

The Fourth Noble Truth — The Perfections (Pāramī)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 14 min read

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

Positive Morality : The Perfections (Parami)

QUESTION

Virtue/virtuous are not common words these days.❖

When you bring people to mind like Martin Luther King or Mother Therese of Calcutta, what is it about them that excites our admiration?

What qualities would you say go up to making an exemplary human?

The Buddha taught that morality was the basis of spiritual attainment. By morality, he didn't mean a set of commandments imposed by a wrathful deity.❖ He meant simply those rules whereby a harmonious society would be established and a peaceful and loving mind could be developed.❖ Since all human beings are interdependent, an individuals progress through life is greatly affected by those around and about them.❖ Buddhism often talks about the kalyana mitta, the good friend and the Buddha himself is often seen as such a friend, a companion, a true guide who has our best wishes at heart.

The Primary Precepts are the basic guidelines. They begin with a negative morality: to cease from harm. Then comes: to do good A positive morality to develop virtue.❖ This was codified in the Theravada Tradition as the Ten Perfections.❖ Actually the translation gives a wrong idea as to their aim.❖ The word for them in Pali is Parami which means 'the other shore, an image often used for Nibbana.❖ So really these ten virtues when practised help us to find our way to liberation.❖ There's no idea of perfection in terms of coming to some sort of end in their development. They can be practised and developed as long as we are alive, to any degree.

The Ten Perfections are:❖ generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, resolution, unconditional love and equanimity. Here we can only give pointers and I'm sure none of the virtues comes as any surprise.

First, then, is generosity, dana. Dana is a word you will often hear in Buddhist circles.❖ If the lay people offer food to monks and nuns, for instance, it's called dana.❖ Dana means really to share ones wealth and one's time with others with no thought of return. Our word donation comes from the same root.❖ This is very important, because it teaches us to let go of our attachment to wealth and❖ frees us from thinking that our lives are to be simply lived for our own personal benefit.❖❖ It stops us becoming greedy and miserly.❖❖

Walking around the city centre on a flag day for a charity, do I ignore the change jangling boxes? ♦ Do I instinctively reach into my purse? ♦ If I do and find only a pound coin, do I still put it in? ♦ Or do I listen to the barrage of voices in my mind, crying - Too much! Too much!

Generosity with time softens our unwillingness to spend time for the benefit of others, those precious moments of our lives we would normally devote entirely to our own pleasures and interests. ♦ How do we feel when the children ask for help with homework, or a parent asks for help, or a friend makes a social call. ♦ Do we say were too busy, too tired. Generosity with our wealth and time helps to put our life, our life's work, our relationships into a greater perspective. The question arises. Why should I give my money to another? ♦ Why should I spend any time of my life helping another? ♦ It is only in so doing and reaping the benefits that we can discover the answer.

The second is morality which means to guard against any unskilful actions and to produce eventually a mind free of greed, hatred and delusion. This is one description of a Buddhist saint, the Arahāt. Arahāt literally means to kill one's enemies. ♦ What enemies? ♦ The enemies within: greed, hatred and delusion!

The third is renunciation. ♦ Although this can often have a feel of sacrifice about it, that is not the kernel of it. ♦ It's being able to give something up, once you know it's no good for you. ♦ We like to drink, but when we come to know what alcohol does to the body and mind, we may decide to cut back or stop altogether. ♦ Either way, renouncing drink means we have to go through the barrier of obsessive desires, ♦ the very habit of drinking. Often renunciation comes about because of weariness with some old habit. Perhaps a person stops drinking because they suddenly realise it's just an empty social habit, devoid of any intrinsic meaning. ♦ Renunciation includes having the strength of character to give up what is harmful to us. ♦

Wisdom, the fourth perfection, means to undermine our delusions and illusions about ourselves. ♦ By the practice of awareness both in meditation and during our daily lives, we can begin to see ourselves more objectively. As we do this, ignorance about ourselves is dispelled and wisdom, real self-knowledge, grows.

The fifth Perfection, effort, is raising the will to do, to act. ♦ Its raising the energy needed to accomplish the task and in ♦ the spiritual field that means the Primary Precepts. ♦ We must make effort to cease from doing harm. ♦ We must put in effort to do good, good for ourselves and others. We have to raise the effort to purify the mind. ♦ This constant effort to raise energy undermines our unwholesome tendency towards sleepiness, laziness, not bothering, leaving it to others, apathy. ♦ It won't allow boredom and depression to trick us into escape routes and hopelessness.

The sixth, Patience, the Buddha said was the highest form of asceticism. The Pali word,

khanti, is variously translated as patience, forbearance or forgiveness. ❖ Our own word patience is interesting also. ❖ Its Latin root means suffering. ❖ Patience is the willingness to accept suffering. In our meditation, this is a virtue of great importance. When we sit, all our negative states of mind begin to surface, our great angers, grudges, depressions, anxieties, fears, doubts and soon. ❖ All of them nasty feelings in the body, some very uncomfortable indeed. What is more, the pain of the sitting posture, especially at the knees, can become quite sharp. Being able to sit still in the midst of this suffering is a prerequisite for insight and wisdom. ❖ That attitude which says, 'Yes there's a lot of pain in me. ❖ I feel it. But I'm just going to sit here patiently, equanimously and put all my effort into watching it keenly, is the sort of attitude is absolutely paramount to the whole process of mental purification. Up until now, we've run from pain to pain either dousing it with pills or finding some way to distract the mind. ❖ Anything but face up to it. But as the Buddha has pointed out so clearly in the First Noble Truth, this is but foolish escapism. ❖ By facing pain and suffering it gladly, we lose our fear of it. ❖ When we see pain and suffering for what it really is, then we can say we have achieved an important insight into the human state and it is this understanding that leads us towards our final emancipation from all suffering.

The Jataka Tales which comprise many volumes are stories made up after the death of the Buddha purportedly telling of his past lives. Before his enlightenment, the Buddha is called the Bodhisatta, one who is seeking enlightenment. In this interesting little story, he is said to have been born an ascetic, called Kundaka. ❖ It shows us how far patience can be taken. ❖ It would seem that the King, Kalaka, had gone with his dancing girls for a lavish picnic in a pleasure grove. ❖ He fell asleep and the girls wondered off to delight in the grove. ❖ They came across the ❖ ascetic, Kundaka. ❖ They fell in conversation with him about the Dhamma. ❖ When the king woke up and found out what had happened, he was furious with jealousy. But for the intervention of one of his favourite ladies, he would have cut ❖ the Bodhisatta down there and then. Instead, maliciously, he asked the ascetic what he taught. ❖ The ascetic answered, 'It is to have no anger when another abuses, strikes or humiliates you'. ❖ The cruel king, Kalaka, decided to put him to the test and had his executioner lash him 2000 times. When asked for his response, the ascetic Kundaka, the

Bodhisatta, replies, 'I teach patience, Sire, but you think my patience is only skin deep! It is not! My patience is rooted deeply in my heart'. ❖ The king then had his hands chopped off. Then his feet. ❖ ❖ Again the ascetic declared, 'You think, sire, my patience is in my hands and feet. ❖ But it is deep within my being'. ❖ Off came his ears and nose! But the ascetic Bodhisatta declared his patience was deep in the heart. ❖ Annoyed by this defeat, the king kicks him and departs only to be swallowed up into the deepest of hells, the Avici. ❖ That same day, the Bodhisatta also died, but not without this verse of forgiveness:

The King who had my hands, feet, ears and nose cut off,

Let him live long!

Those who are as I am, cannot be angry.

So you see there's no limit to how much we can develop the Perfections!

Truthfulness is the seventh. ❖ To strive for that absolute honesty, not only with others but with ourselves too. ❖ It may take courage sometimes to face others and ourselves, but truthfulness means the inability to deceive. ❖ It means to search for the authentic. ❖ To do what is right and proper in our relationships, in our society and towards ourselves. ❖ It asks us to see things as they really are - warts and all. ❖ In its perfection, it is to seek the ultimate truth, Nibbana.

The eighth is Resolution. ❖ The path to hell is paved with good intentions! How true. If only we'd done this, done that, we'd be so happy now. ❖ Resolution is stickability! ❖ The stamina to keep going on regardless of how hard it is, regardless of the temptations to leave off. ❖ It's to go on going on. ❖ The Buddha himself exercised this Perfection when he made his historic decision not to rise from the sitting posture until he had attained enlightenment. What a resolution! ❖ It took six hours before his breakthrough came. ❖ We can do it! ❖ We can. ❖ We can take up the posture and refuse with all our will not to rise until we're enlightened. ❖ It would be a real test of our resolution, wouldn't it? ❖❖ This is one of the reasons it's so difficult to become enlightened. Our Perfection of resolution is not developed enough. Perhaps a little more realistically, it means to see our decisions through. If I decide to do something, I should do it. ❖ I should complete the task, and complete it to the best of my ability. ❖ If I say I'll help someone with their garden, I should do it. ❖ And I should get there early, even if everything in me wants to go shopping instead. If I say I'm going to sit for half an hour, I should do so to the last minute and add a couple for good measure. This sort of self-training helps to develop a strong unwavering will. This is not to be confused with headstrong will, do-or-die business. It's a matter of honouring our commitments to others and to ourselves. ❖ It leads to self-reliance and to the trust of others. People know you do as you say. And you know you can do what you say you will do. ❖ Ultimately, it's all training us for that time when we will make our own personal historic decision not to rise, not to be dissuaded from the Path until our total liberation is won. ❖

The ninth is metta. ❖ A difficult word this, to translate. ❖ Loving-kindness is the usual but some say it's too sloppy. ❖ It's an openheartedness, friendliness. It's a universal, unprejudiced, unbiased, impartial love. Love as care, benevolence, empathy. ❖ There are no favourites. ❖ Even if someone dislikes us, we still develop this attitude towards them. ❖ If I dislike someone, and I want to practise metta, I first of all don't indulge that dislike. ❖ I develop first an attitude of no harm and as the nasty feelings pass, I can begin to develop more kindly attitudes, looking at that person's better side. Of course, this is all very difficult. ❖❖ We're bound to have a greater affinity, greater feelings for those who are close to us, for those whom we meet everyday rather than for people we hardly now, let alone

those we never see. ❖ But it's an ideal we aim to move towards - an unbounded love where all beings are seen through the eye of love and compassion. ❖ It's a generalised attitude, a disposition of care and well-wishing. Someone I know held a correspondence with a prisoner who later in a letter confided he had committed rape. ❖❖ My friend was filled with anger and disgust. ❖ In a later letter, the prisoner explained how through this terrible mistake he had lost his family. No one wanted to know him. ❖ How he had lost his career. ❖ And all that on top of being locked away in prison. When my friend now saw it from the prisoner's angle he was able to re-establish a sense of sympathy for the man. ❖ This is metta.

There is another side of metta which people find difficult to accept and that is to realise that we cannot achieve the goal of universal love if we can't also include ourselves in ❖ there. ❖ That is why when we practice Metta Bhavana, Loving-Kindness Meditation, we develop these attitudes towards ourselves. 'May I be free of suffering. May I be peaceful! May I be liberated.' ❖ Some think this is selfishness, but there's a vast difference between eating to live and living to eat. The one is caring for oneself, looking after oneself. ❖ The other self-indulgence. ❖ We tend to have a lot of dislike for ourselves. ❖ We are often full of self-recriminations, self-accusations. ❖ All those little voices, 'I'm no good. ❖ I'm useless. I'm ugly. ❖ I'm disgusting. I don't know how anyone can possibly like me. I'm not good enough. No one loves me'. ❖ And so on. We need to undermine these negative feelings towards ourselves by first of all not indulging them. ❖ Just listen to them and smile. ❖ No one's perfect! Then we should develop self-acceptance, self-care. ❖ What would you think of someone who never washed their own clothes and went around like a ragamuffin? We'd say that woman doesn't care for herself. ❖ That man has no self-respect. What would you think of someone who never washed their own clothes, went round like a ragamuffin, but wanted to wash everyone else's clothes! That's what we're like, isn't it? ❖ We like to take care of everybody else's problems, while ❖ we haven't a clue what to do with our own. Sometimes, we're so self-deluded, we don't think we have any problems! ❖ Being able to take care of ourselves is a qualification for being able to take care of others.

Finally, equanimity, the tenth perfection. Equanimity is considered to be the highest state of mind in Buddhism. ❖❖❖ It is not to be confused with cold detachment or intellectual indifference. ❖ It is a mental state, undisturbed by any negative emotions or feelings. ❖ There is no sentimentality here. ❖❖❖ It is a state of mind, clear, calm and cool like a still pool in which all the sky is clearly mirrored. ❖❖❖ It is within this equanimous mind that the intuition, the faculty of insight, can exercise its power to see, to understand and eventually to liberate the mind of all its illusions and delusions. ❖ It is when our hearts are calm and peaceful, that wisdom shines. ❖ The practice of meditation is especially important in developing this sort of mind. No matter what comes into our attention, we constantly take the position of the objective observer, just watching, just noting what arises and

passes away. ❖ Eventually all this commotion in the mind begins to die down. You can sometimes feel this relaxation even after a few minutes sitting. ❖ As the mind's agitation calms, you may experience little gaps of empty mind where there seems to be no emotion or mood or thought or image. ❖ Just pure awareness being aware of this stillness, this silence. This is the mind as a calm pool and awareness is the sky. When sensations, feelings or mental states arise out of the depth of this pool, the awareness can perceive quite clearly the arising and passing away of all this mental phenomena. ❖ It is with this sort of concentration that there is a possibility of glimpsing what is beyond all these phenomena, the Nibbanic Peace Beyond.

Now in daily life, it is not necessary for us to get all neurotic and keep a tally on what Perfection we're practicing and how well we're doing. ❖ The easiest and simplest approach to the development of virtue is to take one of the list which you feel you would like most to develop. You will find that in its practice that many of the others are included. However, the Buddha did single out, Dana, Generosity. Firstly, he said that even immoral people could practice that. But more significant, in its development we can see how all the Perfections are lifted. First, it means I'm undermining greed and I shall hardly be developing the habit of taking what is not freely given to me. That's Morality. ❖ As soon as I give, I also have to renounce a little of my wealth or time. ❖ Renunciation. As I practice Generosity, I come to know its importance. ❖ I come to see how interdependent people are. Such insights are all developing my Wisdom. To practice any virtue takes Effort and I need to suffer willingly my discomfort at the loss of wealth or time. That's Patience. ❖ I've learnt how to give gladly. ❖ In all this I need to be honest with myself. ❖ I must be aware of my reasons, both overt and covert. ❖ Sometimes I think I'm giving with a pure heart, but in fact I'm very upset if the person doesn't thank me. Honesty might mean becoming aware of our impure motives. ❖ I develop Resolution too, in that I carry out my decisions. ❖ In giving, my heart is opened. ❖ I'm giving because I see the other needs my assistance. I'm giving because I see no reason why I should have more than the other. This is Metta, Loving-kindness. ❖ All this naturally leads to undermining the negative attitudes I have in my mind, the negative feelings I have in my heart, especially if I give to someone I dislike. ❖ The clearer the heart and mind is of negativity, the greater is the equanimity. ❖ Through the practice of Dana, Generosity, I am developing all the Perfections.

It's important not to make heavy weather of all this, but rather see it in the light of experimentation. ❖❖ When I decided to become a monk, I decided to give a ring away. ❖ It was a silver ring with a Buddhist design on it. ❖ I liked it very much. ❖ This was going to be a great act of renunciation. I decided I would give it away to the first person who showed any interest in it. ❖ As it happened, a young woman expressed ❖ a liking for it not a few days after my momentous decision, but I didn't think her worthy of it! ❖ Eventually I did

give it away under those conditions after a little self-examination. I think my self-knowledge and wisdom grew a little there!

Our growth towards the light, away from darkness, should be a joyful exploit. Our targets should be manageable. They should not be mission impossibles'. If we aim too high and fail, it will only disappoint us. Growth in mental development needs to be slow and sure. We need to build up our Perfections in depth. And that takes time. We need to revolutionise our thinking, but without violence. That revolution is the movement from doing harm to doing good. We have to sit down everyday and really examine our behaviour. We have to begin to do what's right. It's a bit like learning how to play a guitar. You struggle so long to twist your fingers round and get that chord. Then one day, there it is. A tune played with ease and delight. We need to see our bodies and minds as instruments we are trying to master through experimentation and practice. We need to develop into highly tuned harmonious human instruments. This is our task. The purification and development of mind. We can do it.

May the Teachings of the Buddha shed light into your life!

May you quickly attain the Supreme Goal!

SUMMARY

POSITIVE MORALITY

doing good, doing good for others

THE PERFECTIONS (PARAMI)

that which takes us to the other shore

that which takes us beyond, i.e. Nibbana.

1. Generosity (dana)
2. Morality (sila)
3. Renunciation (nekkhamma)
4. Wisdom (panya)
5. Effort (viriya)
6. Patience (khanti)
7. Truthfulness (sacca)



8. Resolution (adhitthana)
 9. Loving-kindness (metta)
 10. Equanimity (upekkha)
- By practising one, we affect them all.

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