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The Ten Perfections: Qualities of the Fully Enlightened Individual as Described in Buddhist Psychology

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Such was the Buddha's impact that people sometimes felt he must be something more than human.

"Are you a God?" they wondered.
"No," replied the Buddha.
"Are you an angel?"
"No."
"Then what are you?" they asked.
"I am awake."

Huston Smith[1]

Like all branches of the perennial psychology, Buddhism is very much an applied psychology, aimed at training the mind and bringing it to optimal levels of functioning. The means for this are laid out in the eightfold path, a prescription for ethical living and meditation training, the meditative component of which will be described in Chapter 9 by Goleman and Epstein. The aim is the cultivation of certain mental qualities and attributes said to characterize the highest levels of enlightenment, qualities which can be recognized as the goals of all the great religious and consciousness disciplines.[2] In

Buddhist psychology, certain of these have been labeled as the ten "paramitas or perfections."[3]

While an individual may cultivate any one or more of these qualities, it is held that the simultaneous perfection of all ten was first attained by the Buddha, whose self-imposed training and discipline were extraordinarily arduous and broad ranging. He began his formal practice with concentrative meditation, and over a period of two years mastered all the higher levels of concentration, known as the jhanas, an extraordinarily rare achievement (for a discussion of these states, see Chapter 9). Not satisfied with the temporary nature of the relief of suffering which these states permitted, he next turned to the path of asceticism with a severity which almost killed him. Recognizing that extreme starvation and deprivation only impeded his mental faculties, he then relinquished asceticism and mastered the path of insight meditation among others, thus supposedly bringing to complete fruition all ten perfections.

The ten paramitas might be thought of as involving five overlapping categories: effort (determination and energy), ethics (ethicality and truthfulness), nonattachment (renunciation, patience, and equanimity), service to others (generosity and loving kindness), and wisdom. Although the refinement of these qualities to the degree described in Buddhist psychology may be exceedingly rare, all of us are said to possess them to varying extents and to be capable of cultivating them if we so choose.

1. Determination. Buddhist psychology is very explicit and repetitive about the need for intense determination and effort in attaining exceptional levels of well-being. "Oh Monks, rouse up yet more effort" is a familiar exhortation in the teachings of the Buddha, who was very explicit that

It is you who must make the effort.
The masters only point the way.

The Buddha[4]

Buddhism makes no claims that the path to exceptional well-being is an easy one and regards the cultivation of unyielding determination as essential for overcoming the many difficulties that are encountered along the way.

2. Energy. One of the "five hindrances" which the practitioner must face and overcome is what the Buddhists have so picturesquely labeled "sloth and torpor".[5] Early in meditative practice there may be frequent experiences of low arousal, apathy, and sleepiness as the mind is deprived of its customary high levels of interaction, conversation, and stimulation. This claim has received recent support from empirical studies which show that beginning

meditators may sometimes display electrical brain wave activity consistent with early stages of sleep.[6] The student must learn how to cultivate and control arousal and energy so as to reduce dependence on outside stimuli and bring the mind to an optimal level of activation freed from the extremes of both lethargy and agitation.

3. Ethicality.

See yourself in others
Then whom can you hurt?
What harm can you do

The Buddha[4]

Ethicality as it is implied in Buddhism and other consciousness disciplines has been much misunderstood in popular thinking and institutionalized religion. In the consciousness disciplines, ethicality is recognized as a functional and skillful device which is essential for mental training, not be confused with externally imposed moralism or sanctions. No one deeply involved in an intensive mental training program can long remain ignorant of the deleterious effects of unethical behavior on mental activity and control. The practitioner soon comes to recognize that unethical behavior is motivated by powerful emotions and states, such as greed, anger, or dislike, which grip the mind and render it hard to control.[5,7] Unethical behavior stems from such motives and at the same time conditions and reinforces them, thus leaving the mind more deeply entrapped in counterproductive conditioning, which in turn produces still more disruptive states such as agitation and guilt.

The practice of ethicality, on the other hand, is designed to reverse this process and to extinguish those attachments and emotions which produce it. The final result is the mind of the arahat (the fully enlightened individual), which is said to be totally freed of such states and hence to be quite incapable of unethical behavior.[3,8,9]

Ethicality is a particularly clear example of the synergistic nature of the paramitas. That is, they necessarily serve both the practitioner and others so that selfish or sacrificial, you or me, zero sum, win-lose dichotomies become meaningless.

4. Truthfulness. The Buddha admonished his son to "never lie, even in jest." This stringent advice seems to reflect the Buddha's deep insight into the powerful influence of speech on our mental functioning and behavior.

Few of us are unaware of the effects of lying on our well-being. Like unethicality of which it is a part, lying reinforces the attachments, greed, and other unskillful behaviors which motivate us and result in further disrupting emotions such as guilt, agitation, and fear. Further lying and unethicality to protect the original lie frequently follow.

The impeccable practice of truthfulness, on the other hand, appears to serve many functions for the practitioner. It encourages ethicality, requires precise awareness of speech and motivation, enhances clear perception and memory of events which might otherwise be distorted by lying, frees the mind of guilt and fear of discovery, and consequently reduces agitation and worry.

The fully enlightened individual, freed from greed, attachment, anger, and other unskillful mind states, has neither desire nor need to distort the truth or act unethically. Those who are fully ethical have nothing to hide, and truthfulness, like all the other perfections, ultimately becomes a spontaneous and continuous expression of the arahat's essential nature.

Like a lovely flower,
Bright and fragrant
Are the fine and truthful words
Of the man who says what he means.

The Buddha[4]

5. Renunciation. Renunciation is an attribute somewhat foreign to our Western thinking and calls up images of asceticism, sacrifice, and the relinquishment of pleasure. However, a deeper understanding of the term as it is used in Buddhist psychology suggests that it implies the voluntary relinquishment of one source of pleasure in order to gain access to pleasures of a deeper and more permanent nature.

Contrary to our traditional Western models, Buddhist psychology recognizes four types of pleasure: sensory pleasures, pleasures arising from states of extreme concentration such as the jhanas, the pleasures of insight (i.e., the pleasure which arises as a result of training in insight meditation), and the pleasure of nirvana.[10,11] These pleasures are supposedly of increasing refinement, sensitivity, and degree.[5] The pleasures recognized by our Western models are confined to the first type, the sensory realm, which in Buddhist psychology includes mental pleasures such as memory and fantasy since in Buddhist psychology these are regarded as sensory inputs.

Renunciation can be viewed as a relinquishment of attachments to sense pleasures in order to cultivate the remaining three. This choice can also be seen in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Lower-order needs are primarily concerned with material objects and sensory stimulation, whereas higher-order needs are more concerned with internal self-produced stimulation and are held to be inherently more satisfying to the individual who has

experienced them.[12-14] Thus renunciation can be viewed as a voluntary relinquishment of lower-order needs in order to cultivate the higher ones.

Renunciation also facilitates a life-style of voluntary simplicity.[15] With deepening perceptual sensitivity, practitioners of the consciousness disciplines are said to recognize more clearly the disrupting effects of greed and attachment.[9] At the same time, they find themselves better able to generate a sense of well-being and positive emotions which formerly depended upon external possessions and stimuli. Greater pleasure is now found in a deepening sensitivity to the moment-to-moment flow of experience, and each moment, no matter what one is doing, becomes a source of rich and multifaceted stimulation. Thus from this perspective, renunciation is seen not as an ascetic practice demanding sacrifice and suffering, but rather as a skillful means for removing distractions to the attainment of higher pleasure.

In the individual who has perfected this quality the mind is said to be free of attachment and aversion, and therefore to no longer covet, grasp after, or avoid any experience. Rather, all situations and stimuli are viewed with equanimity, itself also one of the perfections, and the individual's sense of well-being is no longer so dependent on the environment.

If you are filled with desire
Your sorrows swell
Like the grass after the rain.
But if you subdue desires
Your sorrows fall from you
Like drops of water from a lotus flower.

The Buddha[4]

6. Patience.

At the end of the way is freedom.
Till then, patience

The Buddha[4]

Impatience reflects dissatisfaction with present experience and attachment to anticipated experience. The result is, as almost all of us are aware, an agitated mental state characterized by discomfort and fantasy. Yet the work of mental training is to open to, accept, and be fully aware of all experience, moment by moment, neither resisting what is present, fantasizing about what could be, nor comparing the two.[5] Brought to fruition, patience removed preoccupation with anticipated experience, thus allowing the mind to fully experience the present moment while remaining calm, full of equanimity, and fantasy free. In the words of the Tibetan yogi Milarepa,[16] "The

shortest road to freedom is the path of patience." In Buddhism patience also applies particularly to patience with others, a kind of nonjudgemental acceptance and forebearance. The person who can accept the present moment as it is can also accept others as they are.

7. Equanimity. The mind which responds with conditioned, automatic likes and dislikes is dominated by reactive pleasure and pain. Such a mind is at the mercy of its environment and is said to be turbulent, hard to control and concentrate, inconstant in purpose and direction, and insensistive in perception and insight.[3] With training, this conditioned reactivity and elaboration of strong affective responses is reduced, and the mind gradually becomes less reactive and more calm. As such, it becomes more easy to control and remains unperturbed in the face of an increasingly broad range of experience. Finally, it is said to be able to encompass all experiences and to allow "the one thousand beatific and one thousand horrible visions" to pass before it without disturbance. Of such a mind it is said,

Pleasure-pain
praise and blame
fame and shame
loss and gain
are all the same.

8. Generosity. The Buddha said that if we understood the power of generosity as deeply as he did, we would never sit down to a meal without sharing it.[5] Generosity has long been recognized as both means and end in all the major consciousness disciplines and great religions. It appears to be a powerful inhibitor of such unskillful mental habits as greed, attachment, and hatred. Buddhism describes three levels of generosity: beggarly, brotherly, and kingly. In beggarly giving, we give—with great hesitation and consideration—the worst and least valued of what we have. In brotherly giving, we share equally. In kingly giving, we unhesitatingly offer that which we most value for the pleasure and enjoyment of others.[5]

The fully enlightened individual, it is said, is no longer driven by egocentric motives of any kind. Rather, behavior is said to emerge spontaneously and appropriately in any situation in such a way as to most effectively serve and contribute to others. For such an individual, freed of unhealthy mental factors,[17] generosity is now the only possible response. As such, giving is no longer experienced as a sacrifice of any kind but rather as a natural and joyful expression of the perfections of loving kindness, renunciation, and ethicality which usually accompany it.

9. Loving Kindness. Buddhist psychology describes several practices for the cultivation of loving kindness. Some appear to be almost perfect analogues of certain behavior modification techniques such as systematic desensitization. However, instead of replacing anxiety with calm as desensitization usually does, the Buddhist practices of loving kindness replace unskillful states such as anger and hatred with loving kindness.[3,18] This suggests that some of the principles of behavior modification were identified 2500 years earlier than has usually been recognizd.[19]

One family of practices for the cultivation of this quality is described for use by advanced practitioners with extreme powers of concentration. Such people are said to be able to completely fill all awareness with the experience of loving kindness or other desired qualities. Four such qualities are particularly recommended, namely, universal loving kindness, universal compassion, sympathetic joy (joy which derives from the well-being of others), and another of the ten perfections, equanimity.[3,5] When these qualities are held alone and without fluctuation in the fully concentrated mind, they are said to result in extremely positive and beneficial states which are labeled the four "divine abodes." When the extreme concentration is released, the qualities tend to dissipate in part though they do result in certain trait changes including readier access to them in the future and restraint of inhibiting factors such as anger. When perfected, the quality of loving kindness is no longer dependent on entering specific states of consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously.

10. Wisdom. Like the other perfections, wisdom has many levels. A certain amount of it is considered necessary even to begin some type of mental training. Through this training, the mind is gradually brought under greater control, and perceptual distortions, unskillful habits, disruptive affects, and unskillful behavior of any type are gradually pared away. This leads to clearer perception and greater concentration, which in turn allow the recognition of still more subtle levels of unskillful habits that are pared away in their turn. The result is said to be a positive feedback cycle in which wisdom leads to the recognition of the need for removing unskillful habits and cultivating skillful ones, which in turn leads to greater wisdom.

One of the results is a deep insight and understanding, born of direct experience of what are called "the three marks of existence"—dukkha, anicca, and anatta. *Dukkha* is the recognition of the extent to which dissatisfaction and suffering pervade the untrained mind and of the fact that no possession or stimulation can completely or permanently remove it, a recognition analogous to the angst of the existentialists. *Anicca* is the recognition of impermanence—that everything is in constant flux, that nothing remains the same, and hence that there is no ultimate source of security in the world on which one can rely. *Anatta* refers to an insight that there is no permanent unchanging self or ego. Rather, what the advanced practitioner is said to recognize is that in the psyche there exists only an impersonal continuously changing flux of thoughts, emotions, and images.[19,11] The untrained mind identifies with these mental components and illusorily perceives them as evidence of the existence of a solid ego, much as a moviegoer perceives an illusory sense of continuity and motion even though there actually exists only a succession of still frames.

The deep recognition of these three marks of existence is said to result in a radical wrenching of one's cognitive system. Seeing the transitory and ultimately less than fully satisfying nature of sensory pleasures, as well as the illusory nature of our usual egoic identification, undermines egocentric motivation, thus enhancing renunciation and equanimity. Out of this wisdom springs a compassionate understanding of the counterproductive nature of the means by which people usually seek happiness but all too often only sow the seeds of further discontent. This in turn is said to lead to the desire to serve others and alleviate suffering wherever possible and the recognition that the perfection of the paramitas may be a strategic way of best fitting oneself for the task. With this realization, the individual has become a bodhisattva, one committed to both full enlightenment and selfless service to others.

Discussion

For ease of discussion the paramitas have been talked about as though they were separate and independent. Yet each largely rests upon and facilitates the others. Not one can be practiced and cultivated without thereby enhancing the others. Taken together, the *paramitas* point to an individual of prodigious self-refinement and mastery. To most of us in the West, the perfection of these qualities probably seems somewhat idealistic at best, if not totally unrealistic. The lack of any reference in our Western psychologies to the possibility of such attainments, together with a certain degree of cultural cynicism about human nature, makes such descriptions seem suspect. On the other hand, the perennial psychology has claimed for millennia that through mental training, such perfections not only are possible but are the highest goals to which any person can aspire and are also the most beneficial in terms of contributing to others.

The ten perfections as described here are taken from Buddhist psychology, yet similar qualities could be found at the esoteric core of most consciousness disciplines and great religions. As such they point to "the transcendent unity of religions," the fact that the highest goals of these traditions coverge on a common range of qualities and experiences, and a common picture of the

fully actualized individual: the prototype saint of all traditions, the arahat of Buddhism, the sage of Taoism, the jivanmukti of Hinduism, or the master of Zen.

In any case, whether or not we think such qualities are fully perfectable, they can act as signposts and guiding values for our own lives. In addition, a certain inspiration, humility, and appreciation come from knowing that over thousands of years, up to and including the present time, there have been literally millions of our fellow human beings who have chosen to commit their lives at the deepest possible level to the cultivation and perfection of these qualities and who have done so as a means of contributing to us all.

> For the unified mind in accord with the Way all self centered striving ceases.
>
> Sengtsan[20]

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