

# The Six Perfections

Perfection of Giving

*Triratna Buddhist Community*

## 1. PERFECTION OF GIVING (*DANA*)

This is divided into four parts: the giving of the dharma, the giving of material aid, the giving of refuge, and the giving of love.

- The first, the giving of dharma, is teaching others what is positive and to be accepted and practiced, and what is negative and to be abandoned. This must be done without any desire for gaining fame or respect for oneself, but solely for the benefit of others. It is not the words of the teaching which are the actual giving of dharma, but the intention of giving the teaching in order only to benefit others. Thus it is not what we give, but the giving mind or mental attitude of giving that is the essence of charity. If the teaching is given with this motivation, it is a practice of the perfection of giving the dharma. If we give a teaching with another motive, such as to gain mere personal fame or repute, this is not a pure practice of giving. We can see that the giving of dharma is very beneficial because it shows people what a proper practice is — what should be accepted and what abandoned.
- Second comes the giving of material aid, things such as food, clothing and shelter. Here again the true giving of material aid is the giving mind that offers these things, free of avarice and attachment, for the purpose of benefiting others. That mental attitude is the giving of material aid. The food, clothing, shelter and so forth are the objects which are given. It is important to realize that the real giving of material aid is the mind which does so with a pure motivation. The things that are given are only objects involved in the action.

There are three aspects of an act of giving: firstly there is the giver, secondly the intention to give, which must be free from attachment and is the actual practice of the perfection of giving, and thirdly there is the object which is given. Because there are these three aspects, it is possible even for a dharma practitioner without material possessions to cultivate this kind of giving. Why? Because he can still develop the mental attitude of giving, the giving mind. As with the practice of taking and giving, he can dedicate his wholesome actions and accumulated merit to the benefit of others, even though he has no wealth or property at all. This enables him to develop this practice just as well as anyone else. Also, if someone actually has wealth, not only should he develop this mental attitude, but if he can practice the actual giving of material things this will be very beneficial.

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- The third kind is the giving of refuge, for example protecting someone who is afraid or in danger. Here again it is the intention of giving refuge to such a person that is the actual practice of giving. When we are out walking and find a fish stranded on dry ground, if we pick it up gently and put it back in the water, this is the practice of the giving of refuge. In the same way, if we come across a land animal that has fallen into water and is drowning and we pull it out and set it on land, this too is the practice of giving protection. This is not a hard thing to do; anyone can do it, for example by carefully picking or blowing an insect off our clothes so it will not be injured by our movements. Also, if we hold a position of power or authority and try with a good intention to stop a war, knowing that many people will be endangered by the fighting, this too is the giving of refuge. In short, we are referring to all those actions which arise out of such a pure and compassionate intention and which shield others from danger.
- The fourth kind of giving is the giving of love. Because this life, or samsara, is suffering, all beings lack true happiness. By realizing this, if we then generate a pure resolve to give them all the happiness they desire combined with such practices as taking and giving, this pure attitude of giving happiness to all beings is the giving of love.

## **Summary**

So we can see that there are several ways of practicing giving; it is not confined just to the giving of material aid. Meditators who live in the solitude of mountain retreats, without any material possessions, are able to achieve the perfection of giving by developing this pure mental intention. If one is able to practice the giving of dharma, this is very beneficial, but even if this is not possible, everyone can practice the other three kinds of giving. The word for perfection, paramita, means gone beyond or fully accomplished. Strictly speaking, it refers only to the fully perfected practice that is completed upon achieving buddhahood. Practicing the perfection of giving with the motivation of an awakening mind is also a means of achieving that stage of total perfection.

## **Beneficial Effects**

Giving fulfills the wishes of others. When, for example, we practice the giving of dharma, this satisfies the desires of people who lack an understanding of it. If we practice the giving of material things, this satisfies the wishes of beings who lack such necessities. The practice of giving love gradually grants the wishes of all beings who hope for happiness in general. Therefore, giving can eliminate the misfortune of lacking the

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dharma, the suffering of lacking material necessities, the distress of fears and dangers in life, and the misery of lacking happiness. Because these can be eliminated and the wishes of others can be fulfilled through the practice of giving, it has been called 'the wish-fulfilling gem'.

Giving is also like a sword which cuts the rope of avarice that binds all beings. Without this inner practice, no external method will cut these bonds. If we can begin to practice giving and make it habitual, little by little the giving mind will begin to develop. A real practitioner of giving makes a special effort to give precisely those possessions to which he has the strongest attachment. If we are able to sacrifice the things which we regard as most precious and get used to doing so, our mind will become well-trained and it will be easy to give things which we do not consider very special. Also, if we are seriously practicing this kind of giving, we should give our favorite possessions to someone we do not really like.

This is the toughest way of training our mind and will naturally make it easy to give to people we do like. Gradually, after much practice and development, this giving mind reaches a state at which all attachment ceases. Even if we have to sacrifice our body or life, we will not hesitate to do so if it is for the sake of others. This is the summit of development reached by the great bodhisattvas, whom we read about in the scriptures, when they freely offer, with a sense of joy, their eyes, limbs and even their lives. This same state of mind was also present when, as we read in the stories of the Buddha's previous lives, the great bodhisattva, with no feelings of regret, freely gave up his wealth, kingdom or whatever else was necessary for the sake of others. When a bodhisattva who is on the first of the ten bodhisattva stages is asked to offer his hands or eyes to someone, merely hearing such a request causes a tremendous sense of joy to arise in his mind — an ecstasy which is incomparable to that which arises as a result of achieving the meditative state of mental quiescence.