

# Wisdom from the Dragon's Nest

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This examination of therapeutic practice from a Buddhist view sprang from two words given to me in the Dragon's Nest by a Tibetan lama. I was just about to embark on a three-year training in psychotherapy, and I found myself at lunch in a Chinese restaurant with a lama who had worked in a psychiatric hospital for many years. I felt he would know, through his unique combination of experiences, the answer to a question that seemed to glow at the centre of my being at that time. This was, how could Buddhist understanding be brought into psychotherapy? I felt that I had to seize my opportunity to explore his wisdom on this subject and, looking forward to an extended conversation around it over lunch, I asked him my question. He looked at me, said two words, 'six *paramitas*', and then went back to discussing the menu. The subject was never raised again during the meal. But the question stayed with me, and his answer, perhaps because of its brevity, has given me much to reflect on. So, three years later, here is my version of the six *paramitas*, in a slightly longer format — though for its ability to inspire reflection, I would refer you to the lama's answer.



The six *paramitas* describe compassionate action, arising from the naturally existing awareness within us. According to the Tibetan Buddhist view, this potential for compassion exists in each one of us and cannot be watered down or made less in any way. It can be covered, forgotten, hidden, denied, split off, shadowed, but never completely lost. In fact, given the space, it can spontaneously express at any moment. To find it we have only to recognise it, then it can naturally and completely manifest, in the same way that a candle lights up the darkness, even if the darkness has been present for thousands of years.

As this natural potential for compassion exists in both myself and my client, it is

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always present within any therapeutic encounter. The way in which it manifests can be described through the six paramitas or six compassionate actions. *Paramita* in Sanskrit means 'one who has arrived at the other bank of the river', and is sometimes translated as the transcendent (going beyond) action which can take us to the other shore of understanding or experience. This sense of journeying also describes the powerful transforming action of the paramitas.

Expressed in this way, these paramitas are aspects of compassionate activity which flow into and support each other, and the contemplation of them has helped me towards some understanding of my personal view of compassionate therapeutic practice.

### *First Paramita: Generous Action*

The paramita of generosity manifests when I can give non-judgemental space to the client, and allow the energies of resonance and its daughter empathy to arise. I experience this generosity as the possibility of full communication within spaciousness. At its best it is a powerful openness between myself and the client, which allows a true seeing and exploration, one I experience as spiritual whatever the content. In this it is a true exchange, a joint process, and for me it deeply holds the seeds of transformation and healing.

When I experience the space of the paramita of generosity it has the qualities of richness, warmth, charitableness and receptiveness. Traditionally the image of this paramita is of a large treasure house. It is a welcoming acceptance of process

within the space in which it manifests. If I am very tight and bound up in my own process at times these qualities do not emerge at all. If I were to put it simply I would say that generosity validates, is affirming of experience and tolerant of experience's need for expression.

### *Second Paramita: Appropriate Action*

I see the generous spaciousness of the therapeutic process as being held through the paramita of appropriate action. This is also sometimes translated from the original Sanskrit as 'discipline'. I interpret this as meaning that discipline does not signify blindly following rules or imposing therapeutic techniques, but acting appropriately through being with what comes up for the client, without altering the process to make it more comfortable, and without avoiding communication.

For me this appropriateness is fundamentally expressed through the attention I can offer my client. It could be described as a basic capacity to stay with the client as the path winds through the thorny thickets, or even fades away across the deserts of the therapeutic journey. This continuity requires an equal commitment from both of us. Thus the underlying sense of discipline lies in the relationship between the client and myself, manifesting in the appropriate response or non-response, the intervention, or the silence. At its simplest, it is a basic ground of shared being. At its best, it is a shared process of developing mutual self-awareness.

I see this paramita also as manifesting in the boundaries holding the session,

such as timing, contract and payment. Thus professional supervision and following a recognised code of ethics are both manifestations of the paramita of appropriate action.

### *Third Paramita: Enduring Action*

Within the safe space of the therapeutic session the paramita of endurance or patience supports my capacity to follow the client, without pushing the process forward. I have always found my need to feel that I am doing something in the therapeutic process the most difficult to resist, and I have spent many hard hours reflecting on my frequent divergence from this paramita.

For me this endurance or patience is primarily expressed through the attention of listening, a process involving body, mind, spirit and feelings. It is listening with my ears, my heart, my own body sensations, with my imagination, intuition and intellect. It is a holistic listening, an attention that includes both myself and the client and the process arising between us.

In Tibetan Buddhism, three ways of poor or ineffective listening are described as being like three different types of bowl. The bowl could be a metaphor for the holding space of therapeutic process.

The first ineffective way of listening is described as being like a bowl with a hole in it. This is where I am distracted and retain nothing of the client's communication. My lack of holding does not result in a beneficial emptiness or space for the client, but is rather a negation or ignoring of their expression.

The second way is like an overturned bowl. This is where I am already an 'expert', I already 'know' what is being

communicated, and I spend a lot of mental time in second-guessing or filling in the gaps with my own concepts, rather than in hearing what is actually being expressed. In this situation I can actually receive nothing from my client, which is severely limiting to therapeutic process.

The third is like a bowl with a drop of poison in it. This is where I have a prejudicial judgement about the client, or about the material they are expressing. This poisons the whole communication which is taking place between us, making the joint process potentially toxic if swallowed by the client.

### *Fourth Paramita: Joyful Action*

The meaning of this paramita has been interpreted in many ways. It is often translated as 'diligence'; sometimes as vigour, or energy, or effort, or enthusiasm, or joy. I like 'joy'. Sometimes I can hold this joy when it is inaccessible for the client, when they are unable to share or celebrate a success. This paramita for me also relates to a shared commitment to the therapeutic alliance, where both client and I have a shareable (though not necessarily similar) view of the nature of the work we are doing together. As this work is demanding it will sometimes require vigour or effort to continue, on both our parts. I enjoy the way the fourth paramita allows the celebrations of joy and enthusiasm into the work as a spontaneous and natural part of the process.

### *Fifth Paramita: Meditation*

Meditation takes many different forms, depending on the tradition or instruction.

Basically it is an awareness which is cultivated through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is bringing the mind to rest on what we are doing, as we do it, bringing the attention to the present moment. This awareness may focus inwardly, or outwardly, or be a combination of both. There is no one way of developing awareness, and each of us has a different way of doing it.

The state of awareness is my being in the here and now, being with whatever is happening. It includes an awareness both of myself and of my client which extends into many levels, including my own process, my resonance with the client's process, and the transferences between us.

This quality of meditative awareness, although simple, needs practice. To be able to bring it to the session it has first to be learnt formally, as part of developing one's professional skills. Awareness methods that include an awareness of both the inside self and the other (person, environment, worlds) are highly appropriate for such learning.

### *Sixth Paramita: Wisdom*

The paramita of wisdom manifests on a simple level as clarity in the interaction between therapist and client. The clarity of wisdom is said in the Buddhist tradition to have an adamant quality of brilliance. The paramita of wisdom is sometimes

translated as 'primary knowledge'. This is not intellectual knowledge, but rather a heart and mind knowingness that is expressed in clarity. In the therapeutic process the method of reflection through words, simplification and mirroring body posture can be seen as ways of bringing clarity into the situation. In seeking to bring wisdom to bear on what is happening between myself and my client I may try to bring clarity into the process which is taking place across many sessions. Fundamentally I try to find clarity in myself. This seems to be one of the basic purposes of supervision, that the space it provides can activate some clarity to cut through the veils of transference and countertransference. Traditionally the wisdom paramita is described as a two-edged sword that cuts through all confusion.

At the end of the meal in the Dragon's Nest the lama handed around a basket of fortune cookies, urging me with a smile to take one. These sweet hollow biscuits each hold pieces of paper with a prediction or wise saying. 'Fortune cookie wisdom' is an expression used by Tibetans to describe the very opposite of the paramita of wisdom, rather a belief in blind superstition. Undeterred by this knowledge I eagerly accepted my cookie and bit into it. Pieces of brittle biscuit showered everywhere. 'What did you get?' asked the lama. I showed him the piece of paper. It said, 'When you have a great gift, it is important to use it.'

