

These wonderful teachings stand as a monument to the compassionate heart of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche." —Pema Chödrön

THE BODHISATTVA PATH OF WISDOM & COMPASSION



CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA



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Exertion

Exertion means being consistent, continuous, and faithful to the practice. Being consistent allows you to have a sense of joy, rather than seeing practice as a duty that you have to perform. The practice of dharma is getting into your blood. . . . You begin to regard exertion as a part of your basic, natural activity, rather than as something that is imposed on you.

THE FOURTH paramita is exertion. It has been said in the texts that without exertion, all the previous paramitas are hopeless. Exertion is the most important paramita for you to practice in order to achieve the bodhisattva ideal, and awaken absolute and relative bodhichitta. Exertion is regarded as one of the best ways to speed up the journey to enlightenment. The paramita of exertion is *tsöndrü* in Tibetan, and *virya* in Sanskrit. *Tsön* means “hard work,” or “persistence,” and *drü* means “getting used to,” or “becoming comfortable with”; so the basic idea of *tsöndrü* is becoming familiar with, or getting used to hard work.

The paramita of exertion, or *virya* paramita, is described as a good horse, joyful and free from laziness. Exertion is connected with the idea of how to organize our lives as practitioners on the path. The definition of exertion is not giving up, and the nature of exertion is being delighted in the practice. The analogy for exertion is a diamond, which is indestructible. This indestructibility, this hard-core-ness, is what allows you to proceed on your path.

According to Shantideva and others, exertion is a way of developing an

attitude of delight toward the path. When you feel delighted with what you are doing, working hard evolves effortlessly. At the same time, you still have to encourage yourself further. It is like falling in love: when you fall in love, you have to maintain your love affair, no matter what obstacles come to you. Likewise, when the first splash of delight comes along, you don't just sit and gaze at it and hope for the best, but you maintain it and develop it.

Although you might have generosity, discipline, and patience, without exertion you do not achieve anything. Without exertion, you lapse into laziness, stupor, and slothfulness. Exertion helps you to destroy the whole range of egohood, of viewing solidity as a big deal. It helps you to transcend, or go beyond, all of that. Exertion is joyful and enthusiastic. It is large-scale enthusiasm rather than small splashes, such as when good ideas come up and you get excited about them.

Exertion is continuing what has happened already in the previous three paramitas and taking delight in continuing. If you put together generosity, discipline, and patience, they amount to exertion. As you go along, you are constantly building on previous paramitas, and collecting new ones in the process. The paramitas begin to pile up in that way. The idea is to remember to practice one of the paramitas, or all of them at once, during your daily life. As long as you remember to handle yourself in that way, then you are practicing properly, and you are completely steeped in Buddhism. If you begin to make a separation between dharmic practice and regular, ordinary life, there is a problem.

One way to look at the paramitas is in terms of what each of them overcomes. Discipline overcomes passion, and exertion overcomes laziness. That is the difference between discipline and exertion. With generosity, you are trying to overcome stinginess and selfishness, and with patience, you are trying to overcome aggression. That is how it works. So each of the paramitas has its counterpart.

Another way to look at the paramitas is in terms of how a paramita is paired up with either shamatha or vipashyana. In the development of the paramitas, shamatha and vipashyana alternate six times. So it is shamatha (generosity), vipashyana (discipline), shamatha (patience), vipashyana (exertion), shamatha (meditation), and vipashyana (prajna). In this process, the residues of shamatha and vipashyana from the previous paramitas are not rejected, but the underlying, heightened point of each

of the previous paramitas continues. At the level of exertion, we have a lot of residues piled up already, but at the same time we are working on a particular, very powerful point.

The paramitas are mostly postmeditation practices. You cannot practice generosity in the meditation hall; you have to go out and be generous to somebody. You cannot just visualize being generous; that does not really fulfill anything. So paramita practice is postmeditation experience. With paramita practice, the actual sitting-meditation technique does not really change very much. It is more a question of how you deal with the feedback coming to you from the world outside. Your growing sophistication might take the form of shamatha or vipashyana. With shamatha meditation, you have a level of steadiness, and in postmeditation, it is a question of how much you can maintain that steadiness. Shamatha is first thought, and vipashyana is second thought. Shamatha is usually the instigator; it is how well you have been trained, and it is your education. With shamatha, you come across as a good, educated person.

SMILING AT OBSTACLES

The ultimate meaning of tsöndrü is joy in practice. Exertion means appreciating virtue, rather than just working hard. Holding on to seriousness can be a form of self-protection. You do not want to face facts, whatever the situation may be. But when you accept the pain, or obstacle, it is like tonglen: there is the possibility of joy. With exertion, you appreciate virtue because you begin to feel that what you are doing is right and best, and it feels good to do it. For instance, you never get tired of taking showers, seeing the sunlight, or eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You feel that those things are an integral part of your life; therefore, you accept them.

In a lot of situations, there seem to be obstacles trying to push us backward. Nonetheless, with exertion, we do not give up, and we do not expect others to support us as an automatic response. It is quite the contrary. We try to keep going and to become completely fearless, so that our fear becomes fearlessness. We never lose heart and never look for alternatives unless our situation is really, absolutely, fundamentally, totally, utterly unworkable. Otherwise we do not give in or give up.

You cannot expect an easy journey, an easy situation, or easy circumstances. For instance, Milarepa had a lot of problems and difficulties in

his life. His teacher would not give him teachings, and when he returned to his home, everything was devastated. There was no easy journey for Milarepa, but he still managed to be a happy person, a happy yogi. In the Kagyü tradition, as well as in the general Buddhist tradition, we try to rejoice whenever there is an obstacle. We try to regard an obstacle as something that makes us smile, and each setback creates a further smile. We keep going in that way, and we never give up.

For instance, I myself had a lot of hard times getting out of my country, and obstacles such as sickness happen to me all the time. But I do not regard those obstacles as a sign of anything—I just keep going. In life, you always have ups and downs. It is like riding on a roller coaster: the more you go up and the more you go down, the more you smile each time.

The more you develop, the more laziness and contentment could cause problems. If you have heard the dharma many times before and have practiced quite a lot, you might feel that dharma is old hat. You think, "I have studied such things before. Why should I go over them again?" With such an attitude, you begin to lose all that you have accumulated, and you begin to lose your joy in the practice. The essence of tsöndrü is to delight in the practice you are doing and the teaching you are hearing, as if it were fresh, as if you had never heard it before. Even though you might have heard a teaching two thousand times before, you still never tire of hearing the same thing again and again. Experiencing the dharma is more of a privilege each time.

The paramita of exertion is free from regarding ordinary activity as just boring. No matter what you do, you do not regard it merely as a replay of something that you have done many times before. The notion that things become boring when you do them again and again is just in your mind. If you look thoroughly and fully into situations, you will see that each situation is unique. It happens on a different date and time, and you are in a different stage of your life, so everything is entirely different each moment. You do not repeat anything. I wish you could do everything twice, but you cannot repeat anything and you cannot go back. So the ordinariness of experience is completely conceptual. Whatever happens is new.

By bringing together patience and exertion, you are working with both the shamatha and vipashyana disciplines. You are always taking a fresh approach to life, and you are not trying to look for new occupations or new entertainments. Although the occurrences of life may be entirely

repetitious, your perception or awareness could be fresh and extraordinary. That gives you a sense of joy and cheerfulness.

LAZINESS: THE MAIN OBSTACLE TO EXERTION

The main obstacle to exertion is laziness. In Tibetan, laziness is *lelo*, which sounds like “lay low.” Laziness feels quite deep-rooted when you are in it, but it is much easier to work with than passion or aggression. Laziness is like sleepiness; somebody can wake you up. But when you are dealing with aggression, you have to apply patience again and again and again and again, which is why aggression is considered to be one of the three root kleshas. Aggression and passion go very deep, whereas laziness is somewhat superficial.

There are three categories of laziness: casualness or slothfulness, losing heart, and degraded laziness. These categories are very simple and ordinary because that is the nature of laziness.

Casualness / Slothfulness

The first category of laziness is *nyom-le kyi lelo*, or “casualness.” *Nyom-le* means “common,” “together,” or “even,” *kyi* is “of,” and *lelo* is “laziness”; so *nyom-le kyi lelo* is trying to make everything even or the same. You are too concerned with and attached to comfort. You are tremendously attached to leisure; you do not want to raise a finger. Sitting on a rock or washing your face in a running stream is regarded as inconvenient. You always want to have running water in your bathroom, and you would like to have your seats stuffed so that you always have a soft cushion under you. You fight against a simple rural existence, and regard urban delicacy as the only way to treat yourself well.

Nyom-le kyi lelo includes ordinary laziness or slothfulness. You keep falling asleep and are unable to get yourself together. You have not organized your life properly. Therefore, you begin to feel that you are a victim of your life situation. Students say, “I have this thing to do or that thing to do, and I don’t have a chance to practice.” It is as if they were victims of their lives rather than of their own laziness. Laziness is the problem, although nobody seems willing to admit that.

Tsöndrü is the proper way of relating with your life. It is good scheduling. When it is time to wake up, you wake up; when it is time to eat, you

eat. You find time to practice, to work with others, to study the dharma, and to do your business. So exertion is the good scheduling and good organization of your life. In that way, there is time for everything. But most importantly, there is time and space for practice. So the laziness of being casual is an obstacle to the practice of meditation as well as to the practice of exertion. You have an aversion to sitting practice; there are no French settees and no armchairs for you to lean back on. You have to learn to support yourself, like a stalk of corn growing in a field.

Losing Heart

The second category of laziness is called *gyi-luk-pe lelo*. *Gyi-luk* means “losing heart,” *pe* means “of,” *lelo* means “laziness; since *gyi* means “weight,” this expression literally means “losing weight.” It is being disheartened; you lose heart because you like samsara so much. You like your old-fashioned games and your good old days, and you do not really want to leave this world. Therefore you say, “How is it possible for someone like me to attain enlightenment? It is impossible. I should never even try. I have been this way for many years, and I will be this way for many years to come. What is the point of trying to attain enlightenment? What is the point of trying to do anything at all?”

Interestingly, the fact that you say this means that you are beginning to have a faint fever of what enlightenment would be like: you realize that the attainment of enlightenment means that you can no longer indulge in your samsaric world. Therefore, you begin to feel panicked, and you say, “I cannot do it. How could I ever do it?” You disguise that as losing heart, but in your heart of hearts, you want to stay in your samsara. You are afraid of losing any of your reference points in the samsaric world because you are very attached to samsara.

Degraded Laziness

The third category of laziness is degraded laziness: *mepa lelo*. *Mepa* means “base” or “degraded,” and *lelo* means “laziness”; so *mepa lelo* means “degraded laziness.” Degraded laziness is the laziness of being preoccupied. You are preoccupied with dealing with enemies, collecting wealth, and other activities. You are busy with activities other than dharmic ones, and exert yourself in those situations instead of devoting yourself to

dharma practice. You couldn't care less about the dharma. Sometimes you think about practice, but that does not bring up a great deal of exertion. Your effort is spent on other things. Degraded laziness is caused by a feeling of depression: you feel down, you are not cheered up, and you don't realize the value of the teachings. You do not think the dharma is worthwhile. So me-pe lelo implies depression and laziness combined.

This third type of laziness is the most dangerous one. You are taking advantage of your life in order to avoid practice. You feel extraordinarily energetic when you exert yourself in doing other things, but when it comes to sitting practice and working with dharmic situations, you are very lazy. For instance, you prefer to vacuum the floor rather than sit; you prefer to go out and mail your letter rather than sit; you prefer to take a shower rather than sit; you prefer to make a pie first and sit later. Such situations in your life are known as insulting the dharma.

These three types of laziness are not the only list that we could come up with. I'm sure we could come up with hundreds of thousands of ways and levels of cheating and indulging ourselves.

The three forms of laziness are very simple. More complicated or sophisticated kinds of laziness might come up on top of that, but basically any form of laziness is simple: you do not want to work with the harsh core of being awake. You would like to avoid that direct contrast. You do not want to feel awake; you prefer to take another nap, rest just a few minutes more. You would like to have lots of padding around you so that you don't actually have to experience the sharpness of reality, which could be either extremely painful or extremely pleasant. When you are getting close to an experience of wakefulness, you could actually delight in that, but instead you shy away from it. You would rather go back to your stable, which is full of shit and very smelly.

On the whole, all three types of laziness should be overcome by having a sense of urgency and directness. Traditionally, exertion is referred to as joy in practice, and at the same time, a feeling of immediacy. I wouldn't exactly call it panic, but it is a panic-like situation. According to the texts, if you are truly practicing exertion, you should behave as if a snake had landed on your lap, or as if your hair had caught on fire. It is very immediate and very direct. That is precisely what is meant by the absence of laziness. The point of the analogy is not the snake, or your hair on fire, but

your reaction to it. You cannot just relax, lie back, have a good time, and philosophize about Buddhism. You have samsara on your lap and madness in your brain, so you have to do something about it.

If you stay too long in samsara, you are going to fall apart very soon. You have to do something to prevent that from happening. It's like the concept of vaccination: you have to do something before you actually get hit with sickness. You have to save yourself sooner or later—and the sooner the better, because you will still be young, and you won't yet have been eaten up by the cancer of samsara. You will still have some strength, and you won't be exhausted all the time. So the earlier the better. That is the importance of exertion.

THREE QUALITIES OF EXERTION

Laziness is overcome by three qualities of exertion: exertion like a suit of armor, exertion of action, and exertion of never being satisfied.

Suit of Armor

The first quality is that exertion is like a suit of armor. You never let go of your desire to attain enlightenment, just as you would never go onto the battlefield without wearing your armor. You literally never take off your armor until your attainment of enlightenment. You vow to practice and become accomplished in your practice until the attainment of enlightenment. That kind of definite commitment is quite different from ordinary ambition, because it is based on a sense of joy.

The armor of exertion is connected with the joy and the longing to attain enlightenment. It is a question of realizing that whatever you experience is not all that solid and substantial, but there is an illusory quality to things. It is like driving through very thick, solid-looking fog: although it looks solid, you know the fog is not a wall, so you can just drive through. If you keep driving, at some point you can get beyond the fog and see the road.

Action

The second quality of exertion is action. The action of exertion is threefold: (1) making an effort to overcome the kleshas, (2) making an effort

to develop virtue, which comes from basic goodness, and (3) making an exceedingly great effort to work with others.

OVERCOMING THE KLESHAS. Action is necessary to accomplish what needs to be done on the path. It takes action to overcome the kleshas of passion, aggression, and ignorance. With the exertion of action you do not wallow in your own neurosis, but have joy in practicing virtue. A quality of gentleness goes along with your exertion, so things do not become too speedy.

DEVELOPING VIRTUE. The action of developing virtue can be divided into five subcategories: perseverance, joy, immovability, not changing your mind, and nonarrogance.

With perseverance, you are willing to see through yourself completely, and not stop halfway through. You are marked with exertion, and you will never give up.

Joy is based on recognizing that what you are doing deserves respect from others, and also self-respect because your action is dharmic. You enjoy yourself because you have the feeling that your world is sacred. Whatever you do in the name of exertion, whether you drink a cup of coffee or wash the dishes or change the tires on your car, there is a sense of sacredness, which is joyful.

With immovability, although all sorts of upheavals, kleshas, and suffering happen to you, you just continue with your exertion.

Because you are not changing your mind, although you might see all sorts of things that ordinarily would put you off, you do not give in to those things. You continue with your practice, and you do not just drop out because you have had an unpleasant conversation with someone. Not only can your mind not be changed, but you overcome your timidity in working with others. You could stay in New York, and not be put off by the New Yorkness of it. You could work with it.

You also develop nonarrogance. Because exertion could be a showcase, or a way of glamorizing yourself, it is important to overcome arrogance and pride. Although your exertion might be inspiring to others, even though you have done something quite good and your exertion has been fantastic, you do not become bloated by your achievement.

WORKING WITH OTHERS. The action of working with others is not easy. It takes real diligence.

Never Being Satisfied

The third quality of exertion is that you are never satisfied with your exertion. You never relax and say, "Now I have exerted myself enough." According to Gampopa, exertion is connected with the sense of being one with the dharma. You avoid obstacles to the dharma, and you do not come up with unnecessary excuses to avoid practice. However, overcoming laziness has nothing to do with being speedy, or with being quick and fast in the contemporary Western sense. Rather, exertion means being consistent, continuous, and faithful to the practice. Being consistent allows you to have a sense of joy, rather than seeing practice as a duty that you have to perform. The practice of dharma is getting into your blood.

When you have accomplished the three kinds of exertion, and have mindfulness and awareness in your everyday experiences and activities, you begin to regard exertion as a part of your basic, natural activity, rather than as something that is imposed on you. You don't say, "Now it is time to practice, and now it is time to switch off practice and do something else." Instead, exertion becomes part of your makeup, part of your being in whatever you do. You realize that you are not fundamentally stuck in the mud. You can pull up your anchor and sail away.

SPARK OF HUMOR

Between the levels of patience and exertion, there is a point at which you can spark some kind of flash on the spot. You can understand that in your ordinary life, you are very extremely heavy-handed without any genuine humor. In order to invite a sense of humor, you do not need to go back to the root of the problem and you should not go forward, thinking that you can solve it. There is something in between those two, a little lump, so to speak.

You can actually feel it on the spot, right now, this very fraction of a second. You have a lump in your mind. Look at it. When you look, it

begins to become rather ridiculous that you are holding on to that particular lump. You begin to feel that it is very funny, but at the same time it is worth celebrating.

You can work with that lump; it could be a very chewy situation. It is pleasurable and worth celebrating that you can get the substance of your life between your teeth. You can chew it and work with it. It becomes food for your mind, food that is not bad or poisonous, and not particularly pleasurable either. It is much better than chewing gum; you can chew that lump very beautifully. It is nourishing, as long as you pay attention to what you are doing, as long as you work with your lump, as long as you stay with it long enough.

You find that the lump in your jaw, the lump between your past and future states of mind, is very chewy, but it is also quite good. It is quite real. Don't try to get rid of it; don't take it out of your mouth and throw it in the garbage pile. Chew it and swallow it. It is the juice of your life. You are swallowing your kleshas, your *ayatanas*, your *dhatu*s,* and your skandhas. All those things contain pretty good chewing gum. It is very basic. You do not need too many metaphysical interpretations—just feel it. You are chewing right now, on the spot. Look at it, chew it, and swallow it. You will feel that you have done something at last, this very day. Such chewing is connected with shamatha and vipashyana practice and everything within them. It is very simple and delightful.

* The six triads of sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness are called the eighteen *dhatu*s in Sanskrit, or *kham* in Tibetan. The six pairs of sense organs and sense objects are called the twelve *ayatanas*, or *kye-che* in Tibetan. See volume 1 of the *Profound Treasury*, chapter 37, "Rediscovering Your Own Mind."