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Perfections of Buddhahood

Extracted from
Letters From The Hague

Nina van Gorkom



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



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By

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**Extracted from Letters From The
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Perfections of Buddhahood

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he Buddha, as a Bodhisatta, endured many lives in order to become a Sammāsambuddha. Had he not made the resolution to become a Buddha he need not have accumulated all the perfections necessary for Buddhahood and he could have attained enlightenment sooner. It was out of compassion that he endured so many lives.

When we were on our pilgrimage in India, we also visited the Jeta Grove, the park which Anāthapiṇḍika had presented to the Buddha. The Buddha stayed in this Grove for twenty-five rainy seasons. When we were walking around in the Jeta Grove a friend said to me, “He suffered so much for us.” At that moment I did not understand these words very well. It seemed to me that a Buddha who suffers for other people is like a saviour who could redeem them through his suffering. This is an idea taught in some religions, but strange to the Buddhist teachings. However, now I understand better the meaning of my friend’s words. He endured many lives also for our sake in order to become a Buddha.

Through the teachings we come to know the Buddha who is endowed with all the perfections of Buddhahood. We come to know him as someone who preached about generosity, about *sīla* (morality), loving kindness, energy, forbearance, and the cultivation of all other kinds of wholesomeness. We come to know the Buddha as someone who practised what he preached. We learn about his teaching of the development of wisdom through mindfulness of *nāma* (mind) and *rūpa* (matter) in our daily lives. When we practise what the Buddha taught, and are mindful of the realities appearing through the six sense doors, we begin to have some understanding of the Buddha's wisdom. His wisdom can even today change our lives. Without the teachings of the Buddha there could not be mindfulness at this moment, there could not be right understanding of our life. It is evident that the Buddha's perfections must have had their appropriate conditions. The Buddha could not have attained such wisdom and such purity of virtues at once; they must have been cultivated for an endlessly long time. Only the right cause can bring about such a result. Thus we come to understand that out of compassion for us he endured innumerable lives in order to accumulate the perfections which would make him foremost in wisdom and in all virtues.

Someone of our group remarked that he did not

understand why the Thais paid such deep respect at the holy places by bowing down; by giving incense, candles and flowers; by sticking gold leaf on the stupas and Buddha-statues; and by chanting texts from the teachings. He said that he had no mental disposition for these forms of respect. Khun Sujin explained to him that it is because of Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna, the Four Applications of Mindfulness, which the Buddha taught, that such great respect is paid to the Buddha. When we are mindful of *nāma* and *rūpa* we understand more deeply the value of the Buddha's teachings in our lives. We come to know the teacher through the teachings, and then we wish to pay respect to him, even though he passed away. In Buddhism one does not follow the teacher with blind faith, but one listens to the teachings, considers them, and practises them. When one has seen for oneself that the Dhamma can change one's life, one comes to know the teacher and wishes to pay respect to him. When we had come to the end of our pilgrimage the same person said, "Now I wish to return to the holy places and pay respect."

In order to be able to teach the Dhamma which can change people's lives, the Buddha endured so much during the "four incalculable ages and hundred thousand aeons" (Vism IX.26), when he was a Bodhisatta. Forbearance, *khanti*, is one of the

perfections he accumulated. In many Jātakas one can read about his forbearance and loving kindness. He did not allow hate to corrupt his mind even when his enemies tried to murder him on various occasions. In the Khantivādin Jātaka (J III 39), we read that when he was asked by the king of Kāsi “What do you preach, monk?” he replied “I am a preacher of patience.” Then the king had him flogged with scourges of thorns and had his hands and feet cut off, but he did not feel the slightest anger. He practised what he preached.

In his last life, when he had become a Buddha, his cousin Devadatta wanted to harm him and hurled a stone at him. The Buddha’s foot was pierced by a stone splinter. We read in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (Sagāthā-vagga, Chapter I, part 4, par. 8, “The Splinter”) that although the pains were “keen and sharp,” he bore them “mindful and discerning, nor was he cast down.” When he was lying down in the “lion’s posture,” devas came to see him and expressed their admiration for his endurance:

“See! What a wondrous creature [*Nāga*] is the worshipful recluse Gotama! Tis by this wondrous nature that he endures, mindful and discerning, the pains that have arisen in his body, keen and sharp, that he is not cast down . . .”

He who could endure anything exhorted the monks to have endurance. We read in the Majjhima Nikāya (Sabbāsava-sutta, “Discourse on all the Cankers,” Mūlapariyāya-vagga) about getting rid of all the cankers. The Buddha said this concerning the cankers to be eliminated by endurance:

And what, monks, are the cankers to be got rid of by endurance? In this teaching, monks, a monk, wisely reflective, is one who bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, the touch of gadfly, mosquito, wind and sun, creeping things, ways of speech that are irksome, unwelcome; he is of a character to bear bodily feelings which, arising, are painful, acute, sharp, shooting, disagreeable, miserable, deadly. Whereas, monks, he lacked endurance, the cankers which are destructive and consuming might arise. But because he endures, therefore these cankers which are destructive and consuming are not. These, monks, are called the cankers to be got rid of by endurance.

Can we endure “ways of speech that are irksome, unwelcome”? Are we always forbearing in regard to other people and patient with ourselves? We tend to be impatient sometimes when we do not notice a rapid progress in wisdom. We should accumulate patience

and the way to do this is mindfulness of *nāma* and *rūpa*.

During our journey, when we had to sit in the bus for eighteen hours (and this happened now and then), we might have liked to change the situation. Don't we wish to change the situation when things are not as we would like them to be? However, mindfulness of *nāma* and *rūpa* is more important than the fact whether a situation is pleasant or unpleasant. The experience of pleasant or unpleasant things through the senses is *vipāka* and how can we change *vipāka* which is the result of *kamma*? Life is *nāma* and *rūpa* arising because of conditions and there is no self which can control *nāma* and *rūpa*. During our pilgrimage there were many reminders to be aware of *nāma* and *rūpa*, and thus there were more conditions for *kusala cittas* and there were less *akusala cittas* with aversion. Nobody in our group complained during the long journey in the bus. Once we were sitting in the dark during the small hours of the morning and we still had not reached the hotel where we were supposed to have stayed overnight. One of the ladies asked the Thai monk who was with us whether he would preach about endurance. The monk, who never showed any tiredness and preached all day long to us with great vigour, stood up and preached about endurance.

We should have endless patience in regard to the

development of wisdom. The *Visuddhimagga* (I.135) gives us an example of a monk who attained enlightenment on his death-bed. It is not difficult to attain enlightenment when the right conditions have been cultivated, but it is difficult to be mindful over and over again, with great patience and perseverance, during all our activities. We read that the Elder Mahā-Saṅgharakkhita was lying on his deathbed and had not attained enlightenment. The young bhikkhu who was his attendant said that it would be a disappointment for many people who had come to see him if he would die an ordinary man. We read that the Elder said, “Friend, thinking to see the Blessed One Metteyya, [1] I did not try for insight. So help me to sit up and give me the chance.” He helped the Elder to sit up and went out. As he went out the Elder reached Arahatsip and he gave a sign by snapping his fingers. The Order assembled and said to him, “Venerable sir, you have done a difficult thing in achieving the supramundane state in the hour of death. That was not difficult, friends. But rather I will tell you what is difficult, Friends. I see no action done [by me] without mindfulness and unknowingly since the time I went forth.” Even though we have understood how to develop the Eightfold Path we are often not patient enough to be mindful, day in day out, of visible object and seeing, sound and hearing

and all other realities which appear. At the moment of mindfulness there is only the characteristic which appears, and no impatience regarding a result of our development, no worry about the future. When, for example, hardness presents itself, there can be awareness of only hardness; when the experience of hardness presents itself there can be awareness of that characteristic. This is the way to become more patient with ourselves and with other people. This is the way to be able to endure any kind of situation.

Truthfulness, *sacca*, is another one of the perfections the Buddha had fulfilled. We read in the Jātakas that the Bodhisatta always kept his promises even when his life was in danger. We read in the Sutasoma-Jātaka (Jātaka no. 537) that a man-eater (who would be reborn later in the Buddha's time as Aṅgulimāla) was going to kill the Bodhisatta in order to eat him. The Bodhisatta had to go away for a while first in order to fulfil a promise he had made to a Brahmin. After that he came back on his own accord to the man-eater since he had promised him to return. His truthfulness tamed the man-eater. When the man-eater was reborn in the Buddha's time as Aṅgulimāla he was "tamed" again by the Buddha and even attained arahatship.

In the Lakkhaṇa-sutta (Dīgha Nikāya), we read how accumulated *kusala-kamma* conditioned the bodily features of the Buddha. We read concerning his

truthfulness:

Whereas in whatsoever former birth ... monks, the Tathāgata, then being human, put away lying, felt revulsion at lies, became a truth-speaker, bound to truth, trustworthy, consistent, breaking his word to no one; he by the doing and by the accumulating of that karma, by the mass and the abundance thereof ... was reborn in a bright and blessed world. Deceasing thence, and attaining this life as you know it, he acquired these two Marks of the Superman, that is, down growing in separate hairs, all over his body; and between the eyebrows a hairy mole, white and like soft cotton-down.

He who discovered the truth all by himself and taught the truth to others had accumulated perfect truthfulness and sincerity. Through mahā-satipaṭṭhāna we will become more sincere. When we are mindful we will come to know our more subtle defilements which were hidden to us before. We may have thought that we were sincere so long as we did not tell lies. But are we always sincere in our speech and behaviour? The *Visuddhimagga* (I.60f.) mentions untruthfulness in speech or deportment of monks by which there is transgression of the purity of right

livelihood. For example, a monk lays claim to a higher than human state that is non-existent in order to obtain requisites. [2] This is an offence of “Defeat”; he can no longer be in communion with the Sangha. We read about hypocrisy in the case of a monk who wants to have requisites but rejects them because he wants to make a good impression on people so that they will give him more. We read about the monk who composes his deportment so that people will admire him more (Vism I.70): “He walks studiedly, stands studiedly, sits studiedly, lies down studiedly; he walks as though concentrated; and he is one who meditates in public “

A monk is not supposed to ask for requisites, and he is not allowed even to give a hint or make a suggestion about what he needs. The *Visuddhimagga* gives many examples of the wrong speech of monks who are seeking requisites. A few of these examples are the following (Vism I.75):

Ingratiating chatter is endearing chatter repeated again and again without regard to whether it is in conformity with truth and Dhamma. Flattery is speaking humbly, always maintaining an attitude of inferiority. Beansouperly is resemblance to bean soup; for just as when beans are being cooked only a few do not get cooked, the rest get cooked; so too the

person in whose speech only a little is true, the rest being false, is called a “bean soup;” his state is bean-souperly.

These passages are useful reminders also for lay-people. Are there moments that we wish to pretend to be wiser and more virtuous than we really are? Is there some untruthfulness in our speech, be it only a little?

When we come to know realities as they are there will be more truthfulness in our life. When for example sound appears and there is mindfulness of sound as only sound, we will know sound as it is. We will know hearing as it is, visible object as it is, seeing as it is. We will have a clearer understanding of what our life really is: only *nāma* and *rūpa*. When delusion about reality diminishes we will be less inclined to delude ourselves or others.

One of the perfections the Buddha had fulfilled was *mettā*, loving kindness or non-hate. We read for example in the *Sīlavanta Jātaka* (J-a I 201) that he felt no hate towards his enemies who tried to harm him. He had been buried alive and, after he had escaped, he saw his enemy lying on his own bed. However, he had no hate and treated him as a friend; they undertook a mutual pledge.

When the Bodhisatta was the elephant Chaddanta (Chaddanta-Jātaka, J-a V 51), he was pierced in the navel by a poisonous shaft, but he had no hate towards the hunter. When the hunter told him that he had been ordered to take his tusks for the queen of Kāsi, Chaddanta knelt down, cut off his own tusks and gave them to the hunter. After that he died.

When the Bodhisatta was the Great Monkey he pulled a man out of a rocky chasm. (J-a V 71). The man who was hungry and wanted to eat the monkey dashed a stone on his head. The monkey looked at him with eyes full of tears and warned him for the result of such a deed:

Oh act not so, good sir, or else
The fate you reap will long deter
All others from such deeds as this
That you would do to me today. (J-a V 71)

The monkey had no hate and wanted to help the man; regardless of his own pain he saw to it that the man reached his journey's end in safety.

The Buddha who had practised *mettā* without equal preached *mettā* to others. We read in the "Mettā Sutta" (Sutta-nipāta vv. 143–152):

May creatures all be of a blissful heart.
Let no one work another one's undoing

Or even slight him at all anywhere;
And never let them wish each other ill
Through provocation or resentful thought.

The Australian monk who was with us on the pilgrimage told us an example of *mettā*. A woman in Indonesia lost her husband because of the reckless driving of a young man. They caught the young man and brought him to her but she did not want to have him sent to court and even wished to pay for his education. This woman had *mettā* without limits.

The Buddha who extended *mettā* to all beings without exception exhorted others to have boundless *mettā* as well. When we are treated unjustly by others we may wonder whether we should “do” anything about it. When we develop mindfulness we will understand more clearly that “we” cannot do anything. The experience of praise or blame, honour or dishonour, is only *vipāka* which arises because of conditions.

We read in “The Parable of the Saw” (Majjhima Nikāya, MN 21.20):

“Monks, as low-down thieves might carve one limb from limb with a double-handled saw, yet even then whoever sets his mind at enmity, he, for this reason, is not a doer of my teaching.

Herein, monks, you should train yourselves thus: 'Neither will our minds become perverted, nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and, beginning with him, we will dwell having suffused the whole world with a mind of friendliness that is far-reaching, widespread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence.' This is how you must train yourselves, monks.

"If you, monks, were to attend repeatedly to this exhortation on the Parable of the Saw, would you, monks, see any way of speech, subtle or gross, that you could not endure?"

"No, Lord."

"Wherefore, monks, consider repeatedly this exhortation on the Parable of the Saw; for a long time it will be for your welfare and happiness."

Thus spoke the Lord. Delighted, these monks rejoiced in what the Lord had said.

In many lives, the Bodhisatta had given an example of such metta as he preached in the "Parable of the Saw." We might find this parable rather incomprehensible. Is

it not going too far to “dwell with a mind of friendliness” even when we are being carved limb from limb? Those who develop Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna will understand this parable. When we see that our life is *nāma* and *rūpa* we will not try to “do” anything about people who treat us badly. There is seeing now; can we “do” anything about it? There is hearing now, can we “do” anything about it? We see and hear pleasant and unpleasant things, but we cannot prevent seeing and hearing from arising. They are only *vipākas*, arising because of conditions. All that matters is mindfulness of the *nāmas* and *rūpas* which appear. When there is mindfulness difficult situations in our lives change for the better without there being the need to “do” anything.

Upekkhā, equanimity, is another one of the perfections the Buddha had fulfilled. *Upekkhā* is in this case not neutral feeling but the wholesome cetasika *tatra-majjhataṭṭā*, which literally means “keeping in the middle of things”. We read in the *Visuddhimagga* (XIV. 153) that its function is to prevent deficiency and excess, or to inhibit partiality. It is manifested as neutrality.

We read in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism IX.124) that Bodhisattas, because of *upekkhā*, expect no reward. The Bodhisatta cultivated impartiality towards all beings since he had made the resolve to become a

Buddha for the sake of all beings. He did not expect any reward in return.

We read in the Cūla-Dhammapāla Jātaka (J-a III 181) that when the Bodhisatta was born as Prince Dhammapāla, his father, the King Mahāpatāpa, ordered that his hands and feet he lopped off like bamboo shoots. After that the King ordered that his head be cut off as well. The infant Prince Dhammapāla had no trace of hate, but had firmly resolved thus: “Now is the time to restrain your mind; now, good Dhammapāla be impartial towards these four persons, that is to say, towards your father who is having your head cut off, the man who is beheading you, your lamenting mother, and yourself.”

We read in the Mahāsīhanāda-sutta (Majjhima Nikāya, Sīhanāda-vagga) that the Buddha related to Sāriputta his ascetical practices to which he had applied himself before his enlightenment:

Then I, Sāriputta, lay down to sleep in a cemetery, leaning on a skeleton. Cowherds’ boys, having come up to me, spat and staled on me, and, showered me with dust and stuck twigs into my ears. But Sāriputta, know well that I was not the creator of a malign heart against them. This then came to be for me, Sāriputta, through abiding in even-mindedness.

The Buddha wanted to help all beings and he taught without partiality to anybody who was ready to listen. He was not partial towards his son Rāhula. Rāhula asked him many questions about Dhamma, and so he taught Rāhula as he would teach others who asked him questions.

In the Saḷāyatana-vibhaṅga-sutta (“The Analysis of the Sixfold”, Majjhima Nikāya, Vibhaṅga-vagga), we read that the Buddha spoke to the monks about “three arousings of mindfulness,” practising which an ariyan disciple is fit to instruct a group.

As to this, monks, a teacher teaches Dhamma to disciples, compassionate, seeking their welfare, out of compassion, saying, ‘This is for your welfare, this is for your happiness.’ But his disciples do not listen, do not lend ear, do not prepare their minds for profound knowledge and, turning aside, move away from the teacher’s instruction. Herein, monks, the Tathāgata is neither delighted nor does he experience delight, but dwells untroubled, mindful and clearly conscious

We read that in the case that some disciples do not listen, and others do listen, the Tathāgata is neither delighted nor depressed. “Having ousted both delight and depression, he dwells with equanimity, mindful

and clearly conscious.” In the case that his disciples listen, the Tathāgata is delighted and he experiences delight, but “he dwells untroubled, mindful, and clearly conscious.”

The monk who has left his home for the homeless life has many opportunities to cultivate impartiality. Laypeople who are bound by their family life are apt to have a preference for their own relatives. The monk is not bound by such ties, and has the opportunity to devote himself entirely to the task of helping all people who are ready to listen to the Dhamma, without any partiality. The monk should not expect any reward for his teaching of Dhamma. Since he is not allowed to ask for anything, he truly leads a life of contentment with little.

Laypeople who also practise the “Middle Way,” which is the Eightfold Path, can cultivate impartiality (*tatra-majjhataṭṭā*.) Partiality is unwholesome. Having preference for certain people or expecting a reward from anyone are forms of attachment. Impartiality is wholesome. It arises with each wholesome citta. We can find out for ourselves that the cultivation of the Eightfold Path makes us less apt to partiality. When we learn to see ourselves and other people as only *nāma* and *rūpa* we will have less preference for this or for that person. We will learn not to expect praise, honour or other kinds of rewards from others. We

should remember that the Buddha was unruffled by praise or blame. He was even-minded, untroubled, mindful, and clearly conscious.

The Buddha had fulfilled the perfections of *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (morality), *nekkhamma* (renunciation), *paññā* (wisdom), *virīya* (energy), *khanti* (forbearance), *sacca* (truthfulness), *adhiṭṭhāna* (resolution), *mettā* (loving kindness) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). Thus he could become the Sammāsambuddha. “He is the Exalted One, arahat, fully enlightened, perfected in knowledge and way of life, one well-gone, a knower of the worlds, none higher, a tamer of tamable men, a teacher, the awake among devas and men, the Exalted One! (Aṅguttara Nikāya, “Book of the Sixes,” Chapter I, par. 10, Mahānāma).

Notes

1. The Bodhisatta Metteyya will be the next Buddha. [\[Back\]](#)
2. The requisites of robes, food, a dwelling-place, and medicines. [\[Back\]](#)

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