
A Comparative Study on the Concept and Practices of Perfection (Pāramītas) In Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism

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Abstract

This documentary research investigates the concepts and practices of pāramī in Theravāda Buddhism and pāramitā in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Our primary objectives are to: (1) explore pāramī in Theravāda, (2) examine pāramitā in Mahāyāna, and (3) compare these concepts across both traditions. The study primarily utilises translated Pāli Tipiṭaka and Mahāyāna Sūtras as primary sources, supplemented by commentaries, sub-commentaries, Buddhist textbooks, and academic research from both schools, translated from Pāli and Tibetan.

While sharing a common foundation, the teachings of pāramī and pāramitā exhibit distinct developments and emphases. Both traditions focus on the practices of Bodhisattas (future Buddhas) in their past lives, striving for Buddhahood. However, Theravāda largely relies on Pāli scriptures, while Mahāyāna employs Sanskrit texts, leading to divergent interpretations. Initially, the core meaning of both terms is similar, stressing virtues like generosity, morality, and patience. Later, Theravāda commentators expanded pāramī to thirty sub-qualities, making it relevant not only for Bodhisattas but also for Sāvakayana (disciples) and Pacceka Buddha (solitary realisers). In contrast, Mahāyāna introduced new terminology such as bodhicitta (the aspiration for enlightenment) and emphasised the qualitative aspects of the path.

The ultimate goal in both traditions is Buddhahood, though Theravāda later accommodated other forms of enlightenment, such as Sāvakayana. Mahāyāna, conversely, maintains a strong focus on the Bodhisattva path, including the practice of taking mass Bodhisattva vows, which is absent in Theravāda. Both traditions emphasise compassion, but Mahāyāna emphasises the Bodhisattva's commitment to universal salvation. In practice, Theravāda's pāramī is more quantitative, focusing on accumulating virtues, while Mahāyāna's pāramitā is more qualitative, emphasising the transformation of mind and intention. Despite these differences, the fundamental idea remains consistent: pāramī/pāramitā represents the path taken by the Buddha in his previous lives as a Bodhisatta, with

both traditions ultimately aiming for the cultivation of wisdom and compassion leading to enlightenment.

Keywords: Perfections (pāramītas); Theravada Buddhism; Mahayana Buddhism; Comparative Study

Introduction

The words pāramī in Pāli and pāramitā in Sanskrit are often translated as “perfection” or “completeness,” representing the virtuous qualities cultivated along the Bodhisattva path toward enlightenment. While both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions uphold these perfections as integral to the spiritual journey, especially in the pursuit of Buddhahood, their interpretations, classifications, and applications vary significantly. This divergence reflects broader doctrinal and historical developments within the Buddhist tradition. Thus, it is essential to recognise that there is no uniform or universally accepted understanding of the pāramītas across the Buddhist world (Keown, 2003).

The enumeration and categorisation of the pāramītas also differ among traditions and texts. For instance, the Theravāda tradition typically recognises ten pāramīs, while the Mahāyāna tradition commonly refers to six, though some sources also list ten, particularly in association with the ten bhūmis or Bodhisattva stages (Bodhi, 2005; Candrakīrti, trans. 2002). Furthermore, varying numbers of pāramī, such as four, six, ten, or even thirty, can be found in different canonical and commentarial texts, highlighting the diverse doctrinal interpretations that have evolved (Dutt, 1978). Following the initial unity of the Buddhist Saṅgha after the Buddha’s passing, the Second Buddhist Council marked a significant schism between the Mahāsāṃghika and Sthavira lineages, largely over disputes concerning the Vinaya or monastic code (Harvey, 2013). This historical divergence contributed to the emergence of distinct traditions such as Theravāda and Mahāyāna, each developing unique doctrinal frameworks, including their respective interpretations of the perfections.

Theravāda Buddhism, regarded as the most conservative and historically continuous school, does not explicitly refer to the pāramīs as a codified set in the earliest strata of its canonical literature, such as the Majjhima Nikāya or Saṃyutta Nikāya. However, narratives and themes related to the perfections are found in

later texts such as the Jātaka Tales, Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa, and Cariyāpiṭaka, as well as in post-canonical commentaries (Bodhi, 2005; Dutt, 1978). The tenfold classification of pāramī appears to be a later development, possibly indicating that the systematization of these virtues was not originally a central feature of early Theravāda teachings. Nevertheless, while Theravāda emphasises the pāramī primarily in the context of the Bodhisatta's path, these virtues are also seen as beneficial to Śrāvakas and Pacceka-Buddhas (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, n.d.). Given this historical evolution, the first objective of this paper is to explore the conceptual foundations and practical applications of the pāramī within the Theravāda tradition, with an emphasis on early Pāli canonical texts and their subsequent interpretations.

Conversely, Mahāyāna Buddhism, often referred to as the “Bodhisattva Vehicle,” offers an expansive vision of the spiritual path, emphasising universal compassion and the aspiration for Buddhahood to benefit all beings (Keown, 2003). Mahāyāna texts such as the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras provide in-depth discussions of the six perfections, dāna (generosity), śīla (ethics), kṣānti (patience), vīrya (effort), dhyāna (meditative concentration), and prajñā (wisdom), which are regarded as the foundational practices for Bodhisattvas. Some Mahāyāna sources, particularly in later commentaries like Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra, further expand these to ten, corresponding to the ten bhūmis (Candrakīrti, trans. 2002). Mahāyāna also introduces new philosophical concepts such as bodhicitta (the mind of awakening), which are absent in Theravāda formulations, thus illustrating doctrinal innovations within the tradition.

The concept and evolution of the pāramitās within Mahāyāna Buddhism, based on its canonical sources and major commentaries. Traditions acknowledge the perfections as critical to spiritual cultivation; the variations in enumeration, interpretation, and soteriological emphasis necessitate a comprehensive comparative study. Although prior research has addressed the perfections individually within each tradition, there remains a lack of systematic comparative analysis. Hence, the third objective of this paper is to conduct a comparative study of the concept and practices of the pāramitās in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, highlighting both the convergences and divergences.

This research aims to clarify the doctrinal and practical dimensions of the pāramitās across these two major Buddhist traditions by examining canonical

texts and authoritative commentaries. It also seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these perfections are framed within distinct philosophical and cultural contexts, offering insights into their historical development and contemporary relevance.

Research Objectives

1. To study the concept and practices of pāramī in Theravada Buddhism.
2. To study the concept and practices of pāramīta in Mahayana Buddhism.
3. To compare concept and practices of the perfection practices in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

Literature Review

This research explores the concepts and practices of pāramī in Theravāda Buddhism and pāramitā in Mahāyāna Buddhism, to offer a nuanced comparative analysis across these two major traditions. A critical review of primary Buddhist scriptures, classical commentaries, and modern scholarly works informs the comparative framework.

The first objective, examining pāramī in Theravāda Buddhism, the foundational contribution of Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification by Buddhaghosa (2010) is essential. While the text does not explicitly present the pāramī framework, its detailed treatment of meditative concentration, ethical conduct, and the cultivation of the Brahmavihāras (Divine Abodes) offers an implicit structure that aligns with the virtues underlying the perfection practices. Buddhaghosa's systematic approach to purification reflects the moral discipline foundational to the Theravāda path.

A more direct exposition of the pāramī is provided by Dhammapāla (1996) in A Treatise on the Pāramī, a commentary on the Cariyāpiṭaka. Dhammapāla outlines the ten perfections, offering clarity on their definition, hierarchical structure, distinguishing characteristics, and relevance to the Bodhisatta path. His interpretation represents a significant doctrinal development that systematises pāramī within Theravāda scholastic thought.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu's The Ten Perfections: A Study Guide (n.d.) introduces a distinctive interpretive lens by grouping the perfections under four broader themes—discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm—while identifying adhiṭṭhāna (determination) as a foundational element. This innovative categorisation challenges conventional models and enriches contemporary understanding.

Complementing these theoretical insights, Mingun Sayadaw's (2008) *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas* offers a narrative-based account of pāramī cultivation within the lives of past Buddhas, drawing from canonical texts such as the *Apadāna*, *Jātaka*, and *Buddhavaṃsa*. This work provides historical and literary context for the development of pāramī ideals in Theravāda Buddhism and affirms their role in the long path of the Bodhisatta.

For the second objective, investigating pāramitā in Mahāyāna Buddhism, key texts include Śāntideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, which remains one of the most influential treatises on the six perfections. Śāntideva gives special emphasis to *Prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom), underscoring its centrality in the Bodhisattva's progression toward enlightenment (Batchelor, 1979)

Chandrakīrti's *Entering the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra*) (2020) expands this framework by integrating the ten pāramitās with the ten bhūmis (stages) of the Bodhisattva path. This work illustrates how the traditional six perfections are elaborated into ten through the deepening of the wisdom aspect, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of the Bodhisattva's gradual path of spiritual maturation.

The third objective, conducting a comparative analysis, is informed by the integrative study *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions* by Gyatso and Chodron (2014), which provides a cross-traditional perspective on both convergence and divergence among Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools. Their work underscores the shared ethical foundations while acknowledging philosophical and doctrinal variations, particularly in the orientation toward Buddhahood.

War Yar Mein Da's (2015) doctoral dissertation, *A Study of Pāramī (Pāramitās) as Reflected in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist Tradition*, directly engages the comparative theme. Although focused primarily on the numerical distinctions, ten perfections in Theravāda versus six (or ten) in Mahāyāna, the study offers critical insights into the historical and textual development of perfection practices in both traditions.

Together, these sources form a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the doctrinal, textual, and practical dimensions of pāramī/pāramitā in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, allowing for a nuanced and informed comparative study.

Conceptual Framework

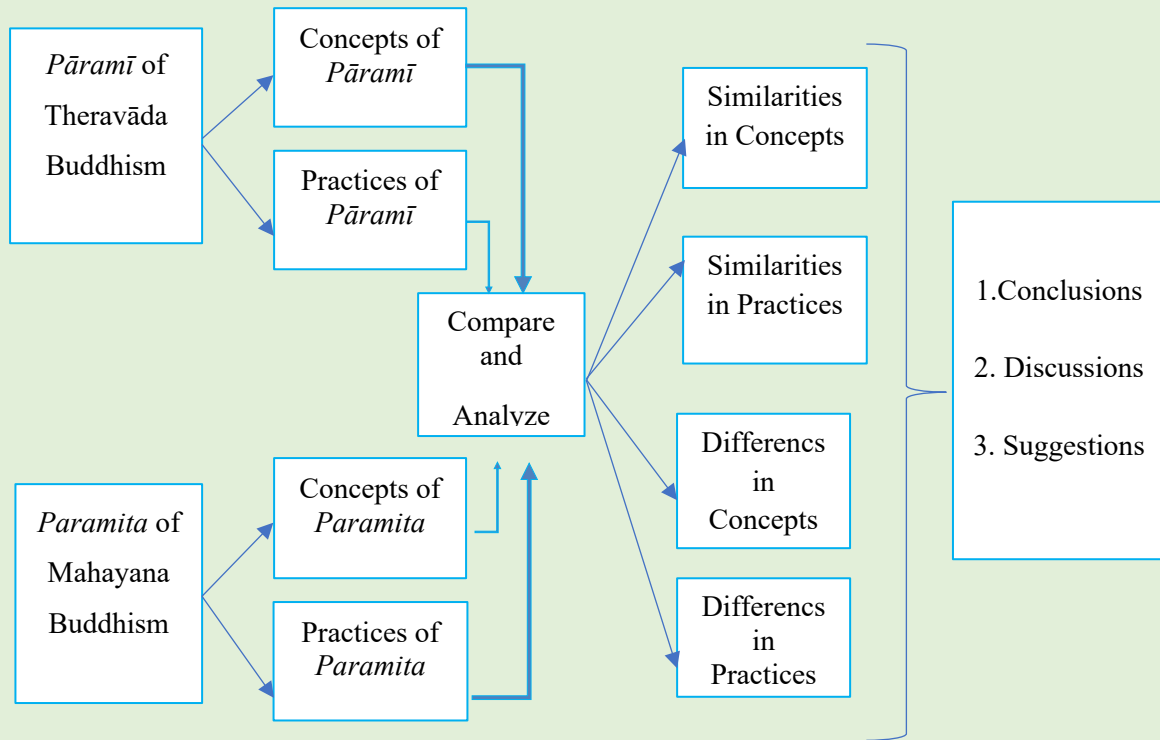


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study is documentary research. The research methodology will be divided into the following four stages.

1 Collecting data on the Pāramīta concept and practices in the Theravada and Mahayana traditions from the English translated source texts of the Pali canon and Tibetan translated sources from the Sanskrit canon.

2 After the collection, analyse and systematizing the collected data into the categories.

3 Discuss the concept and practices of Pāramīta in both traditions. Compare and contrast the differences in the two traditions: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

4 Discuss the problems, differences and similarities among them.

Research Results

The first objective of this study was to examine the concept and practice of pāramī within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. The findings indicate that pāramī is acknowledged primarily as the practice of a Bodhisatta, a being on the path to Buddhahood, as depicted in the Jātaka tales and canonical texts such as the Buddhavaṃsa. To present a coherent understanding of pāramī in Theravāda Buddhism, three interrelated dimensions are essential: (1) the concept of pāramī itself, (2) the figure of the Bodhisatta who cultivates the perfections, and (3) the canonical narratives that illustrate these practices.

1. The Concept of Pāramī

Etymologically, there is no significant difference between the Pāli term pāramī and the Sanskrit pāramitā. Both are employed interchangeably in Buddhist texts, with pāramī more common in Theravāda literature and pāramitā in Mahāyāna sources. According to the classical commentator Ācariya Dhammapāla in *A Treatise on the Pāramī*, the perfections are described as “noble qualities such as giving, etc., accompanied by compassion and skilful means, and untainted by craving, conceit, and views” (Dhammapāla, 1996). This understanding is echoed in later works such as Mingun Sayadaw’s *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas*, emphasising the ethical and altruistic dimensions of perfection.

2. The Bodhisatta Ideal in Early Texts

The term Bodhisatta is consistently used in the early Pāli canon to refer to the previous existences of the Buddha before his enlightenment. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his introduction to Dhammapāla’s treatise, notes that the Buddha used the term Bodhisatta to refer to himself even during his existence in the Tusita heaven, before his final rebirth (Dhammapāla, 1996). Bhikkhu Anālayo (2010) likewise draws attention to canonical references such as “pubbeva me sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisattass’ eva sato” (“before my awakening, while still being an unawakened Bodhisatta”), which appear in early discourses to affirm this self-designation.

3. Canonical Literature on Pāramī Practice

The core canonical sources that detail pāramī practice include the Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpiṭaka, Jātaka tales, Apadāna, and Mahāpadāna Sutta. Among these, the Buddhavaṃsa is particularly significant for its explicit listing of the ten pāramīs, generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), renunciation (nekkhamma), wisdom (paññā), energy (virīya), patience (khanti), truthfulness (sacca), resolution (adhiṭṭhāna), loving-kindness (mettā), and equanimity (upekkhā), in a standardised sequence. While earlier literature alludes to these virtues implicitly, the full tenfold classification appears to have been formalised in post-canonical commentarial traditions.

The early Pāli texts predominantly focus on the attainment of nibbāna through the realisation of the Four Noble Truths and the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. In these contexts, the figure of the Buddha is portrayed as exceptional, his path seen as rare and non-replicable. As Bhikkhu Bodhi (in Dhammapāla, 1996) explains, the Theravāda tradition, being more conservative, prioritizes the arahant ideal based on the historical Buddha's teachings. In contrast, other early schools such as the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṃghika began to entertain multiple valid paths, including that of the Bodhisatta, leading to the formulation of the doctrine of three vehicles (yānas): that of the Śrāvaka, the Paccekabuddha, and the Samyaksambuddha.

4. Interpretation of Pāramī Practice in Jātakas and Commentaries

The Jātaka tales serve as didactic illustrations of the Bodhisatta's cultivation of perfections across countless lifetimes. For example, in the Sasapaṇḍita Jātaka, the Bodhisatta recounts: "When I saw one approaching for alms, I sacrificed myself. There was no one equal to me in giving; this was my perfection of giving." This illustrates the ideal of dāna-pāramī in its ultimate form. Later commentaries, such as the Buddhavaṃsa Aṭṭhakathā, introduce a three-tiered model of perfection: basic (pāramī), higher (upapāramī), and ultimate (paramattha-pāramī). Under this schema, dāna-pāramī is seen as perfected first through the giving of external possessions, then body parts, and ultimately, one's own life (Buddhadatta Thera, 1978).

These gradations reflect a later doctrinal development whereby the pāramī practices were extended beyond the exclusive domain of future Buddhas. The

commentarial literature distinguishes between perfections practised by Śrāvaka-Bodhisattas, Paccekabuddha-Bodhisattas, and Samyaksambuddha-Bodhisattas, though it still asserts that ultimate perfections are unique to those destined for full Buddhahood.

In summary, while early Theravāda canonical texts centre the pāramī exclusively within the Bodhisatta path of a future Buddha, later Theravāda commentaries broadened the scope to include all three aspirant types. The textual development of the pāramī doctrine, especially the codification of the tenfold list and the elaboration of their gradations, illustrates an evolving understanding of spiritual cultivation in the Theravāda tradition. These findings provide critical context for comparative analysis with Mahāyāna perspectives on pāramitā, which will be explored in the subsequent sections of this study.

The second objective of this study focuses on the understanding and application of pāramitā within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. The research reveals that the concept of pāramitā in Mahāyāna is intrinsically connected to the ideals of bodhicitta (the mind of awakening) and the path of the bodhisattva. Unlike Theravāda, where the pāramīs are primarily associated with the previous lives of the historical Buddha, Mahāyāna texts present the pāramitās as universal practices for all beings aspiring to achieve full enlightenment for the benefit of others. In Mahāyāna scriptures, numerous bodhisattva disciples receive teachings directly from the Buddha, particularly on the cultivation of perfections as part of the Bodhisattva Path, with prajñāpāramitā (the perfection of wisdom) regarded as the culmination of these practices.

To fully understand the Mahāyāna conception of pāramitā, three key elements must be considered: (1) the definition and function of pāramitā itself, (2) the role of bodhicitta and the bodhisattva ideal, and (3) the centrality of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras in the Mahāyāna canon.

1. The Concept of Pāramitā in Mahāyāna Buddhism

The term pāramitā is often translated in Mahāyāna traditions as "that which has reached the other shore," signifying transcendence or the attainment of ultimate spiritual realisation. Commonly translated as "perfections," the pāramitās are ethical and spiritual virtues perfected by bodhisattvas on their path to Buddhahood. Geshe Sonam Rinchen (as cited in Shambhala, n.d.) explains that

the six primary pāramitās, generosity (dāna), ethical discipline (śīla), patience (kṣānti), enthusiastic effort (vīrya), meditative concentration (dhyāna), and wisdom (prajñā), are perfected by bodhisattvas motivated by the supreme intention of achieving enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. These perfections, when practised with this altruistic intent, lead to complete awakening.

According to Wright (2009), the pāramitās in Mahāyāna are not merely moral qualities but constitute the foundational disciplines for spiritual training. They are cultivated in conjunction with bodhicitta, without which the practice lacks the transformative power required for full enlightenment.

2. The Bodhisattva Ideal and Bodhicitta

Central to the Mahāyāna framework is the notion of the bodhisattva, one who generates bodhicitta, the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. The generation of bodhicitta marks the spiritual birth of a bodhisattva. As Śāntideva eloquently states in his Bodhicaryāvatāra:

“When the spirit of Awakening has arisen, in an instant a wretch who is bound in the prison of the cycle of existence is called a Child of the Sugata and becomes worthy of reverence in the worlds of gods and humans” (Śāntideva, 1997, p. 23).

Etymologically, bodhicitta derives from the Sanskrit roots bodhi (awakening) and citta (mind or consciousness), commonly translated as “the mind of enlightenment” or “awakening mind” (Wright, 2016). The earliest systematic explanation is attributed to Maitreya in the Ornament of Clear Realisation, where bodhicitta is defined as the aspiration to attain complete enlightenment for the benefit of others (Maitreya, 2002).

The cultivation of bodhicitta is seen not only as a prerequisite for entry into the Mahāyāna path but also as a sustaining force throughout the ten bhūmis (stages) of the bodhisattva path. It serves as the compass guiding the practitioner’s actions, while wisdom (prajñā) functions as the method for actualising those aims. This dynamic relationship is often summarised in Mahāyāna teachings: bodhicitta is like the eyes that direct one’s course, while prajñā is the feet that walk the path (Gyatso & Chodron, 2014).

3. The Prajñāpāramitā Literature

Among the most important scriptural sources in Mahāyāna is the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra collection, also known as the “Perfection of Wisdom” texts. These texts expound on the nature of ultimate reality through the lens of transcendental wisdom, which understands all phenomena as empty (śūnya) of inherent existence. The Prajñāpāramitā corpus, composed over centuries in various lengths (e.g., 8,000, 18,000, 25,000, and 100,000 verses), remains foundational to Mahāyāna soteriology and philosophy.

The practice of the pāramitās in this context, particularly prajñā, is viewed as transcending ordinary dualistic notions of self and other. Sheng (2001) underscores this view by noting that genuine pāramitā practice must be free from self-centered motivation; otherwise, it cannot be considered true perfection. Practicing the perfections solely for personal benefit contradicts the fundamental Mahāyāna principle of working for the liberation of all beings. Furthermore, the Mahāyāna path is structured through ten progressive bhūmis, or stages of spiritual development, which correspond to the maturation of bodhicitta and the deepening realization of śūnyatā (emptiness). As Gyatso and Chodron (2014) describe, the progression through the bhūmis illustrates the integration of compassion and wisdom, ultimately culminating in Buddhahood.

The Mahāyāna tradition presents a comprehensive and systematic approach to the practice of pāramitās, anchored in the cultivation of bodhicitta and the realisation of wisdom. Unlike the more exclusive emphasis on the Bodhisatta ideal in Theravāda, Mahāyāna opens the path to Buddhahood to all sentient beings through the adoption of the bodhisattva vow and the disciplined cultivation of the six or ten perfections. These findings underscore the centrality of bodhicitta as both the foundation and fuel of the Mahāyāna path and confirm that prajñāpāramitā, the perfection of wisdom, represents the pinnacle of spiritual realisation in this tradition.

Objective three shows that the concepts and practices of perfection in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism can be understood and seen with the following table.

Table 1: The Concepts and Practices of Perfection in Theravada and Mahayana

The Perfection	Theravada	Mahayana
The scriptural Bases	Based on Pali Canonical of The Buddha's Teaching	Based on Sanskrit Canonical of The Buddha's Teaching
The Core Meaning	In Tipitaka and Early Commentaries, it is a Practices of Generosity and So forth accompanied with Compassion. Aimed at Fully Enlighten Buddhahood Later Commentators Have Widened the Scope of Perfection to Other Vehicles.	Any Practices accompanied by Compassion and Skillful Means-Wisdom Aimed at Fully Enlighten Buddhahood.
The Practitioner- Bodhisatta or Bodhisattva	In Tipitaka and early commentaries, Bodhisattas destined to be a Fully Enlighten Buddha. Later commentators attributed the practice of the perfections to sravaka and Pacceka-buddha. Eight conditions are mentioned to fulfil to be a Bodhisatta	Practiced only by Bodhisattvas who are destined to be a fully enlighten Buddha. Conditions like male born and so forth are not mentioned rather everyone can become a Buddha especially in Tantrayāna teachings.
The goal	The Goal in Tipitaka and Early Commentaries is Always a Complete Buddhahood.Later Commentators Have Introduced Three Kinds of Enlightenment with Three Kinds of Practitioners	The Goal of Practicing the Perfection Is Always a Complete Enlightens Buddhahood.
Quantitatively or qualitative	Quantitatively	Qualitatively
The practice of Bodhisattva or bodhisatta vows	Available in the teachings Individuals practicing as a bodhisatta by taking vows are possible. No mass traditions and practice of taking bodhisatta vows	Available in the teachings Individuals do take bodhisattva's vows. Practice of taking bodhisattva's vows, rituals in a mass way.
Practical aspects of bodhisattva and bodhicitta	Practical aspect of bodhisatta ideal can be seen in the past history and in the teachings.	Bodhisatta ideal are always present around the Buddha in sūtras.

The Perfection	Theravada	Mahayana
	Not very popular practices and recognized someone as bodhisatta. One can practice with the method of Brahma vihara teachings	Very popular to recognize highly developed spiritual seekers as bodhisattva. The practices can be one with different methods like Sevenfold cause and effect instructions
The path of perfections	Path as a Bodhisatta going to be a fully enlighten being is not mentioned.	Five Mahayana paths Ten bodhisattva grounds
The scope of compassion	Towards all the sentient beings. Emphasis by the way of meditation and ethical conducts.	Towards all the sentient beings. Emphasis by the way of skillful means and wisdom.
The perfection qualities suggested for householders.	Dāna Sīla Khanti Sacca	Dāna Sīla Khanti

Discussions

In conducting a comparative study of the perfections (pāramī/pāramitā) within the two major contemporary classifications of Buddhism, Theravāda and Mahāyāna, it is important to clarify several critical points that often lead to misunderstanding, especially in modern discourse.

First, a distinction must be made between dāna (generosity) and dāna pāramī (the perfection of generosity). While all acts of dāna are commendable, they do not automatically constitute dāna pāramī. According to the Theravāda commentator Ācariya Dhammapāla, for dāna to qualify as a pāramī, it must be accompanied by compassion, skilful means, and be free from defilements such as craving and conceit (Dhammapāla, 1996). Thus, while all dāna pāramī are dāna, not all dāna are pāramī.

This distinction is crucial, especially as many scholars and practitioners often equate general acts of generosity with the formal pāramī practices, leading to the erroneous belief that pāramī teachings are commonly found in the core Theravāda Nikāyas such as the Saṃyutta Nikāya. In reality, the explicit framework of the pāramīs is primarily preserved within texts of the Khuddaka

Nikāya, particularly the Apadāna, Buddhavaṃsa, Cariyāpiṭaka, and Jātaka collections. These works centre around the bodhisatta ideal and the cultivation of the ten perfections over countless lifetimes.

Moreover, canonical Theravāda texts refer to the bodhisatta exclusively in the context of the Buddha's previous lives (or those of other Buddhas), emphasizing that pāramī is a path unique to those destined for full enlightenment. As such, it remains a subject of scholarly debate whether pāramī can be rightly attributed to the practices of Śrāvakas (disciples). While post-canonical commentaries such as the Buddhavaṃsa Aṭṭhakathā suggest that pāramī may be relevant to Śrāvaka-Bodhisattas and Paccekabuddha-Bodhisattas (Buddhadatta Thera, 1978), this extension is not found in the early canonical sources and is, therefore, best understood as a later doctrinal development rather than an original Theravādin teaching.

The idea of three types of bodhisattas, Mahābodhisatta, Paccekabodhisatta, and Sāvaka-bodhisatta, is also a product of later commentarial literature. If we accept this classification, then the pāramī path is not exclusive to future Buddhas, which raises questions about the earlier canonical portrayal of these practices as unique to the Buddha's path to awakening.

Another significant observation is that, within Theravāda, the teachings on pāramī have not enjoyed widespread emphasis in mainstream practice, primarily because the tradition centres around the arahant ideal rather than the aspiration for sammāsambuddhahood (perfect enlightenment). However, Theravāda does not preclude individuals from aspiring to Buddhahood, even though such aspirations are rare and not systematically encouraged (Dhammapāla, n.d.).

On the Mahāyāna side, the term "Mahāyāna" (Great Vehicle) historically refers to two key features: (1) the Bodhisattva Path as an expression of universal compassion (mettā-bhāvanā) and (2) the philosophical systems of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, which build on the Theravāda doctrine of anattā (non-self) and develop it further into a broader metaphysical framework (Nāgārjuna, 1975; Chatterjee & Datta, 2021). Importantly, the term Mahāyāna does not signify a geographically bound school or sect but rather an idealised path centred on altruistic enlightenment.

Interestingly, from the Mahāyāna perspective, the pāramī teachings found in Theravāda texts could be interpreted as consistent with Mahāyāna values, particularly when framed within the Bodhisattva ideal. However, it is essential to distinguish between classical Mahāyāna philosophy and the modern sociological label “Mahāyāna Buddhism,” which may differ in emphasis and institutional development.

Throughout this comparative study, it becomes evident that the foundational principles of both traditions share many commonalities, especially in their early formulations. Over time, differences emerged due to the evolution of terminology, philosophical systems, and pedagogical methods. What now appears as divergent may be variations on a shared conceptual core.

Consequently, it would be intellectually and spiritually productive for followers of both traditions to remain open to the insights and practices of the other. Rather than clinging to rigid doctrinal boundaries, there is an opportunity to foster a more integrated and compassionate spiritual culture, one that values both the diversity and unity of the Buddhist path.

Knowledge from Research

In Theravada pāramī, it is very clear that the later commentators approached the practices of the ten pāramītas as pertinent to the three kinds of practitioners, whereas the early literature emphasised that pāramī practice was only attributed to the Bodhisatta who was going to be a Buddha in future. It can also be seen this way: the ten pāramī practices can be practised by all kinds of practitioners, including hearers (śrāvaka). However, if we stick to the approach of canonical literature, it is not considered a pāramī unless it is accompanied by compassion and skilful means (as mentioned by Acharya Dharmapala). So, it is only through Acharya Dharmapala’s commentaries which clarify what makes the practices of Dāna and so forth into pāramīs. The Treatise on the Pāramīs, written by the great Pāli commentator Dharmapala and found in his commentary on the Cariyāpiṭaka and sub-commentary to the Brahmajāla Sutta, explains the ten pāramīs as a practice of the bodhisatta.

In Mahayana schools, Bodhicitta is like the eyes, which show the direction, and Wisdom is like the legs, which lead one to move upwards on the path and ground towards Buddhahood. According to the Mahayana teachings, to be on the

Bodhisattva or Mahayana path, there is no other way other than through generating the bodhi mind or Bodhicitta. However, one will never move ahead on the path towards Buddhahood unless “prajñā” or the “wisdom” is practised. In order to have the wisdom, one needs to work on the rest of the pāramītas. Still, it does not mean that only those six or ten perfections are the only practice of prajnapāramīta. Every practice by a Bodhisattva, including the Four Noble Truths, meditation

Studying the comparison of the two teachings available in the Buddhist world right now, the perfection concept is originally present in the Theravada teaching and more developed in Mahayana teachings. But later Theravada commentaries tried to make it more relevant to the other kind of practitioner and introduced words like Pacceka-bodhisatta and Savaka-bodhisattas.

The original ideas, concepts and practices are actually same in both the teachings; right the present teachings see many differences due to development in the ideas, concepts and practices.

Conclusion

At their core, the concepts of perfection, whether termed pāramī in Theravāda or pāramitā in Mahāyāna, share a common origin and fundamental understanding: they represent the Bodhisattva path aimed at achieving full enlightenment. While rooted in early Theravāda teachings, their meaning and objective align closely with Mahāyāna explanations, highlighting a shared pursuit of ultimate realization. Over time, later Theravāda commentators broadened the scope of this path, extending its relevance beyond just Bodhisattas to encompass the practices of Sāvākayana (disciples) and Pacceka Buddha (solitary realizers). This expansion effectively made the path of perfection more accessible and applicable to a wider range of practitioners within the Theravāda tradition, recognizing diverse forms of spiritual aspiration and attainment.

The divergence between the two traditions becomes evident in their respective textual foundations and subsequent interpretive developments. Theravāda primarily relies on the Pāli Canon, emphasizing the accumulation of virtues through a more quantitative approach to pāramī. This focus often translates into a methodical cultivation of specific qualities. Conversely, Mahāyāna, drawing upon a vast corpus of Sanskrit sutras, developed a more

qualitative and nuanced understanding of pāramitā. This is exemplified by the introduction of concepts like bodhicitta, the altruistic aspiration for enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, and an emphasis on the transformative power of wisdom and skillful means. The Mahāyāna tradition also distinctively features the practice of taking mass Bodhisattva vows, underscoring a communal commitment to universal salvation—a feature not explicitly found in Theravāda.

Despite these differing emphases and practices, the underlying spirit of compassion and the pursuit of enlightenment remain central to both traditions. Both pāramī and pāramitā serve as frameworks for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and the cultivation of profound wisdom. They represent the arduous yet ultimately liberating journey undertaken by the Buddha in countless previous lives, demonstrating that the path to awakening is open to all who cultivate these perfections. The comparative study reveals that while the expressions of the path may vary, the ultimate aspiration to transcend suffering and realize complete liberation is a shared aspiration that bridges these two significant branches of Buddhism.

Suggestions

This topic being a vast to research upon, there are many loopholes to be filled. But the researcher has focused mostly on the Tipiṭaka of Theravāda and Tibetan, compositions by early Indian and Theravāda commentators rather than focusing on the modern diverse compositions.

Regarding this research, the researcher would suggestion the following points in future if any further research need to be done on this topic.

1. The subject of the research being a vast one, the researcher has touched only the original texts of Theravāda teachings and their early commentaries. For the Mahāyāna perfections, it has research mostly on the early Indian commentaries and mostly the Tibetan commentaries. So, it has missed or ignored the original Chinese texts related to the perfections concept and practices and the modern commentaries.

2. Buddhism being evolving a lot since the beginning of the teaching into writing from and shifting the writing into various other languages and to various different regions, the actual ideas sometimes keep on expanding or losing its

meaning might also be possible. So, this research has not touched on all other possible ideas.

3. It is highly possible that one could find some practitioners who aspired to become completely enlightened beings in all the so-called classified three groups of the Buddhist world, but the research has not been able to conduct practical ground research on enquiring and identifying the possible number of practitioners.

4. How the perfectionist practices can be secular and especially for those who do not identify with any kind of schools or religions, can be studied considering a spiritual practice leading to a higher understanding and perceptions.

5. The six pāramītas are distinctively Mahayanist, as they appear in texts like the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras. However, were they originally developed by Mahāyāna, or did they draw on teachings from earlier schools such as the Mahāsaṅghika and Sarvāstivāda? This point remains unclear to modern scholars.

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