

## Six Worlds and Six Paramitas

Valerie Allison, Lay Minister, O.B.C.

*"As long as you learn how to look, daily life always points toward the Buddha Nature."*<sup>1</sup>

I remember visiting the Abbey and thinking: "That teaching just now was just exactly what I needed! How did they know?" right along with "Oh, I didn't do that right, I'm so embarrassed!" and "What time is it (how long until the end of this work period)?" Later, or "back in the world," I have thought "Some things, myself included, are just odd, stupid, and outside of the Buddhist teaching." Existence just didn't live up to my expectations.

So, what are my apparent choices? 1) Turn off my mind, relax and float downstream, 2) throw a tantrum, 3) eat, drink and be merry, 4) indulge my agony and despair for all it's worth, 5) cling to a teaching or person while accepting none into my heart, or 6) just get by, fake it if I have to, and maybe it will work out? All of the above. These six choices are one way to describe the six realms or worlds, otherwise known as the Wheel of Life, which turns by the force of craving (greed, anger and delusion).

But my expectations were *Buddhist*, weren't they? Now it seems to me that expectation is just another form of craving and non-acceptance. Looking at any one of the six realms, I see expectation plays a major role. Well then, to the extent that I seem to be stuck with expectations, as I toss about here on the sometimes mild and sometimes rollercoaster-rough sea of samsara, how can I make use of them? It turns out that for every realm I find myself in, a Paramita, a means of reaching the other shore, arises naturally out of meditation. With the Paramitas, I have the choice of transforming the situation that

is gripping me, and receiving its teaching. This applies even when the situation or question intensifies greatly and defies the expectations closest to my heart (such as the expectation that a *really good* trainee will never make a *really big* mistake).

The following correlations between the six realms, their kōans and Paramitas, were offered in a monk's lecture. These terms can seem strange, so I have taken examples from my experience to illustrate them.

Realm: Heaven. Kōan: Stupidity. Paramita: Reflection.

One morning, having arrived in San Francisco late the night before, I looked out the windows to the many-layered roofs and walls, rusted metal accidental sculptures, the sunlight hitting some planes and dividing them from the shade, and my heart felt clean and full of acceptance and love for the plain surfaces. The air washed my lungs with sunlight and sky. My family got up and we noticed that there was no coffee in the house; we lolligagged on out to the car to head for an ATM and a coffee shop. At the corner we dimly and happily waited, giving another car its due right of way. For a while the other car didn't move, then it headed our way, slowly.

"She's going to drive right into us," Heidi said calmly. It was a cluttered intersection and I wasn't ready to shoot out into it. We were somewhat transfixed by the car coming toward us. It was possible she could complete the turn without hitting our car. By the time I realized for sure that her car would hit us, it was too late to put in the clutch and shift into reverse. We waved our hands and shouted out the open window "STOP! GO BACK!" The driver looked at us dimly and not unhappily, and then with surprise as her car slowly crunched into our car. Still she didn't stop, and her car continued its path, creating a deep dent along the entire side of our car. I told her to stop again and finally she did. She backed



up, taking our chrome with her. I will come back to this story in a minute.

Off and on at classes with monks there have been some pointed remarks about the state of heaven and its dangers, its kōan of stupidity. I thought this couldn't apply to me because I don't "have everything." How could being deeply in debt and just barely maintaining a household as a single mom be called heaven by anyone's standards? But after this little experience in the city I began to think about it, starting with the question, what does this event have to teach me? Karma does come out of left field, yes, but I felt there was something I could learn from it. Even though the accident was not my fault, could I have averted it? With quick responses and the awareness that anything is possible, could I have shifted into reverse, honked the horn to wake the other driver? It dawned on me that the state I was in was a version of heaven; that heaven for me does not require having everything, just the *feeling* of having everything, being enveloped in that feeling to the extent that I sort of float.

My pleasant mood of passivity, and my refusal to believe that someone would so casually drive right into me, played a role in the unfolding of events. A funny thing is, whatever her case was, the other driver's mistake was not that different from mine. I guess I could say that for that moment, we were perfect for each other. "When you are training, the world trains with you. When you are not training, everything seems to be an obstacle."<sup>2</sup>

I thought that I was ceasing from evil, and I assumed that was enough. Stupidity! Here the Paramita of reflection or meditation can help get the feet on the ground where they can be of service, in full alertness to what is going on around me. Peace and joy are the natural fruits of meditation, but first of all, they are the fruits and not the tree. And if I depend only on the fruits, the supply will run out—but not before a certain amount of drunkenness will result from the fermentation.

Reflection, like a brisk splash of cold water, puts a fresh, more clear-sighted perspective on the situation.

Realm: Asura "demi-gods" Kōan: Ambition, Anger.  
Paramita: Morality

Back to the auto accident for another example. Of course we stopped the car and jumped out. Filled with surprise and adrenaline, I exclaimed "*What is the matter with you?*" Suddenly very alert and on my toes, I got her name and license number, but as I was calling the police, she drove away. Invitations to frustration continued: The phone operator directed me to the closest police station. Running on high charge, I strode into the police station where they informed me that in San Francisco they "don't *do* non-injury accident reports anymore. Let your insurance company earn those premiums and investigate it themselves." So I turned to the phone in the lobby. Calling my insurance company in small town Mt. Shasta, the operator informed them (even though I had given my telephone credit card number) that this was Valerie Allison calling from a correctional facility and would they accept the charges! Apparently not. I thought, just what my reputation needs! encouraging even more adrenaline. I strode out of the lobby to look for another phone. On my way to the car I ran full force into a post with my shoulder but I barely let that break my stride. "Slow down!" my kids laughed. "I don't feel like it!" I said vigorously.

Thinking about this later in connection with the teaching of the six worlds, all of these things were invitations to anger, the Asura realm following on the heels of heaven. In this particular case I didn't actually get angry. I did experience a sort of fire-breathing dragon, or brave-determined warrior sort of state, an overcharged will, an adrenaline-laced determination. "I am going to take care of this right away, and nothing, not even telephone poles, will stop me!" However, many times I have jumped into the frustration of the myriad Catch-22 situations the world offers. The Asura realm can be



a lot like having my foot on the gas when the car has no wheels, and then shouting angrily as well, to try and change things. In my own experience, it is a state where although I am conscious that the Eternal exists, somewhere, the self barges around with the notion that daily life should reflect this knowledge in easy, happy, obvious terms.

Some additional samples of thought to be found in this area of daily life Asura realm:

*It's not fair! I don't deserve this! I know what a good experience is like and I am going to get it back. I'll just push harder. I will put my foot down until I get what I want. I'll just meditate all day and be There by tomorrow or at least by next week. I'll just fast. I'll just take what is rightfully mine. I've had a hard day and I deserve such-and-such. I do have a cold but if I take some medicine and keep my mouth shut, I can still go to the gathering. I don't have to put up with these mosquitoes! I'll just swat the next mosquito that lands on me, as a warning. I will be the best such-and-so ever; I'll show them! If I have to step on a few toes, well I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I'm going to get what I deserve.*

This reminds me of the words of a gypsy curse, "May you be involved in a legal battle in which you are convinced that you are right." I have no control over how the Dharma manifests itself. Knowing that Nirvana exists does not help me too much if I am busy throwing tantrums, running into brick walls, back-stabbing, nose-twisting, manipulating or "intelligently" debating. My powerful blindness or angry determination to get what I think I need or to "get enlightened" kindly throws me smack into a wall of suffering, embarrassment or other karmic consequence.

When I feel this roaring response to a situation, I know that in some sense I have lost my wits. I still use the energy to do what needs to be done, but I have to give the floor to the Precepts, and I am so glad that there are words of the teaching since I am temporarily blind to the spirit.

I think the inclination to resist the Precepts is pretty strong in general; I know it has been for me. As a young person, I wanted to think of myself as relying only on the great ungraspable truth beyond words and not be so dense as to require the map of the Precepts. Besides, I thought, if I followed the letter of the Precepts, I would look like a self-righteous idiot. Later I saw that the Precept against being proud of oneself and against devaluing others addresses the self-righteous (self wrong-us) part, and there is no need to make a big show about attempting to follow the Precepts. But in the meantime I continued to stumble around, breaking Precepts and reaping consequences. And sometimes when I found myself in the middle of a mess, I would give in and check the map of the Precepts and of course, in big and small ways I had broken them up and down, this way and that.

Sometimes ambition is the predominant quality of the Asura state. An example on a small scale I remember from long ago: Sitting space in the meditation hall was very limited, and some people had to sit out in the hall or in the room on the other side of the stairway. I thought this wasn't as good as sitting in the *real* meditation hall, and I thought "I wish one or two of those ('relatively uncouth') visitors would leave, then I would be sure of getting a spot in the meditation hall!" And what to my wondering eyes should appear but the sudden business that required *me* to be the one to have to leave. Instant karma?! The lesson is in the eye of the beholder. It is not necessary to say that my wish "caused" the business to come up. However, it could be called a teaching (Dharmic coincidence) that I found myself in the exact same situation that I had wished upon others. You can be sure I never made that wish again.

This kind of daily life hint lets me know where I've gone off course. Or, if I see the possible storm on the horizon, I can pick up the map of the Precepts to guide me to the return of my wits. This is the beginning of the arising of the Paramita of morality, the pure and loving speech of the body, mind and



will. It's such a quiet answer that it can be the last place I look, but sooner or later I see that it's the most efficient route. However tempting it is, it ultimately doesn't work to put my apparent needs above the long-sighted truths spoken by the Three Treasures. The Precepts speak clearly of the Path, and I can let them speak louder than my expectations.

Realm: Animal. Kōan: Intense Propensities. Paramita: Intuitive Wisdom.

After a while of stomping around, or revving my engine, throwing tantrums, getting embarrassed, et cetera, I naturally run out of gas. Then I take whatever is available that has some glimmer of pleasure. Sample thoughts:

*If I can't have such and such, I can at least have this physical thing that feels/tastes/looks pretty good. Fine distinctions don't matter when something feels this good. Tomorrow I will worry about fine distinctions. Enlightenment may be fine for those who are close to it but right now it's great to have just a little such-and-such. I exercise a lot and my appetites are vigorous; I am healthy! I should take advantage of it!*

In some years I have been surprised to find intense propensities arising with seemingly no wish of my own. I tried to set down rules and I fought these propensities with mixed results and very little success. The gather-ye-rosebuds-while-ye-may impulse can be a very strong voice. I remember one dream experience about ten years ago where I said, essentially, "I am being too virtuous! Will there be no pleasure?" A kindness of spirit seemed to humor me and my body was flooded with exquisite flowing streams of exhilaration and peace. The knowledge that this experience could exist never left me completely in many years' struggle with the animal realm. Much later, in compassion the teaching was offered to me: transform the lust into the great bright light.

Even though intellectually we might accept the teaching that we are inherently unique, inherently made of Buddha Nature, it still sounds funny that the answer to the animal world is wisdom; until wisdom is defined as the intuitive knowledge of the Buddha Nature. This Paramita may start as a background niggling, a response to the confusion and lack of self-worth that daily life seems to offer, a response that differs: "But, what about my secret perfect side?" At introductory retreats I sometimes see a sort of vigorous inward nod of agreement and relief when the teaching of our inherent Buddha Nature is mentioned.

This clue expands into the discovery of an "inestimable vastness and wealth of compassion, love, wisdom, benevolence; this discernment of Buddha Nature."<sup>3</sup> This Paramita is the Prajnaparamita we mention and bow with every morning. I have seen it translated as the meeting, face-to-face.

Realm: Hell. Kōan: Acute Suffering. Paramita: Patience.

The next realm in the cycle of the six worlds is the hell world. This is of course, not just having your head torn off or tearing someone else apart, although these will suffice. As with all the realms, it can have many levels, as does the natural arising of its Paramita, patience. Thinking about my first hells in childhood, it occurs to me that even an unconscious effort in the right direction calls to some level of receiving the Truth. As a little kid I did not know that one of the six modes of existence was arising when I ran out of the house in (what for me then was) rage and grief, what could be called hell. I sat in the tree house or on the back porch, working off the steam. I stayed there for what seemed like hours, until I began to shiver and get hungry and it was obvious that night was almost here. Then I thought the equivalent of "Oh well, whatever," and went back in the house, where no one seemed to have noticed my defection. I imagine this is a common experience in growing up, and I only recently realized that it was a form of meditation, with a certain level of the arising of



patience, the Paramita that transforms hell into training, all-acceptance and gratitude.

Looking at later hells, I think that when there is a conscious attempt at some kind of spiritual path, the components intensify. For example, when I hadn't come to the Abbey yet, but I knew that I was searching for enlightenment, I listened to a Jnana Yoga friend and teacher (with the primary kōan of "Who am I?"). Coincidentally, he also told me that his mantra was:

*I take Refuge in the Buddha  
I take Refuge in the Dharma  
I take Refuge in the Sangha*

and he said this with such peace and conviction that, although I didn't know what all of the words meant, I felt respect for their power. Anyway, I knew that spiritual people meditate, so I would go out in the woods in back of the house and sit on a stump and see what would happen. I didn't know what to make of it when each time I did this, the cloudy sky parted and rays of sunlight came to my little spot like a corny movie, but I liked it. During that season, a time came when I was betrayed on a very gut level by a close friend.

I ran, full of an even more 'grown-up' rage and grief, out into the night, inwardly speaking "I just want to die!" Looking up at the night sky full of stars, it seemed that although I would not commit suicide, I could let go of my little self, and my little broken cage of a heart could open up and let the whole sky in. Many times during the following years I went to the sky for comfort and even the moon seemed truly compassionate. Later on, I called it the night sky benediction factor. It is one level of the meaning of the word patience, this sky-wide compassion and freedom in the possibility of no-self. At whatever level of training I enter it, hell offers me this compassionate beyond-ness, and I can go on. The nice thing about losing "everything" is that the Buddha Nature stands out bright and clear. It's a door of opportunity to taste the

freedom of the *having nothing, wanting nothing, and knowing nothing* (a phrase attributed to Meister Eckhart).

Later I experienced worse hells and deeper hollows of hitting rock bottom as I am learning more about this starry clean patience by heart. Now it seems the patience often meets the hint of hell and transforms it before it becomes all-out hell.

Going for a walk can be a practical application of patience. I remember another time when my "rough" life circumstances seemed to have no solution. I went to bed with the sincere question, What do I do? And the kind answer came during the night: Go for a walk. Given the desperation of my circumstances, this almost seemed like a joke, but I believed it and I did go for a walk and let peace and patience have their say.

Sometimes hells seem like little storms in a teacup, and they often make me smile, my grouchy thoughts and subsequent self-hatred are offered to me like choices on a computer screen:

Hell Folder \_\_Open  
\_\_Cancel  
Files \_\_call that person a phony  
\_\_look at that person over there, staring rudely  
\_\_that person has a problem  
\_\_what a jerk I am to think these things  
\_\_aaagh!  
\_\_WHY ME?!

Luckily as a trainee I can close the file and cancel the option at least before opening the mouth. Sometimes foolishness presents itself more clamorously than others, but there is patience. I trust we share the mutual grin-and-bear-it burden of the small self. At least it has a lot of reruns and so it gets easier to turn it down or go beyond it, something that is required daily.



I can create hell any time by not accepting what is in my daily life begging bowl. I can invest heavily in something different than I am getting. But over time, these expectations teach me by trial and error, that I can live a lifetime without status, and many days without "the necessities," but I don't live a day without Buddha Nature. To remind myself of this, I sometimes recall a definition of expectation that I stumbled upon in Roger's Thesaurus: Expectation is the absence of wonder. This saying can also be helpful in the hungry ghost realm.

Realm: Hungry Ghost. Kōan: Obsession, craving.  
Paramita: Giving.

Expectation functions in this realm by cutting off the ability to receive. I think almost everyone has experienced looking forward to something for so long, that when it comes it just doesn't seem like so much fun, or doesn't even seem real.

The most obvious symptom of this realm is thinking that *something else* is what you need. I remember one of my first hungry ghost decisions. I was about thirteen, in the car on a hot summer's day with my family who were "nowhere, man." I stayed in the car and let them go into the mall. The parking lot was depressing in the baking sun, so many acres of cars and no trees and I felt miserably trapped. "If only Robin Hood (fittingly enough, that was the boy's real name) liked me, none of this would matter." Ding ding. Variations on this "If only..." pattern are the hungry ghost theme song.

In this state, even if I get what I think I want, I don't think I really have it. Needless to say, this formula is no fun at all. Like the handful of water grabbed out of the river, once I get it in my clutches, nothing looks the same as it did when I was wanting it. Even in the presence of the object of my obsession, whether it was comfort, a person, or a teacher, I remained excruciatingly aware, oftentimes, of my over-all

lack of comfort and completeness and the feeling of quiet desperation hovered like an inevitable fate.

The way the Paramita of giving eased itself into my notice started with overwhelming flavors of hungry-ghost influenced self. As long as I didn't have whatever it was that would fix my life, I could become more and more suitable and deserving by being such a sweet and smiling and loving person. Of course I wouldn't respect anyone who fell for this act. But I didn't realize that. In the meantime, there opened up some unavoidable occasions (child near death, etc.), at home and among acquaintances, to give wholeheartedly. There were also the continual gentle reminders from Buddhism, such as Dōgen's "If one would understand tenderness, one must speak to others whilst thinking that one loves all living things as if they were one's own children," and "If a kind word be spoken in his absence the impression will be a deep one. Tenderness can have a revolutionary impact on the mind of man."<sup>24</sup>

As the anguish of the never-having (hungry ghost) condition becomes more clear to me, over the years, the opportunity for intuitive, meditation-minded giving unfolds. I get called upon to empathize, and in order to do that I have to learn acceptance. It does not matter that the two year old is being illogical or the six year old will not get in the car. It cannot matter that on a conscious level they might not even realize that I am giving anything, but in order for our daily life to proceed somewhat smoothly, I will have to know how to reach them, what their perspective feels like. Like the experience of knowing the child who is both other and not-other, when you try your wings of empathy on others, the line between self and others fades. And then what is there to crave that is not already part of you via the Buddha Nature?

Again in the last place I'd look, I find the Paramita or skill that answers my inadequacy or needy hungry ghost state is *giving*, born of meditation. The acceptance that maybe began in hell is the ground for a large part of this giving. The



recipient (whether a child, a lawn, or an acquaintance in pain) becomes the Beloved if only for a moment and there opens the way for obsession to dissolve into a joy of compassion and appreciation. Great Compassion is with us. It doesn't belong to anyone. "The Gift of Truth excels all other gifts,"<sup>5</sup> in every way, and acceptance cleanses the begging bowl, lets the begging bowl of the hara be clear-hearted.

Realm: Human. Kōan: Violent egotism. Paramita: Vigor, Wholeheartedness

I think of this as the *comme si comme ça* world. A little of this plus 'me,' and a little of that plus 'me.' Sometimes there are good friends, good movies, good food, good concerts and sometimes people love us. Sometimes I didn't get a good night's sleep and the baby is cranky and the car won't start. Sometimes all of these things happen on the same day. As the tongue-in-cheek saying goes, life is a sad and beautiful thing.

The temptation in the human world is to try to ignore the dilemma of suffering since it seems to be *sort of* balanced out by the occasions for joy; or to do just enough training to ease the pain, or to pretend to train because I don't really feel willing to go the whole nine yards. This came up vividly for me one day in meditation as I saw how my little mind was pretending to be behaving, pretending to be in the presence of the Buddha when all the while, there I stood in my naked pretense in front of the Buddha, in plain sight.

The Paramita for this human kōan is wholeheartedness, vigor, or earnestness. Sometimes I seem to be operating under a bed of clouds, layers of resistance. That is when it helps to turn up the fire under my training: to step it up a little, to sit twice a day for a few minutes, instead of just once, or to work on ceasing from breaking my most frequently broken Precept. As a monk said, the Lord provides the quality, we provide the quantity. "It is the amount of effort that conditions the understanding of Buddhism received."<sup>6</sup> In the times when

I have had the wherewithal to listen to this advice, I have found that my energy is much more efficiently used by these little step-ups than it is when I am allowing myself to be dragged around by the ups and downs of my human self.

Here's a sample of thought from the human world:

*Well I'm actually all right. I have a sense of humor. No, I'm a smart aleck. I'm casual enough not to be bound by constant house-cleaning. No, I'm a slob. I just have a spot of trouble, a temporary set back. Let's trade in our car, build a deck, go on vacation. It never hurts to stay in shape. Honey, what time is it, aren't we late? Some dog killed one of the chickens. I think I'm going to be sick. Why are we going to dinner with them anyway? I have a big presentation tomorrow. I think I'll do well as long as I get some sleep. Can't we get out of it?*

One of the major drawbacks of this state is believing in the self. "I'm like this, I'm like that. I'll try to be more like that." We are constantly changing clothes in the wardrobe of self. The emperor's wardrobe. [A note for readers from other cultures: this is a reference from the story of the Emperor's New Clothes where an Emperor walks proudly down the street in invisible clothes and a child is the only person to point out his condition.] Until the child of our meditation bursts like a blazing fire through our foggy wanderings to say "Hey! You aren't any of those things and I'm not either."

In the *Dhammapada* the Buddha refers to wholeheartedness, or earnestness as a great treasure which helps dissolve vanity. And Dōgen says that when training we should use the same energy "we would employ if our hair were to catch fire."<sup>7</sup> I always thought, gulp, okay, but it sounds kind of uncomfortable for a daily thing. But I don't think he meant that fear had to be a motivation, only that there is no time for academic questions about the need to act immediately, to be thoroughly and wholeheartedly engaged in training, NOW! It is not always easy to locate this Paramita



of vigor or wholeheartedness. In times of slackness I have found it a great help to get in touch with people who are already vigorously awake to training, namely the Sangha at the Abbey. The Sangha's example is contagious, and I come home with a glad "oh, yes, that's right, now I remember." Dōgen goes on to say, "We must guard against weakness of body, our effort being as that of the Buddha when raising his foot."<sup>8</sup> This kind of vibrant wholeheartedness is a relative of the energy with which a bean plant arrives above ground or with which the new bright green tips on an evergreen's branches appear in the spring. It is an upward blazing ease.

Through all of these seasons I keep doing my never-faultless best to take Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. When I look at my shenanigans, I am reminded of one more reason I owe a great debt to the loving-kindness of the Sangha. Fortunately, the heart of the Sangha is more than big enough to embrace all within it. In all cases the six worlds of our daily life have a good heart for us, and teach us. The more one allows oneself access to these avenues of transformation called the Paramitas, the more deep and shining and heart-felt they show the Teaching to be. "It is because it is eternally here that the wind of Buddhism makes the earth golden and the rivers run with ghee."<sup>9</sup>

#### Summary of Correlations:

<u>Realm</u>	<u>Kōan</u>	<u>Paramita</u>
Heaven	Stupidity	Reflection
Asura	Ambition, anger	Preceptual
Animal	Intense propensities	Behavior (Morality)
Hell	Acute suffering	Intuitive Wisdom
Hungry Ghost	Obsession, craving	Patience
Human	Violent egotism	Giving, Generosity
		Vigor,
		Wholeheartedness

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#### Notes

- 1, 2 and 3. From lectures at Shasta Abbey.
4. Great Master Dōgen, *Shushōgi* (*What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment*) in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd ed. rev., by Rōshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 160.
5. From the title page of Nārada Thera, *The Dhammapada*, 3rd ed. (B.M.S. publication, 1978).
6. Dōgen, "Gyakudō-yōjinshu" ("Important Aspects of Zazen") in *Zen is Eternal Life*, by Jiyu-Kennett, p. 134.
7. Ibid., p. 124.
8. Ibid.
9. Dōgen, "Genjō-kōan" ("The Problem of Everyday Life") in *Shōbōgenzō in Zen is Eternal Life*, p. 175.

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