



Perfection of Practice

Thank you very much for coming to sit in this group, in this format. Each person's presence is a support to one another—each person. This is the nature of Zen practice, this format: without thinking about it, being here and practising, making an effort to settle down and, together with everybody else, naturally supporting and supported; and that is the beautiful part of Zen practice.

It's so beautiful because you don't know whether you are supporting or not, or whether you're supported or not [laughs]. You're still making an effort. That is the perfect practice. If you have the slightest idea 'I am supporting somebody being here', then it's not so beautiful [laughs]. But if you don't have any idea that you're supporting or being supported, but you're just here to work on yourself, sincerely, whole-heartedly; that is what I mean by beautiful, perfect.

Paramita is the traditional term for perfection. If you don't have the slightest idea of it but you're doing it, in the midst of it, then your activity is perfected. There are six foci of this perfection of practice, six paramitas. The first one is 'giving', called dana practice. Ordinarily, when you hear of dana, you get ideas that dana means donation to the monk or teacher [laughs]. That is a very limited idea. To practise dana means perfection of giving practice. If you don't have the slightest idea whether you give or receive, which is which, but you do it—that is perfection of practice. That's the first door into the other levels.

It's not in the realm of conventional give and take: I give, I get something—a cultivated idea about how much I give or how much I receive. Rather it's in the other sense: that you are practising giving; and it then naturally goes into the realm of spiritual practice and is a perfection of practice. It's the kind of practice that's carried out in all activities. Thinking, think something without trace. Complete thinking process. Say something: complete, no trace; and do something: complete no trace, no trace, no trace. Practice with no trace.

Perfection. That is naturally the entrance to Zen practice. Of course, [laughs] from the beginning we are learning the practice of perfection. We are learning to sit, né, just sit. In sitting in zazen, learning to give ourselves, totally, in this practice, in this moment, here and now. Wherever we are, to give, totally. No need to wait for the outcome [laughs]. That's it! [Laughs.] If you are waiting for something after you give—'I sat twenty minutes, I should be getting somewhere,'—that kind of practice is far away from perfection of practice.

When giving practice is perfected, the five other aspects of practice become automatically perfected. Like the second one, 'patience' paramita. Patience. It is automatically perfected [laughs]. If you have the slightest idea of patience [laughs], 'I'm doing it, I'm having a hard time, I'm trying to make an effort, I'm trying to be patient'—that is not yet the paramita level, the perfection of patience level. Not having the slightest idea, just doing as much as you can for the time being [is the perfection of the patience level].

The precepts work in two ways: individual levels are what's most important to you; the unfolding of the precepts on an individual basis. But they're related to the community's, what's collectively important. There is etiquette, rules, in the format of the zendo. They're not the ordinary kind of rules—society's—they're rules for practice; so we observe them. They naturally support each other. Basically, what we are doing is sitting with good posture and good breath. Good attention of the mind to the practice. When you stand up and walk, and when the activity changes, there is a greeting gesture, a bow, integrated. This is the way of practice. So, naturally everyone is clear about it and making an effort as it comes, giving oneself totally around these three essential practices, naturally we support each other. Everyone is completing a giving practice, a dana practice in this form. The effect is great.

So, in the Mahayana tradition, giving, dana, has to come first, before anything else. The effect is great. If it's the other way around—take and give—when take comes first, that affects the consequence, the effects become reversed. I need something, you know, [laughs] before I can do something for you. It's not in the realm of spirituality, if take comes first. If giving comes first, then we enter into the realm of spirituality. The purest or ultimate form is just to give, and because you're totally giving yourself, body and mind, in the activity or thinking, whatever you do, there's no trace of it. You have no idea about what you're doing. That's the beautiful part of it. No-one is giving [laughs]. You're not quite sure whether you're giving or receiving. This is the highest realm of spirituality. It's abandonment, inexhaustible.

Once we come to that spirituality, it's inexhaustible and tremendous work is done. For instance, Mother Theresa. She did tremendous work. One person. But she had no idea that she was doing something favourable for the poor. Not the slightest idea. It's the other way around—she received a lot. That kind of realm is not experienced if we're in the level of take and give ... or even give and take. It doesn't make sense [laughs] trying to help people, dying people, the poorest of poor, day after day. You'll become burnt out or exhausted. But when you hit the spiritual realm it becomes the key to energy. You receive more of it, absolutely, it is a kind of feeder, a kind of nuclear reaction starts to occur [laughs]. Perfection of practice is like that. It's the ultimate.

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Transcribed and edited by Johanna Verberne.