

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN SAYS

PARAMITA One of the great principles in primitive Buddhism is the Sacred Eightfold Path. That which corresponds to this Hinayana principle in Mahayana is the Six Paramitas. Usually the Eightfold Path and the Six Paramitas are explained as entirely different principles, but there are many intimate relations between them.

The so-called Six Paramitas are: giving, observing the precepts, forbearance, expedients, meditation, and attaining wisdom. The last two, meditation and attaining wisdom, are in the Eightfold Path. Regarding the sixth, of course wisdom is intrinsic, so you don't need to attain it, but you must discern it in your mind. The second and fourth paramitas are also in the Eightfold Path. So of the paramitas, two only, the paramita of giving and the paramita of forbearance, are not included in the Eightfold Path.

"Paramita" means "to reach the other shore." From this human world one will reach the other shore of Nirvana. You may call it Emptiness, Sunyata or Nirvana: all these words are synonyms, all convey the same meaning.

In human knowledge there are two kinds of knowledge. One is earthly knowledge, and the other is, using your term, heavenly knowledge. Knowledge to attain Nirvana must be commenced in your daily state of mind. It ends in attaining the nature of Nirvana. Earthly knowledge is that which can be learned or explained or taught by the human mind using words or concepts. When you teach your children one plus one equals two the medium by which you convey it to your children is concepts taking form in the words one plus one equals two. But in heavenly knowledge there is neither one nor two nor plus nor minus, so you cannot teach it to your children by words. If you say heavenly knowledge is zero and zero is also a number this is a concept. A great mistake of Buddhists is to take Emptiness as like zero. If you think Emptiness is zero, you are making something of Emptiness. Emptiness can't be called zero. True Emptiness has no concepts or words or symbols in it. This is the reason why Emptiness is so difficult to attain in Buddhism. You can conceive the idea of zero because there was one. But if from the beginning there was zero but no one you could not make such a concept of zero.

The Buddhistic zero is neither zero nor one. It is called non-existence. Of course it is not existing, but when we think very carefully about this non-existence we realize it is really existing.

When we think of non-existence in terms of space, then we think about the universe. There are many vast spaces which have never come into the realm of our intellect. Vast space is unintelligible, therefore it does not exist in the realm of the human intellect. What can we do about it? We can do nothing.

When we think about this Emptiness in terms of time, we can trace back some million years but we cannot go back before the creation of the universe. We say this whole universal existence is operated from a black nebula--from a crushed star--or from protons and electrons. But before the electron and proton there must have been something. It is Emptiness.

But we don't need to think about this in such a remote way. We can immediately prove we have nothing to do with this Emptiness. The Chinese Zen Master Isan asked a novice this question: "Before your mother had given you birth, what were you?" The novice thought about it. "Of course I was in my mother's bosom but I didn't know I was existing then. I didn't know which side was east, which west. I knew nothing about it." He failed therefore to make answer to his Master's question.

The Sixth Patriarch asked a monk: "Before your father and mother were born in this world what were you?" This gives a little more time than Isan's question.

This koan gives some idea of Emptiness. Emptiness is very difficult to grasp. When you completely understand this and are perfectly awakened in it your study of Buddhism is over. There is no more Buddhism to study.

"To reach the other shore" means to reach this Emptiness. This Emptiness is not dead Emptiness; it is not a dead end. This Emptiness is omnipotent Emptiness. When I say I am meditating on Emptiness, my American friends say: "You are wasting your time. No knowledge can come from Emptiness." Well, our idea of Emptiness is not so materialistic as that. We are not talking about a materialistic kind of Emptiness, like the Emptiness in an empty box. Ours is more like that in a glass of pure water. It is Emptiness, but it is solid Emptiness. This solid Emptiness in Buddhism is called Nirvana.

When our intellectual power is boiled down and becomes one sharp point, the intellect itself still exists. In the Western science called epistemology you study about this intrinsic wisdom. We certainly must know what this intellect is which we have. We meditate upon this pure intellect. When you meditate upon this pure intellect, you must not put it outside your intellect, however. Just meditate upon it and Emptiness will burst open from the center. That is all I can explain in words. You must experience it by yourself. Then for the first time your mind and body and soul and the world at once will all get into

that Emptiness. Without losing this world, your body, this daily mind, or the universe, you go into that Emptiness. This is the first step in Buddhist meditation and it is also the home of the Buddhist: our mind's home as well as our physical home is here.

We are going to Paramita; at the same time we are coming from Paramita also. Now the Six Paramitas are practiced by way of coming back from Paramita. You enter Paramita, that is, Nirvana, by practicing the Eightfold Path, and coming back from it you come in this vehicle of the Six Paramitas.

The first paramita, which is not mentioned in the Eightfold Path, is giving. In the Diamond Sutra the nature of true giving is explained. When a Bodhisattva practices giving he must not reside in existing Dharma. When you give something to the other you must not reside in form. You are giving Emptiness to the other and he is receiving Emptiness. That is the way of giving and also the way of accepting alms.

From the first principle, the Bodhisattva practices giving without residing in form, without residing in sound, without residing in taste, without residing in feeling. The Bible says when you give with one hand don't let the other hand know. Perhaps this is the same idea. "I feel very sorry to give you this" is certainly not the way to give. And when the Bodhisattva practices giving without residing in form, the merit is immeasurable. When heat comes into the cool air and heats the air it doesn't say: "Now I am coming." Cold air doesn't say: "Now I will be warm." Heat comes and goes without residing in form. When you look at the empty sky, can you measure anything? The eastern sky is immeasurable, the western sky is immeasurable. The empty sky is immeasurable. When the Bodhisattva practices giving without residing in the form, the merit is also immeasurable.

We monks practice this giving and accepting by going out alms-begging to train our hearts to accept and give merit to the giver. Accepting, we give the merit to the almsgiver. When you give, give without ego. When you receive, receive without ego. If giving is conscious, then you are accepting. Of course giving is easier than accepting. When you accept, you feel fear and inferiority in accepting, you feel that your ego is crushed. But when you can accept without residing in form, when you can accept everything in the state of Sunyata, you are an enlightened man.

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A highly detailed treatment of the paramitas appears in Har Dayal's *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Kogan Paul, Trubner, Trench and Co., Ltd., London 1932, in which nearly 100 pages are devoted to their definition and illustration. According to Mr. Dayal, the best translation of paramitas is "perfections." In Japan, during two weeks each year, one in spring, one in fall, the Buddhist is expected to pay special attention to their practice. In case you might like to observe this week, it begins three days before the equinox and ends three days after.

Baso Doitsu was living in Dembō-in. Everyday he practiced zazen. The Master (Nangaku Ejō) recognized that he was a vessel of Dharma and went to him and questioned him, saying: "Virtuous one, what is your aim in practicing zazen?"

Itsu said: "My aim is to become a Buddha."

Then the Master picked up a tile and began to polish it on a stone in front of the hermitage.

Itsu said: "What is the Master doing?"

The Master said: "I am polishing this tile to make a mirror."

Itsu said: "How can you make a mirror by polishing a tile?"

The Master said: "How can you make a Buddha by practicing zazen?"

Keitoku dentō roku Translated in *The Development of Chinese Zen*, pp. 51-52

Do you think Nangaku's statement in this story is inconsistent with Hakuin Zenji's praise of zazen in his ZAZEN WASAN? If you do, you have not read this story carefully or thought about it carefully. Please sit down and meditate upon it deeply. Though you will not be able to "become a Buddha" through this meditation, perhaps you will eventually come to realize why. My telling you why would do you no good. You must find the answer yourself. ERYU

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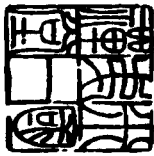
You think your eye is yours. Your eye is not yours. You think this hand is yours, but sometimes your mind cannot move your hand. You think this body is yours, but sometimes you cannot stay in it. If your face is yours, why in advanced age does it gather so many wrinkles? You cannot refuse them. Your face is not yours. Nothing is yours, and this yours is not yours also. Fool, the things you call yours are not yours; the ego which you call your ego is not your ego. It does not exist.

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