

# The *Paramis*: A Historical Background

by Guy Armstrong

## The ascetic Sumedha

Four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age - which is to say a very, very, very long time ago - an ascetic named Sumedha was practicing the path to arahantship when he received word that a fully self-awakened one, a Buddha named Dipankara, was teaching in a town nearby. He traveled there and found Dipankara Buddha being venerated in a long procession attended by most of the townspeople. Sumedha was immediately touched with deep reverence upon seeing the noble bearing and vast tranquility of the Buddha. He realized that to become an arahant would be of great benefit to humankind, but that the benefit to the world of a Buddha was immensely greater. At that very moment, in the presence of Dipankara Buddha, he made a vow to become a Buddha in a future life. This marked his entry into the path of the bodhisattva, a being bound for buddhahood.

Just then Sumedha noticed that the Buddha was about to walk through a patch of wet mud. Spontaneously, out of great devotion, he threw his body down in the mud and invited the Buddha and his Sangha to walk over him rather than dirty their feet. As the great teacher passed, Dipankara Buddha read Sumedha's mind, understood his aspiration, and predicted that the ascetic Sumedha would fulfill his vow to become a Buddha at a time four incalculables and a hundred thousand eons in the future.

It was also revealed to Sumedha that had he not made the aspiration to become a Buddha, he would have realized full enlightenment that day by listening to a discourse from Dipankara Buddha. This would have ended Sumedha's own suffering and also his chain of rebirths. But the bodhisattva chose instead to devote inconceivable lifetimes of practice to gain the ultimate goal, buddhahood.

Having resolved on this goal, Sumedha then retired to his cave to reflect. "How can I make this vast journey?" he wondered. "What aspects of mind and heart do I need to develop in order to become a Buddha?" As he reflected, he saw that there were ten wholesome qualities that he would need to brought to strength and maturity. The factors came into his mind one by one. Generosity (*dana*). Virtue (*sila*). Renunciation (*nekkhamma*). Wisdom (*pañña*). Energy (*viriya*). Patience (*khanti*). Truthfulness (*sacca*). Determination (*aditthana*). Lovingkindness (*metta*). Equanimity (*upekkha*).

He called this set the *paramis*, which has usually been translated as the "perfections." He then began the journey of innumerable lifetimes to develop the perfections of heart and mind that finally unfolded in his full enlightenment as Gotama Buddha under the bodhi tree in Northern India more than 2500 years ago.

## The *paramis* in Theravadin literature

The story of Sumedha and the *paramis* is related in the *Buddhavamsa*, which is found in the

*Khuddaka Nikaya*, or Minor Collection, in the *Sutta Pitaka* of the Pali Canon. The stories in the *Buddhavamsa*, like those in the Jatakas (stories of the many lives of our bodhisattva), are viewed by scholars as later additions to the Canon and somewhat apocryphal. They do not carry the authenticity of the Buddha's voice as do the other four *Nikayas* (*Digha*, *Majjhima*, *Samyutta*, and *Anguttara*), *Sutta Nipata*, *Dhammapada*, *Udana*, and *Itivuttaka*.

Interestingly, although the Buddha spoke often of these ten qualities, to my knowledge the list of the *paramis* does not appear even once in the above texts which we may consider to be the most authentic words of the Buddha. Still it is clear that from the early days of Theravada Buddhism, the *paramis* were viewed as the essential elements of the path to buddhahood and hence closely identified with the bodhisattva path. Note that in the authoritative suttas of the Canon, the Buddha often refers to himself as the "bodhisatta" (Pali; or bodhisattva, Sanskrit). Contrary to common belief, the bodhisattva path has always been one of three options within Theravada, the others being those of the arahant and the *pacekkabuddha* (one who is self-realized but doesn't teach).

Though a minority, there are many Theravadin practitioners in Burma today following the bodhisattva path. There are stories in Burma that the meditation master Mingun Sayadaw early in the last century instructed one student, Mahasi Sayadaw, to become an arahant and another student, Taungpulu Sayadaw, to follow the bodhisattva path. Such stories are extremely hard to verify. Because monks are forbidden to talk to laypeople about their attainments, they rarely offer details of their practices.

The *paramis* came to play a central role in Buddhist thought with the dawn of the Mahayana, around the start of the common era, when the bodhisattva ideal gained more widespread popularity among practitioners. With the growth of interest in the bodhisattva path, Theravadin scholars responded from within their tradition. For example, there is an extensive essay by Acariya Dhammapala, a contemporary of Buddhaghosa Bhikkhu in Sri Lanka, called *A Treatise on the Paramis*. It has been translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi and can be found online at <http://www.geocities.com/~madg/gangessangha/ParamisTreatise.html>.

### **The *paramis* in Mahayana literature**

Mahayana Buddhism placed the *paramis* at the center of their training because all practitioners in that lineage are encouraged to practice for buddhahood. (In Mahayana, the term *paramitas* is more frequently used, but the two are synonymous.) Their philosophers reduced the list from ten qualities to six, omitting five of the Theravadin *paramis* (renunciation, truthfulness, determination, lovingkindness, and equanimity) and adding one (concentration). The order is slightly different in the Mahayana list and is considered to indicate something of a sequence of development: generosity, virtue, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. It is interesting that while deleting lovingkindness from the list, the Mahayanists didn't choose to replace it with compassion, which they came to regard as the most important of the four *brahmaviharas*.

The clearest expression of the *paramis* as an entire path is perhaps found in Shantideva's classic text from the eighth century, *Bodhicaryavatara*, or *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way*, which is available in several English translations. This work is especially beloved by the Dalai Lama,

who has published a beautiful commentary on it called *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night*. Shantideva's *Guide* is really a foundational text for the Mahayana schools; of texts by known authors, its influence in Buddhist thought is probably second only to that of Nagarjuna's *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*.

### **The *paramis* in practice**

One of the beautiful features of the *paramis*, in contrast, say, to the seven factors of enlightenment, is that these qualities can be developed in daily life as well as in retreat. Qualities like generosity, virtue, patience, and truthfulness can be developed strongly in daily life, while aspects like energy, wisdom, and equanimity may develop more fully through formal meditation. The *paramis* thus span what the Mahayanists call the *two accumulations* required for liberation: the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. That is, in order to be liberated, we need to perform a lot of wholesome actions and also generate a great deal of insight. This is true whether we are practicing for buddhahood or arahantship. The list of *paramis* highlights this balance. We understand that the two accumulations together have the power to uplift us and sweep us to liberation.

The meaning of *parami* points to this. Thanissaro Bhikkhu mentions two etymologies: "They carry one across to the further shore (*param*); and they are of foremost (*parama*) importance in formulating the purpose of one's life." (Introduction to "The Ten Perfections: A Study Guide," online at:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/perfections.html>.)

In their blend of merit and insight, the *paramis* convey the two key qualities of Buddhist life, compassion and wisdom. As Acariya Dhammapala says in his treatise:

*Through his wisdom the bodhisattva perfects within himself the character of a Buddha,  
through his compassion the ability to perform the work of a Buddha.  
Through wisdom she brings herself across (the stream of becoming),  
through compassion she leads others across.  
Through compassion he trembles with sympathy for all,  
but because his compassion is accompanied by wisdom  
his heart is unattached.*