual insight is gained by truthfully understanding that all things follow the law of causation, but in themselves are transitory and empty of any self-substance. There are two aspects of *Dhyāna*: the first aspect is an effort to suppress idle thinking; the second, is a mental concentration in an effort to realize this emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of Mind-essence. At first a beginner will have to practice these separately but as he gains mind control the two will merge into one. . . .

He should contemplate the fact, that although all things are transitory and empty yet, nevertheless, on the physical plane they have a relative value to those who are cherishing false imagination; to these ignorant ones, suffering is very real -- it always has been and it always will be -- immeasurable and innumerable sufferings. . . .

Because of all this, there is awakened in the mind of every earnest disciple a deep compassion for the suffering of all beings that prompts him to dauntless, earnest zeal and the making of great vows. He resolves to give all he has and all he is to the emancipation of all beings. . . . After these vows, the sincere disciple should at all times and as far as his strength and mind permit, practice those

deeds which are beneficial alike to others and to himself. Whether moving, standing, sitting or lying, he should assiduously concentrate his mind on what should be wisely done and wisely left undone. This is the active aspect of *Dhyāna*.

How can one practice Intuitive Wisdom (*Prajnā*)?

When one by the faithful practice of *Dhyāna* attains to *Samādhi*, he has passed beyond discrimination and knowledge, he has realized the perfect oneness of Mind-essence. With this realization comes an intuitive understanding of the nature of the universe. . . . he now realizes the perfect Oneness of Essence, Potentiality, and Activity in Tathāgatahood. . . .

Prajnā-Paramitā is highest, perfect Wisdom; its fruitage comes unseen, without effort, spontaneously; it merges all seeming differences whether they be evil or good into one perfect Whole. . . .

Therefore let all disciples who aspire after highest, perfect Wisdom, which is *Prajnā-Paramitā*, assiduously apply themselves to the discipline of the Noble Path for that alone will lead them to perfect realization of Buddhahood.

In order to understand and spiritually to *feel* the true nature of *prajnā*, it is necessary to abandon the 'this side' view, and in spiritual comprehension to go over to the 'other shore' (*pāra*), or other manner of looking at things. On 'this side' we are involved in a sphere of consciousness of brain-mind analyses and particulars, which becomes a world of attachments and lower-plane distinctions. When we achieve this inner 'reversal,' this shifting of our consciousness upwards to the mystic 'other shore' of being, we then enter more or less successfully into a world of transcendent realities, from which we can view things in their original and spiritual oneness, beyond the *māyā* of the deceptive veils of multiplicity; penetrate into the essential nature of these realities and cognize them as they truly are.

This condition of inner clarity and of accurate spiritual and intellectual apperception is so different from the familiar operations of our 'this-side' consciousness in our everyday world of transitory appearances, that untrained minds associate it with the conception of emptiness, vacuity. Emptiness (*śūnyatā*, to use the Buddhist term), in its true metaphysical meaning, however, should not be confounded with 'nothingness,' implying an absolute negation of real being and thus annihilation. Nor is it to be understood through the ratiocinative faculties of the brain-mind, but rather by the direct or immediate perception belonging to the high spiritual-intellectual state called *prajnā*, which is above the *māyāvic* distinctions of being and non-being, of particular and universal, of the many and the one.

Indeed, this high state is the intuitive knowledge and penetrating insight of the spirit-mind in man, his *buddhi-manas*, which is immeasurably more powerful and

penetrating than is mere intellection. Such intuitive knowledge and insight lie ever active in the loftiest and most universal recesses of our consciousness. It is through the gradual awakening of the lower man into self-conscious realization of this spiritual-intellectual consciousness — which in its active manifestations is identical with *prajñā* — that we arise from the lower realms of our consciousness and escape from the bondage of ignorance and nescience (*avidyā*), and thus become liberated from the various kinds of both inner and outer pain. This release is the attainment of supreme enlightenment and of emancipation (*mukti*). In brief, *prajñā* may perhaps best be translated as intuition, signifying that instant illumination or full knowledge which verily is godlike.

In the *Prājña-Pāramitā* group of Buddhist scriptures, *prajñā* is regarded as the directing principle of the other *pāramitās*, pointing to them as being the method of reaching reality. It is compared to the perceiving and understanding eye that surveys with perfect clearness of vision the horizons of life and designates the path to be followed by the aspirant. Without *prajñā*, the other *pāramitās* would be devoid of one of their highest elements; it guides their progressive development, somewhat as the earth provides the fields of sustenance for the growth of vegetation.

All beings in the universe possess *prajñā*, although it is not functioning self-consciously except when the evolving entities in the course of their evolutionary pilgrimage have become at one with it. The animals have *prajñā*, including bees and ants, as instances, but any self-conscious awareness thereof is lacking, because such self-realization of union with *prajñā* begins only with man — at least on this earth. In its first feeble workings *prajñā* in the human being manifests as aspiration towards illumination, love and wisdom; blossoms in the bodhisattva, and is in full bloom in the Buddhas and Christs, which is the state of perfect enlightenment.

The high chela or initiate who has successfully reached the stage where he has *become* the *pāramitās*, with his consciousness crystal clear and relatively boundless, his whole being attuned to the spiritual soul of humanity, having given up his self to the selfless glory of living for all that is, is technically called a bodhisattva — ‘one whose essence (*sattva*) is of the very nature of wisdom (*bodhi*).’ The motive which prompts the true disciple to realize within himself supreme enlightenment is never personal gain, however exalted and spiritualized, but the urge to benefit the whole world, to raise all beings from the chains of ignorance and pain, to arouse within himself a compassionate heart for all that lives, so that every sentient being may in time attain to perfect emancipation (Cf. Fo-Mu *Prajñāparamita*, Fas. 14, Chapter “On Wise Men”).

In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* the question is asked of Śāriputra whether the bodhisattva should pay respect only to other bodhisattvas, and not “to all beings

generally.” To which the sage answers that he should in fact “revere them with the same feeling of self-abnegation as he does the Tathāgatas.” He then goes on to say:

The Bodhisattva should thus awaken a great compassionate feeling towards all beings and keep his mind completely free from arrogance and self-conceit, and let him feel in this wise: I will practice all the skillful means in order to make all sentient beings realize that which is the foremost in themselves, i.e., their Buddha-nature (buddhatāa). By realizing this they all become Buddhas, . . . (Hsuan-chuang, Fas. 387, Chapter xii, “On Morality”)

Prajnā in the individual entity, such as a human being, holds pretty much the same position that Ādi-buddhi or mahābuddhi does in the universe. One of the axioms of the esoteric wisdom is that our universe is an entity; hence we can figurate its individual universal mind or consciousness as a vast ocean of self-conscious buddhi-mānasic energy points. From this standpoint, prajñā may be described as the spiritual individual consciousness of every member of the hosts of dhyāni-chohans or cosmic spirits. Thus when one has attained prajñā-awareness, he is in self-conscious communion with the buddhi-mānasic mind of the Wondrous Being of our hierarchy.

From the foregoing it should be clear that there are numerous differences in grandeur of accomplishment as among the members of a hierarchy, for there are differences in grades of attainment between the chela beginning the path and a mahatma, followed by still higher beings having an even larger realization of prajñā on the ladder of achievement that extends steadily upwards until the Wondrous Being is reached. The prajñā is the same in all; the differences among individuals lie in their respective manifestation of it.

There are also differences of another kind, such as that between one who has attained a relative realization of prajñā and who enters nirvana, and another of similar attainment but who renounces nirvana. Here we have an important distinction based on cosmic ethics: the one who has won nirvana yet renounces it in order to turn back and help the world stands far higher ethically than does the one who enters nirvana for his own bliss. Each has reached a sufficiency of at-onement with prajñā to have gained the nirvanic state, but the one who renounces it has achieved a self-conscious realization of prajñā on a higher buddhic plane than the one who won nirvana and enters into it.

The key to this mystery lies in the fact that every one of the seven principles in the human constitution is septenary, and hence buddhi, which is the seat of prajñā, is sevenfold. We thus see that the one entering nirvana has reached what we may define as kāma-buddhi, but has gone no higher in the quality of his realization of prajñā; whereas the other one who renounced nirvana has attained that condition of buddhic prajñā which we may describe as either buddhi-buddhi or manas-buddhi. The buddhas

and mahabuddhas are those who hold what we may call the atmic state of buddhi — and thus feel themselves absolutely and unqualifiedly self-identified with the universe.

The seven pāramitās as given contain the gist of the code of conduct embodied in the fuller enumeration of ten pāramitās, or the complete ethical decalog of occultism. The three additional pāramitās are: adhiṣṭhāna, upekṣhā, and prabodha or sambuddhi. Of these adhiṣṭhāna, meaning 'inflexible courage,' not merely awaits danger or difficulty, but when enlightened by intuition or prajñā 'goes forwards' and 'stands up' to it. Its natural place follows vīrya or 'fortitude.' The next, upekṣhā or 'discrimination,' searches for and finds the right method of applying the pāramitās, and appropriately comes after dhyana. Two terms are given for the tenth paramitā: prabodha, meaning 'awakening of inner consciousness,' bringing knowledge and foreknowledge, thus opening up glorious visions on the pathway; and sambuddhi, 'complete or perfect illumination or vision' or self-consciousness of one's identity with the spiritual, the culmination or crown of all. Otherwise phrased, it is 'union with buddhi.'

Other 'virtues' are occasionally included by other schools of esoteric or quasi-occult training in the Orient. As examples, satya or truth, and maitra or universal friendliness or benevolence; but when analyzed these are seen to be already embodied in the ten pāramitās. Also it may be mentioned here that in many parts of the world there are various systems of training, most of them futile, for on careful examination they will be found to be more or less modifications of hatha-yoga, and, as pointed out, these are extremely dangerous even at the best, and at the worst will produce insanity or loss of the soul.

Strength is born from exercise, and it is the exercising of our strength in the tests and experiences of daily life that in time leads to the treading of the path. Unless the student follow the inner discipline, which is the continuous and never-failing practice of the spirit of these ten glorious virtues or pāramitās as his inflexible rule of thought and of action from day to day, he will never succeed in his endeavors. It is just this discipline, this exercising of his will power and of his intelligence and of the love which should fill his heart, which eventually bring the neophyte to the new or 'second' birth, which produce the dvija, the 'twice-born,' the initiate, finally to become the master of life and of death.

The reader may be wondering just what connection the pāramitās have with the much more familiar teachings of Buddhism, known respectively as the Four Noble Truths and their logical corollary the Eightfold Path. The connection is both historical and intimate, for both contain the same root-ideas, only in the more popular teaching so phrased as to furnish a code of conduct which the average worldly man is capable of following, if he desire to avoid the harassing mistakes attendant upon human life, and

to attain the peace and intellectual detachment which accompany a life well and nobly lived.

Briefly, the Four High Truths are: first, that the cause of the suffering and heartache in our lives arises from attachment or 'thirst' — trishna; second, that this cause can be made to cease; third, that the cessation of the causes productive of human sorrow is brought about by living the life which will free the soul from its attachment to existence; and the fourth truth, leading to the extinction of the causes of suffering, is verily the Exalted Eightfold Path, to wit: "right belief, right resolve, right speech, right behavior, right occupation, right effort, right contemplation, right concentration."

Now this course of endeavor was called by the Buddha the Middle Way, because it involved no useless or fanatical asceticism on the one hand, and no laxity of principle and of thought and consequent behavior on the other hand. It is a code, as said, that is within the reach of every man or woman, calling for no special conditions or circumstances, but able to be practiced by anyone who yearns to better his life, and to do his part in helping to bring about the surcease of the world-misery surrounding us, and of which sensitive human hearts everywhere are conscious.

It must not be supposed, however, that the chela neglects the ethical injunctions of the Eightfold Path, for this would be a misapprehension of their import. In fact, he not only practices them, but does so with far greater concentration of mind and heart than the average man, because at the same time he is striving with all his soul to raise himself to the sublime altitude of the pāramitās by which he should live.

It is perhaps necessary to weigh somewhat strongly upon this point, because there is a totally erroneous idea current among some half-baked mystics that it is a part of the chela's life to ignore normal human relations, to take small account of them, and to imagine that he is freed from his duties, even of a worldly kind, towards his fellow men. This last supposition runs directly counter to all the teaching of occultism.

The principle behind the Four High Truths and their eight corollaries is this: if the root of attachment — desire — can be cut, the soul thereupon becomes freed, and in thus liberating itself from the chains of desire which bring about attachment, the cause of sorrow is made to cease; and the way of cutting the root of attachment is by so living that gradually the thirst of the soul for the things of matter dies. When this happens, the individual is 'free' — he has become a relatively perfected jīvanmukta, a master of life. Once he has reached this stage of utter detachment, he is a bodhisattva, and thereafter devotes himself completely to all beings and things, his heart filled with infinite compassion and his mind illuminated with the light of eternity. Thus it is that as a bodhisattva he appears again and again on earth, either as a buddha or as a bodhisattva, or indeed remains in the invisible worlds as a nirmānakāya.

The common idea regarding the bodhisattva, that he has only one more incarnation to undergo before he becomes a buddha, is correct as far as it goes, but as thus expressed is inadequate. As a matter of fact, the ideal both of esoteric theosophy and esoteric Buddhism is the bodhisattva, even more, perhaps, than the buddha, for the reason that the bodhisattva is one whose whole being and objective, whose whole work, is the doing of good unto all beings, and the bringing of them safely to the 'other shore'; whereas the buddha, while the same thing in an extended degree, nevertheless, by the very fact of his buddhahood in the present stage of spiritual unfoldment of the human race, is on the threshold of nirvana, and usually enters therein. It is, of course, quite possible for a buddha to refuse the nirvana and to remain on earth as a bodhisattva or a *nirmānakāya*; and in this last case, as a Buddha of Compassion he is at once a buddha by right and a bodhisattva by choice.

Too much stress cannot be laid upon the great need of understanding the inner significance of the bodhisattva doctrine, embodying as it does the spirit of occult teaching running throughout the cycle of initiatory training as well as in the nobler schools of the Mahāyāna. It is at once seen why in northern Buddhism the bodhisattva is so greatly honored and occupies so lofty a position in the reverence of human hearts. For the Buddhas of Compassion are such because they themselves embody this ideal when they renounce the spiritually selfish bliss of nirvanic buddhahood in order to remain in the world to work for it. Even the humblest and least educated can aspire towards this ideal.

In future aeons one must choose whether he will become one of the Buddhas of Compassion or one of the Pratyeka-Buddhas. When the choice comes, it will come as the karmic resultant of lives previously lived, for it results from the bent of one's character, the spiritual faculties aroused, the will made to be alert, responsive to command: all these will govern and in fact make the choice when the time for choosing arrives. Therefore the training starts now: becoming great in small things, one learns to become great in great things.

As a final thought, one must not be heavy in living the life which the High Eightfold Path, or indeed the *pāramitās*, enjoin. He should joy in so doing. For I sincerely believe that everyone who practices these noble rules to some extent at least will be enormously bettered by them. Nor can we be oblivious of how greatly such consistent practice will increase the will power, strengthen the mind, enlarge the sympathies of the heart, and bring about a glorious illumination of soul, all of which in their final stages produce the mahatma — the true bodhisattva.

From *Fountain-Source of Occultism* by G. de Purucker.

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Endnotes:

¹ Pāramita and pāragata (or its equivalent pāragāmin) are Sanskrit compounds denoting ‘one who has reached the other shore’; pāramitā (the feminine form) is used for the transcendental virtues or attributes which one must cultivate in order to reach that shore. There is a shade of difference in meaning to be noted here: pāramita carries the idea of having ‘crossed over’ and therefore ‘arrived,’ while pāragata (or pāragāmin) implies ‘departure’ from this end and thus ‘gone’ in order safely to reach the other shore.

Another word of frequent use in Buddhist writings which also embodies both subtle distinctions of the above term is Tathāgata, a title given to Gautama Buddha. This is a Sanskrit compound that can be divided in two fashions: *tathā-gata*, ‘thus gone,’ that is, departed for and reached the other shore; and *tathā-agata*, ‘thus arrived or come,’ the significance of the term Tathāgata being one who has both ‘departed’ for and ‘arrived’ at the other shore, as his predecessor-Buddhas have done.

² Often translated as “The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna,” but this very inadequately conveys the significance of the original Sanskrit. *Śrāddha* means certainty or confidence based on an unfoldment of inner experiences, the proof of which lies both within and without the self, and implying here a continued process of inner unfoldment, a connotation which is utterly lacking in the word ‘faith.’ As to *utpāda*, this carries the same idea of continuance and progressive unfoldment, an awakening or rising towards an awareness or realization of wisdom, culminating in the mystic renunciation of the fruits of emancipation and the attainment of buddhahood. This scripture belongs to the *Prajñā-Pāramitā* family of writings, and is usually credited to Aśvaghosha, a notable Buddhist scholar who lived during the latter half of the first century A.D., and whose outstanding work is the *Mahālamkāra* or “Book of Great Glory.”