June is the sixth month of the year, and its arrival brings heralds the sixth paramita of prajña, transcendent wisdom. The text below comes from H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche’s “The Heart of Compassion”.

The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva

TRANSCENDENT WISDOM

(verse 30)

In the absence of wisdom, perfect enlightenment cannot be attained
Through the other five perfections alone.
Therefore, to cultivate wisdom combined with skillful means
And free from the three concepts is the practice of a bodhisattva.

The paramitas of generosity, discipline, patience, endeavor, and concentration can help you to accumulate merit, but they are still associated with concepts. Only wisdom can perfect the accumulation that leads you to realize primordial awareness free of all concepts. Generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and concentration could be likened to five blind men who, without the eyes of wisdom, would never be able to find their way to the citadel of liberation. Indeed, only when accompanied by wisdom do they deserve the name paramita, “transcendent,” or literally “gone to the other shore”—the shore across the ocean of suffering and ignorance, beyond the concepts of samsara and nirvana.
Transcendent wisdom has three aspects, which are stages in its progressive realization: first, the wisdom of the learning acquired through hearing the teachings; then, the wisdom that arises through reflecting on the meaning of these teachings; and finally, the wisdom that arises from meditating.

You, the practitioner, should first of all be like a bee going from flower to flower collecting nectar. At the stage when you are listening to and studying the teachings, learn all of them carefully, in both words and meaning. Then, you should be like a wild animal. Not satisfied with a mere theoretical understanding, go and live in mountain solitude where you can be free of all the busy involvement of ordinary life. Be self-sufficient and firm in one-pointed practice as you discover directly for yourself the profound meaning of the teachings. Finally, as you put the teachings into practice and integrate them with your being, you should be like a peg driven into hard ground. Unshaken by thoughts during meditation, remain unwavering. Cut away all limiting concepts of existence and nonexistence from within, and directly encounter the face of the ultimate nature of everything.

So here we have come to the very heart of the paramitas. Wisdom is not only the most important of the six—it is their very life force. To realize wisdom is the ultimate goal; it is the reason why all the branches of the teachings are explained.

For the first aspect of wisdom, to perfect the wisdom of the learning acquired through hearing the teachings, the scriptures to be studied include all the Mahayana teachings, which are referred to as “profound and vast.” The profound teachings are those that expound emptiness, and the vast teachings those that explain the different stages on the bodhisattva path—the five paths, the ten bhumis, and so on. The profound teachings are found in sutras such as the King of Concentrations Sutra and the Great Compendium Sutra. The vast teachings are found in The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras, The Ornament of True Realization, and other texts. There are other treatises that explain the wisdom intention of the Buddha’s words in a
way that is easy for later followers of the Buddha to understand. You should hear all of these teachings from a qualified teacher.

However, hearing the teachings alone is not quite enough—even animals can hear the sound of the Dharma being taught. The second stage is to develop the wisdom that arises through reflecting on the meaning of these teachings. Think about what you have heard and extract the essential meaning from it so that the teachings do not just remain as intellectual knowledge. It is important to develop confidence in the meaning of the Dharma, and be sure you have understood it correctly. Whatever you are going to practice has to be considered very carefully. Clarify all your doubts and hesitations with your teacher. In particular, remember clearly what your teacher tells you about all the obstacles that can arise, and what deviations from the path you might find yourself making. Then, when you are ready to put your instructions into practice, it will be like setting out on a journey with full knowledge of all the different conditions you are likely to encounter, and all the money you will need to meet your expenses on the way.

Some teachings belong to the category in which the meaning expounded is provisional or expedient, or of relative truth; others to that in which the meaning is direct and definitive, or of absolute truth. Of the two, the absolute meaning is the more important, so you should put your effort into recognizing that absolute meaning and becoming familiar with it. The more you study and reflect on the teachings of the scriptures and of the rediscovered treasures, the more your understanding, your confidence, and your certainty as to the meaning of the teachings will grow. When gold is being refined, the refining processes, such as melting and drawing off the pure metal, are repeatedly applied. In the same way, refine your understanding by reflecting, over and over again, on the meaning of the teachings so that you develop a clear confidence in their absolute meaning.

Study and reflection will cut through your more gross misconceptions. But the subtler ones can only be dispelled by meditation, and by integration of the absolute wisdom that arises from it into your very being. To engender it, go to a secluded place and stay as much as
possible in meditation, practicing shamatha and vipashyana—sustained calm and profound insight—to realize emptiness, the ultimate nature of all phenomena. This is the wisdom that arises from meditation. To have recognized that all phenomena are empty by nature is to have recognized the ultimate point of all the teachings.

Through the understanding of emptiness, you will perceive no difference between yourself and others. You will be free of self-cherishing, compassion will arise spontaneously, and you will benefit beings without any effort. Even great bodhisattva acts such as giving your life for another’s benefit will not be difficult for you, and you will be able to perform altruistic deeds effortlessly over many kalpas. Everything happens without effort because it all takes place within the continuum of the realization of emptiness. Here generosity, patience, and all the other perfections now truly merit the term paramita, as they are utterly beyond the realm of delusion. For a bodhisattva who has realized emptiness, the number of beings to be liberated and the time it might take to liberate them arouse feelings neither of discouragement nor of pride. Dawning freely in your enlightened mind is an all-inclusive compassion, devoid of all concepts of subject and object. Having realized the sameness of self and others, you remain as unchanging as primordial space.

A thorough, experiential understanding of emptiness is the only antidote to the belief in an “I”, in a truly existing self. Once you recognize emptiness, all your attachment to such a self will vanish without a trace. Realization will blaze forth like a brilliant sun rising in the sky, transforming darkness into light.

At first, until you actually recognize emptiness, you have to gain an understanding of it through deep and careful reflection on the teacher’s pith instructions. Then, when you first recognize it, your experience of emptiness will not be stable. To improve it, blend meditation and postmeditation periods. Try not to fall back into ordinary delusion, but to maintain the view of emptiness in all your daily activities. Meditation and the path of action will mutually enhance each other. Finally, you may reach a point where there is no
difference between meditation and postmeditation, a point at which you no longer ever depart from emptiness. This is called the realization of great sameness. Within that great sameness, compassion for all beings will arise spontaneously—for the more you realize emptiness, the less there will be any impediment to the arising of compassion. With it will come a natural ability to benefit others without effort, in the same way that if, among a hundred blind people, one of them were to recover his sight, he would be able to guide all the others.

Without the realization of emptiness, both love and compassion are limited and narrow. As the Bodhisattva-bhumi explains, there are three successive levels of boundless love, compassion, joy, and impartiality. Consider love to start with. At first, boundless love is focused on sentient beings. Remembering that all beings have been your parents, you wish that they may all have happiness. This is a form of love that everyone, from ordinary people to bodhisattvas, has in common.

At a second stage, boundless love has phenomena as its reference. The practitioner, while recognizing that in absolute truth nothing has any inherent existence, wishes nevertheless that within the illusory, dreamlike reality of relative truth all beings may find happiness. Love of this kind is unknown to ordinary people, but is common to practitioners of the Basic Vehicle (shravakas and pratyekabuddhas) and to those of the Mahayana (bodhisattvas).

The third and highest level of boundless love is non-referential, beyond any concept of an object. From the outset of the meditation, the practitioner knows that the nature of both self and others is emptiness, free of all conceptual elaborations, like the sky. That intrinsic lack of substantial existence, omnipresent and vivid, unceasingly radiates a love that is lucid and spontaneous. This kind of love is, by nature, free of all concepts and without any goal. It is beyond the three ideas of there being a subject, an object, and an action. It is only found in the Mahayana.
These three successive approaches can be similarly applied to boundless compassion, joy, and impartiality.

The practice of the paramita of wisdom should be done in stages to begin with. First, divide your practice into meditation periods during which you meditate on emptiness, and postmeditation periods in which you try to improve your understanding of the view of emptiness by studying the philosophical system of the Madhyamika, until you attain certainty in it. The Madhyamika view leads to an understanding of the two truths. The recognition of the absolute truth is helped by understanding how all phenomena arise through a combination of causes and conditions.

As your practice becomes more stable, it will no longer be necessary to meditate intentionally on emptiness; it will be integrated into your understanding. You will reach a point when you see that emptiness and compassion, emptiness and phenomena, and absolute and relative truth, are intrinsically one, rather than being in each case two separate entities like the horns of a goat. The vaster your view of emptiness, the clearer your understanding will be of the infinite ways phenomena can manifest in accordance with the law of cause and effect. And it is from emptiness inseparable from compassion that a bodhisattva manifests.

This is the ultimate fruit of all the different teachings of the Mahayana and Mantrayana, of Madhyamika, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. The most important point of these teachings is to realize them through your own experience, and no mere proliferation of words will be of much help to you in doing that. To put it simply and directly, developing perfect wisdom in your mindstream is the actual practice of the bodhisattvas.