

Paramitas

The word 'paramita' is also known as 'perfection'. It can be translated as 'crossing over to the other shore' - the shore of peace and liberation. There are six paramitas in the Mahayana system. These are six virtues we need to practice. They remind me of the ethical system of *virtue theory* in philosophy that used to be called *neo-aristotelianism* because it was first proposed by Aristotle.

I am going to look at the first perfection usually given on the list: *dana paramita*

Some points :

The perfections require some effort. The 'other shore' won't come to you - you have to swim or row across to it. Though we may come to know ourselves better through (for instance) meditation practice in which we naturally develop in compassion and tend to become more able to deal with our greed, anger and delusion, some pointers can also help us.

We need to learn to receive as well as give. I have found this one difficult. As a disabled person I often find I want to be as independent as possible and have to remember that others often enjoy being kind and helpful to me. It makes them feel better about themselves. And why should I deny them their exercise of compassionate kindness?

Motivation is as important as the actual giving. Giving to feel good about ourselves, being shamed into giving, giving in order to get something back; giving from these types of motivation is not real giving.

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh gives an interesting analogy of an Asian onion-like plant that grows better and stronger the more you cut it back. The more we give the more we have to give, it seems.

What is it that we give? We materialistic Westerners usually think about money, but forget about the kindness, love, friendliness, sharing and joy we can give to others. TNH also mentions *presence* - just being there and being willing to spend time with our friends and family in today's hectic busy life. I have friends who make a date to see me but then often can't make it because of work pressure or because they are too tired from working so hard. But we also need to give others *space*.

Other things we can give: our own qualities of stability, peacefulness. And we can give kind advice, encouragement and comfort.

But in Zen it is not principles that are important but action in the moment:

"Zen ethics is grounded in the realization that one does not know what's right. This "not-knowing" is the refuge from which all moral action originates. It's a refuge that can't be relegated to the role of moral abstraction and remains a free and alive expression of the moment." Lin Jensen