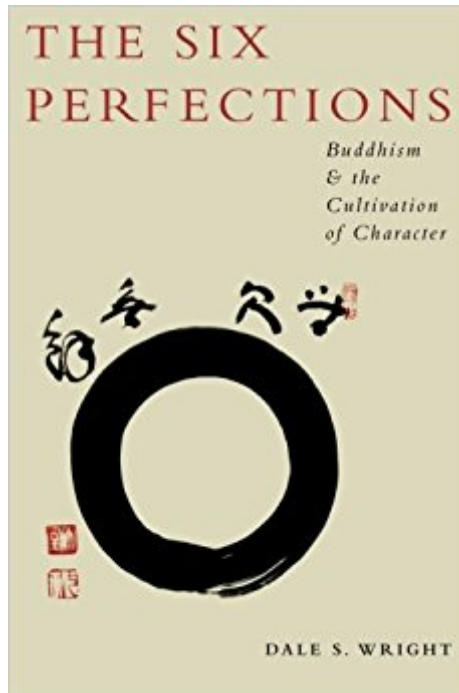


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The Six Perfections: Buddhism And The Cultivation Of Character



Synopsis

Here is a lucid, accessible, and inspiring guide to the six perfections--Buddhist teachings about six dimensions of human character that require "perfecting": generosity, morality, tolerance, energy, meditation, and wisdom. Drawing on the Diamond Sutra, the Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom, and other essential Mahayana texts, Dale Wright shows how these teachings were understood and practiced in classical Mahayana Buddhism and how they can be adapted to contemporary life in a global society. What would the perfection of generosity look like today, for example? What would it mean to give with neither ulterior motives nor naiveté? Devoting a separate chapter to each of the six perfections, Wright combines sophisticated analysis with real-life applications. Buddhists have always stressed self-cultivation, the uniquely human freedom that opens the possibility of shaping the kind of life we will live and the kind of person we will become. For those interested in ideals of human character and practices of self-cultivation, *The Six Perfections* offers invaluable guidance.

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Customer Reviews

After reading a couple examples of "popular" books on the Buddhist paramitas, this one came as a very welcome relief. The difference was immediately noticed and profound: as opposed to the fluff, irrelevant stories and pop psychology of Lama Surya Das and Sylvia Boorstein, this is a mature philosophical reflection on the Buddhist "perfections" by a man who is less an entertainer than a real thinker. Wright's language is sophisticated, nuanced and densely meaningful, and he offers a critical, contemporary assessment of Buddhist attitudes and practices. The book is entirely Mahayana in orientation, taking its cue from the "Perfection of Wisdom" literature, specifically the

Diamond Sutra, the Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom, the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, the Vimalakirti and, of course, the Bodhicaryavatara of Shantideva. (I knew I was in the hands of a good scholar when Wright actually stated up front what his sources would be.) The book covers (per the title) the traditional six paramitas as opposed to the Theravada and later Mahayana ten. For each of the six Wright first discusses how the paramita has been understood in traditional Buddhist culture. He then offers a contemporary critical assessment of that "perfection." I found this added reflection absolutely critical to the quality of the book and one of the reasons why I would recommend it so unhesitatingly. Wright recognizes-as is rarely done, it seems-that many images of Buddhist sainthood are so rarefied and elevated as to be impossible to emulate. Somehow, though, they must be rendered concrete, and so the question Wright pursues is how can these examples be made valid models for contemporary people. He spends a lot of time exploring this and similar questions, making the old texts relevant and comprehensible to us. In this he renders great service to the tradition as a whole. It should be clear to anyone who reads this book that Wright is a man of great integrity and insight. The book simply could not have been produced by someone who had not reflected seriously and at length upon these issues. But my simply saying this will not adequately convey what I mean. Put it this way: I know a book is "great" when I cannot help but read it with a pen or pencil in hand and feel excited to mark out passages that particularly strike me, when I am compelled to write notes to myself for later reference. When I know I have to read a book again, I get a feeling of great gratitude to the author, for in such instances he or she has created something that affects and alters me, for the better. This is such a book. I offer a few examples from the text: "What is it that we are perfecting in the six perfections? The best word in English for that would be our character. It is through resources of character that we undertake enlightening practices, and it is our character that is enlightened" (7). "Unless we as donors can see clearly and unflinchingly that who we are as donors-secure in wealth and health-is completely dependent on numerous turns of good fortune, on the care and help of others, and on opportunities not available to everyone, our acts of giving will be less than fully generous. These acts will therefore not have the liberating effects that they might otherwise have had. When we are able to see that the homeless person's parents did not do for him what ours did for us, that his teachers did not do for him what ours did for us, then we begin to understand the contingency of our fortune, and, looking more deeply, the thorough interdependency of all reality" (25). "The culmination of Buddhist practices of generosity can be seen in their ideal form, the bodhisattva who gives unselfishly out of a deep compassion for all living beings. Compassion is the ultimate aim of these practices. But that culmination is the result of a long process of self-cultivation. For the most part, compassion is something we learn to feel. It

is not innate, not a "natural" feeling. For these reasons, we cannot feel compassion simply by deciding to feel it, or by telling ourselves that it is our responsibility to feel it. We do, however, have the capacity to develop compassion by cultivating our thoughts and emotions in ways that enable it. This is the function of the "practice" of giving. Making generosity of character an explicit aim of self-cultivation, we sculpt our thoughts, emotions, and dispositions in the direction of a particular form of human excellence" (30). "In the same way that etiquette resembles morality while not yet embodying it, morality imitates compassion while still falling short of it" (81). "The perfection of tolerance is the art of understanding what, when, and how to tolerate" (110). "Anger as a response to injustice presupposes a kind of selfhood that will at some point stand in the way of justice" (117). "The role of energy in ethics can be highlighted by reflecting on ways in which we might fall short in life. There are two basic ways in which it is possible for a person to fail ethically. The most obvious of these is to act unjustly, to commit crimes against one's society and oneself, to be a negative, destructive force. But another way is to fail in the positive, failing to live constructively on behalf of oneself and others. This second failure signals a deficiency of energy, a lack of constructive striving toward something worthwhile. Failing in this sense, people may never commit a crime against others or do anything explicitly wrong; their failure consists of not generating the energy of constructive life, thus failing to live a life in keeping with their capacity" (146). I could of course supply many more quotes-the author is eloquent and thoughtful at every turn. But the book is not without its faults. Two points stood out for me. First, Wright has a tendency to go on longer than necessary, which can make the chapters seem over extended. He clearly gets caught up in his own ruminations at times, to the detriment of the text. If anyone thinks any part of the book is "boring," this will be the reason. The second problem is much more profound. Through the first four paramitas Wright was spot on in his understanding and elucidation of Buddhist concepts, but in the section on meditation (chapter 5) the wheels came off his cart. I think once again we have here the age-old conundrum of the scholar who has not practiced beyond thinking, learning and reflection; it's clear Wright does not really know what meditation is. For example, on page 194 he says "...in contrast to samatha or calming kinds of meditation, vipassana cultivates thinking in the service of enhanced awareness and wisdom." He continues, saying "...vipassana meditation takes several forms. But in each case the practice entails focusing thought on an idea or a series of ideas" (194). He clearly believes vipassana is primarily reflective, cognitive or conceptual, so the essence of the fifth chapter is an elucidation of meditation as a kind of disciplined, guided thinking. While it is true that some types of meditation (think of the Brahmaviharas) begin as discursive reflections or visualizations, that is never their end. As regards vipassana, however, it doesn't even begin there;

Wright would have done well to read Kornfield's Living Dharma to get an idea what vipassana really is about. I have to confess I am at a loss to explain how Wright so totally misses the point here. Clearly he is an intelligent, thoughtful and well read man. Clearly he has put a lot of time into understanding Buddhist culture. But the fifth chapter, while not without insight (here and there), is largely a toss on account of how badly he misunderstands what dhyana is actually about. I've come to the conclusion that this kind of fault is cultural in nature, the culture in question being the "culture of scholarship," aka "academia." (Remember when someone says It's academic they really mean it's beside the point, not useful or applicable.) I was once myself an aspiring scholar/academic and I can say how tempting it is to think that if you've read the books and published the articles, then you must really understand something in a serious way. If you're talking about Renaissance French literature, that might be the case, but human consciousness ultimately transcends culture and time-structures and capacities are innate-and contemplative technologies which seek to alter those structures and capacities cannot be adequately understood from the vantage point most of us start from. These are not things one should simply think about-you have to do them. On account of the problems I've described, I'm giving the book four stars. However, the first four chapters are five (even six!) star material, and the last chapter is also quite excellent, though it lacks the practical groundedness of the first four.

As a student of Zen I purchased the book in order to study these Buddhist guidelines for self-transformation. I found Wright's book academically sound and engagingly written. The structure of each chapter was helpful to me in that it explored the text, the historical understanding of the Perfection being discussed, and then a reflection on the contemporary application of the Perfection. Sometimes the contemporary reflections seem a bit off the beaten path, but perhaps that only helps the reader to generalize to his/her own lived experience. I used this book to prepare a Dharma talk on the Paramitas and found it to be an indispensable resource because Wright traces them through the key Mahayana texts and into the contemporary world. Some of his phraseology was exquisite and I was able to quote passages where he seemed to get to the essence of the teaching, which is always helpful in giving a talk. Framing the Perfections as character builders is a very useful construct. I would recommend this book not just to formal students of Buddhism. I believe it has value for anyone who is trying to understand how to live in today's world generously, ethically, with patience and energy, reflectively and wisely.

I normally don't take time to review a book, but this is the most articulate book on Buddhist thought I

have ever read. He gives both an historical and a contemporary view. Superb discussion of the Perfection of Wisdom. I definitely recommend this book!

This is a quite useful survey and guide through the Six Perfections, both doctrinal and in relation to our everyday life. One question the author asks and provides an answer to is: "What is it that we are perfecting in the six perfections? The best word in English for that would be our character." Challenging, isn't it!? Highly recommended!

Great insights, provides justification for each perfection on its relevance to everyday living which I found helpful. It's a relief to find Buddhism explained articulately and in an accessible manner, because Buddhist texts can seem very weird and contradictory a lot of the times. It's also unlike pop spirituality where the effects of the words wear off, as each point was discussed so thoroughly.

I expected some sort of exegesis of Buddhist texts that would make the "Perfections" more intelligible to a lay audience. However, the author seems more intent on offering his own views than unpacking those of the texts. This book is recommended by several authors that I respect, so your experience may differ from mine.

Extraordinarily clear examination of the traditional paramitas in the light of contemporary life

I haven't finished reading it yet, but I am really enjoying this book!

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