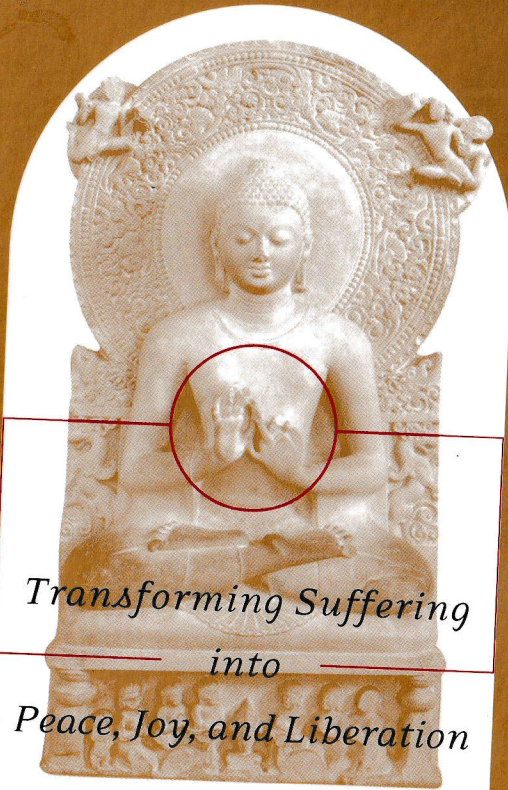


# The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat  
Hanh writes  
with the voice  
of the Buddha."

—Sogyal Rinpoche



*Transforming Suffering  
into  
Peace, Joy, and Liberation*

**THICH  
NHAT  
HANH**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *The Six Paramitas*

The Six Paramitas are a teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. *Paramita* can be translated as “perfection” or “perfect realization.” The Chinese character used for paramita means “crossing over to the other shore,” which is the shore of peace, non-fear, and liberation. The practice of the paramitas can be the practice of our daily lives. We are on the shore of suffering, anger, and depression, and we want to cross over to the shore of well-being. To cross over, we have to do something, and that is called paramita. We return to ourselves and practice mindful breathing, looking at our suffering, anger, and depression, and smile. Doing this, we overcome our pain and cross over. We can practice “perfection” every day.

Every time you take one mindful step, you have a chance to go from the land of sorrow to the land of joy. The Pure Land is available right here and now. The Kingdom of God is a seed in us. If we know how to plant that seed in moist soil, it will become a tree, and birds will come and take refuge. Please practice crossing over to the other shore whenever you feel the need. The Buddha said, “Don’t just hope for the other shore to come to you. If you want to cross over to the other shore, the shore of safety, well-being, non-fear, and non-anger, you have to swim or row across. You have to make an effort.” This effort is the practice of the Six Paramitas.

## THE SIX PARAMITAS

### *The Six Paramitas*

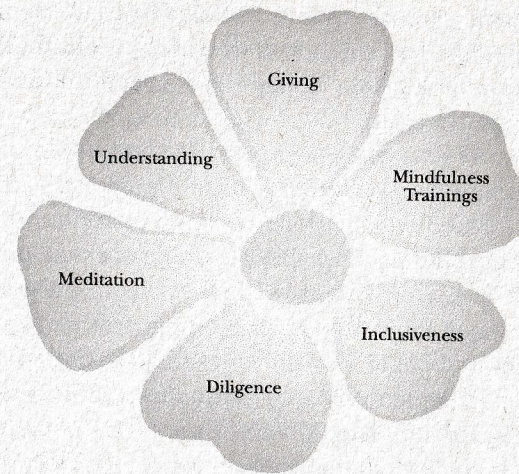


Figure Four

- (1) *dana paramita* – giving, offering, generosity.
- (2) *shila paramita* – precepts or mindfulness trainings.
- (3) *kshanti paramita* – inclusiveness, the capacity to receive, bear, and transform the pain inflicted on you by your enemies and also by those who love you.
- (4) *virya paramita* – diligence, energy, perseverance.
- (5) *dhyana paramita* – meditation.
- (6) *prajña paramita* – wisdom, insight, understanding.

Practicing the Six Paramitas helps us to reach the other shore — the shore of freedom, harmony, and good relationships.

The first practice of crossing over is the perfection of giving, *dana paramita*. To give means first of all to offer joy, happi-



ness, and love. There is a plant, well-known in Asia — it is a member of the onion family, and it is delicious in soup, fried rice, and omelets — that grows back in less than twenty-four hours every time you cut it. And the more you cut it, the bigger and stronger it grows. This plant represents *dana paramita*. We don't keep anything for ourselves. We only want to give. When we give, the other person might become happy, but it is certain that we become happy. In many stories of the Buddha's former lives, he practices *dana paramita*.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest gift we can offer anyone is our true presence. A young boy I know was asked by his father, "What would you like for your birthday?" The boy hesitated. His father was wealthy and could give him anything he wanted. But his father spent so much time making money that he was rarely at home. So the boy said, "Daddy, I want you!" The message was clear. If you love someone, you have to produce your true presence for him or for her. When you give that gift, you receive, at the same time, the gift of joy. Learn how to produce your true presence by practicing meditation. Breathing mindfully, you bring body and mind together. "Darling, I am here for you" is a mantra you can say when you practice this *paramita*.

What else can we give? Our stability. "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel solid." The person we love needs us to be solid and stable. We can cultivate our stability by breathing in and out, practicing mindful walking, mindful sitting, and enjoy living deeply in every moment. Solidity is one of the characteristics of *nirvana*.

What else can we offer? Our freedom. Happiness is not possible unless we are free from afflictions — craving, anger, jealousy, despair, fear, and wrong perceptions. Freedom is one of the characteristics of *nirvana*. Some kinds of happiness actually destroy our body, our mind, and our relation-

<sup>1</sup> See any of the translations of the *Jataka Tales*.

ships. Freedom from craving is an important practice. Look deeply into the nature of what you think will bring you happiness and see whether it is, in fact, causing those you love to suffer. You have to know this if you want to be truly free. Come back to the present moment, and touch the wonders of life that are available. There are so many wholesome things that can make us happy right now, like the beautiful sunrise, the blue sky, the mountains, the rivers, and all the lovely faces around us.

What else can we give? Our freshness. "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh." You can breathe in and out three times and restore your flowerness right away. What a gift!

What else can we offer? Peace. It is wonderful to sit near someone who is peaceful. We benefit from her peace. "Breathing in, I see myself as still water. Breathing out, I reflect things as they are." We can offer those we love our peace and lucidity.

What else can we offer? Space. The person we love needs space in order to be happy. In a flower arrangement, each flower needs space around it in order to radiate its true beauty. A person is like a flower. Without space within and around her, she cannot be happy. We cannot buy these gifts at the market. We have to produce them through our practice. And the more we offer, the more we have. When the person we love is happy, happiness comes back to us right away. We give to her, but we are giving to ourselves at the same time.

Giving is a wonderful practice. The Buddha said that when you are angry at someone, if you have tried everything and still feel angry, practice *dana paramita*. When we are angry, our tendency is to punish the other person. But when we do, there is only an escalation of the suffering. The Buddha proposed that instead, you send her a gift. When you feel angry, you won't want to go out and buy a gift, so take the opportunity now to prepare the gift while you are not



angry. Then, when all else fails, go and mail that gift to her, and amazingly, you'll feel better right away. The same is true for nations. For Israel to have peace and security, the Israelis have to find ways to ensure peace and security for the Palestinians. And for the Palestinians to have peace and security, they also have to find ways to ensure peace and security for the Israelis. You get what you offer. Instead of trying to punish the other person, offer him exactly what he needs. The practice of giving can bring you to the shore of well-being very quickly.

When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That is the message he is sending. If you are able to see that, offer him what he needs — relief. Happiness and safety are not an individual matter. His happiness and safety are crucial for your happiness and safety. Wholeheartedly wish him happiness and safety, and you will be happy and safe also.

What else can we offer? Understanding. Understanding is the flower of practice. Focus your concentrated attention on one object, look deeply into it, and you'll have insight and understanding. When you offer others your understanding, they will stop suffering right away.

The first petal of the flower of the paramitas is dana paramita, the practice of giving. What you give is what you receive, more quickly than the signals sent by satellite. Whether you give your presence, your stability, your freshness, your solidarity, your freedom, or your understanding, your gift can work a miracle. Dana paramita is the practice of love.

The second practice is the perfection of the precepts, or mindfulness trainings, shila paramita. The Five Mindfulness Trainings help protect our body, mind, family, and society.

The First Mindfulness Training is about protecting the

lives of human beings, animals, vegetables, and plants. To protect other beings is to protect ourselves. To prevent the exploitation by humans of other humans and of nature. It is also the practice of general compassion to protect children and adults from sexual abuse and to protect the happiness of individuals and families. Families that have been broken by sexual misconduct. When you practice the Third Mindfulness Training, you protect families and couples. You help them stay safe. The Fourth Mindfulness Training is about listening and loving speech. The Fifth Mindfulness Training is about mindful consumption.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings is a form of love, and a form of giving. It assures the protection of our family and society. Shila paramita is the gift that we can make to our society, our family, and the people we love. The most precious gift we can offer is our life. Practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings. If you practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we protect ourselves and the people we love. When we practice shila paramita, we offer the precious gift of life.

Let us look deeply together into the causes of suffering, individually and collectively. If we do, I am sure we will see that the Five Mindfulness Trainings are the best medicine for the malaise of our times. Even if we are not the equivalent of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, if I see someone receive and practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings, I feel so happy — for him, his family, and myself — because I know that the Five Mindfulness Trainings are the most concrete way to practice mindfulness. We need a Sangha around us in order to practice.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Five Mindfulness Trainings, see *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, *The Right Speech and Right Action*. See also *Thich Nhat Hanh: The Way of Zen*, *Be Possible* and *The Mindfulness Survival Kit*.