

Towards a Harmonious University Community: the Pāramitās as *Praxis*

Cynthia Drake
Naropa University, USA

Leaving home/Entering the University

In all cultures, the experience of starting a university degree program entails a profound transition. For many students around the globe, this transition includes leaving the known world of one's childhood home and entering a cultural space unlike anything they have yet seen. Their three or four years of undergraduate education is often the most transformational time in their life. It is a time when the universe of ideas and possibilities opens up, a time that lays a foundation for a meaningful and fulfilling life, to train towards contributing to the greater good.

In the United States, a great deal of scholarship has examined the psychological and intellectual developmental phases that university students go through. Notably, Arthur Chickering (1969 and 1993) and William Perry (1970) have described the fluidity and malleability of this time of life. Chickering's theory of development posits seven vectors which students travel through repeatedly as they learn increasingly sophisticated ways to manage their emotions, make autonomous decisions, and develop a sense of purpose. Perry's Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development notes a series of stages that take a student through degrees of indeterminacy and into a more nuanced view of their place in the world.

All domains of a student's life, including his cultural and family identity, his spiritual affiliation, and his extra-curricular activities contribute to his development. On many university campuses, so much is happening every day, it is almost surprising that students have time to attend class. Nonetheless, the classroom is a developmental nexus for students, a signifying center of gravity as meaning condenses and evaporates and minds are stretched and opened to new ideas. The classroom is also a critical venue in training students in engagement and civil discourse, two key components in community building.

This paper offers an innovative theoretical perspective on using traditional Buddhist practices to cultivate a harmonious community in the university classroom. A case study presents methods of daily contemplation practice of the Ten Perfections (*dasapāramiyo*). These practices are used to engender a more efficacious learning environment, greater sympathy, openness and trust amongst students, and between students and instructor.

The Buddhist connection to *praxis*

There is good pedagogical reason for teachers to emphasize engagement in their classrooms. The connection between learning and active engagement has been examined since Aristotle divided the activities of humans into three categories (Nightingale, 2004). The three activities of humans, said Aristotle, are *theoria* (the theoretical work aiming to uncover the truth); *poiesis* (activity aiming to produce something); and *praxis* (the impulse toward action and engagement). While *theoria* and *poiesis* have obvious importance at university, *praxis* is the domain in which meaningful learning can ripen into inner motivation for wisdom. *Praxis* is the action born of reflection and the synthesis of ideas. Renowned pedagogical scholar Paulo Freire calls *praxis* "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (36).

Regardless of academic discipline, the Buddhist professor draws upon years or decades of the *praxis* of examining the nature of reality. From the time of the historical Buddha, practitioners have been instructed to “work out your salvation with diligence.” Indeed, Buddhist practice maps beautifully onto the life of the university instructor. What we practice is always informed by View, or Aristotle’s *theoria*. What we offer via curriculum is our *poiesis*. And what we do with our minds, the way that we engage with teaching as a dharmic activity, is our *praxis*. This approach to teaching as dharma aligns intention with action.

Just as the Buddha is said to have taught in 84,000 modalities, there are virtually limitless ways to bring Buddhist practice into our lives as classroom teachers. One teaching and set of practices that has proved potent and helpful as *praxis* or engaged reflection is the set of *pāramitās*, found in many texts including the Pāli canon’s *Buddhavamsa*. The Ten Perfections (*dasapāramiyo*) provide a way to orient one’s mind to harmony and possibility, rather than to deficiency and conflict. They can be used as a daily practice to go deeper in seeing students as radiant beings with minds and hearts that are brilliant and virtuous. Each of the *pāramitās*, also known as the ten transcendent virtues, can be used as a vehicle for the instructor to engage with his or her class. Each of the *pāramitās* informs some aspect of the learning experience and offers a modality to go beyond the conventional learning expectations, the *theoria* and *poiesis*, and guide both student and instructor into *praxis*.

Each of the *pāramitās* needs to be studied separately and considered on its own terms. Some, such as generosity and loving-kindness, are particularly important to include on a daily basis in one’s practice because they are so germane to classroom interactions. Some, such as renunciation or determination, might arise unexpectedly during the course of a school term and need to be brought front and center in our practice for a period of time. The *pāramitās*—listed individually below as presented in the *Cariyāpitaka (Basket of Conduct)*—can also be synthesized into a single comprehensive daily contemplation that covers one’s teaching aspiration.

Some examples of comprehensive *pāramitā* contemplations:

- May I wake up in kindness and community. May this class wake up in kindness and community. May we enjoy learning in each other’s company.
- May I let go of anything that prevents my students from learning. May my students let go of anything that keeps them from learning. May we all let go of anything that keeps us from learning.
- May the barriers dissolve. May we open into non-conceptual space, a new way of making meaning.

These global contemplations can be spontaneously crafted or one or a set might be established at the beginning of a school term. I find it useful to spend some time before the beginning of my semester reflecting on my objectives for the term. I think about the specific skill sets that my students will be working on. I also contemplate the larger objectives, of community-building, communication, and meaning-making, and how I aspire for these objectives to be realized. As I progress through the semester, I pay attention to the atmosphere in the class, identify any objectives that are far from being met, and I aspire for contemplations that address these objectives to spontaneously arise.

The *Pāramitās* with examples from stories in the *Cariyāpitaka (Basket of Conduct)*

1. *dāna*/generosity

This pāramitā is about the powerful marriage of offering and insight. All teachers practice generosity on a daily basis. We give our time, our attention, and other resources needed to get our work done. Conventional generosity transcends into dāna when we let go of our own private territory, see what the situation needs, and act from that awareness. As a classroom teacher, some acts of generosity are apparent to all. If I stay up all night to mark papers, so that my students can benefit from my feedback, this is a tangible sign of my commitment to the course. But perhaps the more valuable and dharmic forms of generosity are the least tangible: those moments when I feel my “superior knowledge” about a topic, but allow a student to fumble her way through and into a deeper understanding than she previously had, could be a form of generosity. Here are some contemplations on generosity:

- May my teacher ego dissolve so that learning and joy meet each other.
- This class is not about me. This learning is not about me.
- May our roles dissolve into the play of learning. “The teacher” and “the student” dissolve. “I” and “you” dissolve.

2. sīla/virtue/morality

We show our strength through the impeccability of our conduct. Our discipline is apparent through our relationships with such details as schedules and consistent adherence to our teaching protocols. Though often less immediately apparent, good conduct is even more critical in those moments when students feel frustrated and their needs not met. The discipline of our minds allows us to practice the generosity of letting go of territory so that we can meet our students where they are. When our conduct is impeccable, we reduce the danger of acting aggressively and defensively. In “Conduct of the Buffalo-King,” a previous incarnation of the Buddha has multiple encounters with a naughty monkey who repeatedly defecates and urinates on him. Encouraged by another to kill the monkey, he responds, “If I were to be angry with him, from that I would become more degraded than him” (23). Some contemplations on virtue:

- In moments of stress, my conduct is impeccable. In moments of duress, my conduct is impeccable.
- If I promise Monday, it will be done by Monday.
- We are all drawn to the crystal clean water of virtue.

3. nekkhamma/renunciation

This pāramitā is about going forth into the unknown. In “Conduct of Yudhañjaya,” the king’s son is “thrilled” when he sees a dew drop fall and is inspired to leave his father’s kingdom and go out into the wider world (30). This stepping out beyond the known is what terrifies and thrills teachers. The kingdom that we give up might be the safety of what works pretty well. Being completely awake is never a predictable matter, so we have to be willing to step out. Some contemplations on renunciation:

- This unknown space before me is the only home I need. I step into the unknown with courage, kindness, and humor.
- What works can be made better. What doesn’t work should be abandoned.

4. adhitthāna/determination

This pāramitā relates to the power of staying steadfast with what we recognize as our true path. In the “Conduct of Wise Temiya,” the Buddha in a past life experiences dread and uncertainty about going beyond his worldly life. He is visited by a devatā who gives him three critical instructions: “Show no intelligence, to all creatures be like a fool, let all people heap scorn on you” (37). Outsider status allows him to stay outside of the

societal bonds that would tie him to the world. Teachers do not need to completely cut ties to our bonds of relationship and society. But we do need to take chances, to be the fool for our students. When we do so, we allow whoever we were as teachers to make space for something unnamed and unknown. The shock of the numinous can occur. For the Buddha, “the purpose for which I had practiced austerity was a purpose that had prospered for me” (37). Some contemplations on determination:

- May the wisdom of this moment pop “you” and “me.”
- When the direction is clear, do not hesitate or waver.

5. sacca/truthfulness

There is tremendous power in proclaiming what is true. We can trust that. When the truth is blended with kindness, it has a protective and healing power. There are small categories of dissembling that can leach the potency of our presence. The practice in truth-telling is as much about how we say it as what we say. In “Conduct of the Fish-King,” the Buddha says, “As long as I (can) remember about myself, ever since I have come to (years of) discretion I am not aware of having hurt intentionally even one living thing” (42). The impeccability of his behavior allows the Buddha’s previous incarnation to tell the truth fully, to transmit the truth. We weaken our own truths when we are distracted, but we can strengthen our truth by pausing and clearing some space for what we have to say. Rather than a contemplation, this practice below is offered. A practice on truthfulness:

- Say one thing completely. It is difficult to tell the truth well when we are distracted.

6. mettā/loving-kindness

In “Conduct of Suvanna-Sāma,” loving-kindness is shown to mutually alleviate fear between beings in conflict. Loving-kindness can do much for the inner stability, confidence and enjoyment of the teacher. But it becomes a fully transformational practice as it works on and impacts the interrelationships between teacher and students. Mutual fear is strong; loving-kindness dispels fear. Some contemplations on loving-kindness:

- May these students be happy.
- May this material/book/poem bring happiness and peace.
- May joy leap from the words on the page and plant themselves in your heart.

7. upekkā/equanimity

Equanimity is balance “toward happiness and anguish, toward honours and reproaches” (48). It may be difficult for many teachers to actually act with true equanimity, but it is something that we can aspire to. We can hold an image of equanimity as we face our students. Some contemplations on equanimity:

- Each student in this class has a good heart. Each student desires happiness.
- Whatever occurs, I can approach it with the calm of a cool pool of water.

8. paññā/wisdom

This pāramitā is the most fruitional and can be viewed as an aspiration. It is helpful to see all students as filled with wisdom. Some contemplations on wisdom:

- My wisdom sees and greets your wisdom.
- May we all experience a spark of wisdom today. May that spark melt any resistance we have.

9. vīriya/effort/energy

This pāramitā is an antidote to losing heart. We can enjoy the energy in our midst and appreciate its inherent qualities. Some contemplations on effort:

- May we be heartened in our effort.
- May our smiles inspire one another.

10. khanti/patience

This pāramitā involves working with aggression. There are particular moments when this practice is invaluable. For example, when a student disrupts the anticipated flow of a class session, we can work with patience. Even when the student's intention is to derail the class, an angry response erects an immediate barrier. Another good time to generate patience is when students have not prepared or are clearly not interested in the material. A practice on patience:

- Welcome the opportunity and look at the aggression (or potential arising aggression) carefully. Analyze it. What drives it? What is it in response to?

Some contemplations on patience:

- When my heart starts to harden, may it melt instead.
- I can always pause. And look.

Observations and further considerations

The effects of this practice on my teaching style can best be characterized as a series of subtle choices made in the moment that help me to soften and open to my students as full human beings. I pause more, react less. I see the impact of these choices in the ways that students learn to claim authority of their ideas, to work together as colleagues, and to push beyond their comfort zones. When the shyest students in the class repeatedly volunteer their ideas, I see the benefits of this practice.

What I am offering here is a work in progress. I have worked with the pāramitās in my classrooms for close to ten years. In the past two years, I have done so with increasing formality and focus as I have developed and revised my contemplative practices. What is most salient to me is that I endeavor to relate to my students as dignified, worthy individuals, who all want to be happy and who do not, in their hearts, wish to do harm to others. This work feels transformational, and I believe that this approach provides a way of instantiating a paradigm shift. As I go forward with my work, I seek ways to investigate this approach further, including ways to quantify and assess my use of the pāramitās in the classroom.

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