The Six Perfections Summary Sheet

(Pages 72-73 in the Buddhism textbook)

This summary sheet is to help you learn about the Six Perfections of a Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. According to the AQA specification you need to know the following things:

‘• The six perfections in the Mahayanan tradition:

1 generosity  
2 morality  
3 patience  
4 energy  
5 meditation  
6 wisdom,

including how the individual develops these perfections within themselves.’

Some key words have obvious meanings but in the exam you may be asked to define any of the words used in the specification so they are defined for you below.

Terminology

**abstain** - to avoid doing something;/to do without something

**Bodhisattva** - in Mahayana Buddhism, an enlightened person (a buddha) who can now be freed from all suffering but instead has chosen to remain in the cycle of rebirth to help others become enlightened

**compassion** - feeling concerned for the suffering of other people

**the Dhamma**  - the teaching of the Buddha

**energy** - the fourth of the Six Perfections about staying mentally strong for a very long time

**ethics** - the study of right & wrong behaviour/good & bad behaviour

**ethical** - to do with right & wrong behaviour

**the Five Moral Precepts** - five principles that Buddhists follow to live ethically

**generosity** - willingness to give to others

**meditation** - a Buddhist practice of concentrating peacefully for a long time on an idea

**morality** - behaviour that is ethically good; doing what is good and right

**patience** - the ability to wait a long time; the ability to avoid become angry or frustrated

**scripture** - holy books

**the Six Perfections** - the six qualities or virtues that Mahayana Buddhists try to develop in order to live as Bodhisattvas

**skilful** - good, ethical actions or behaviour

**unskilful** - bad, unethical actions or behaviour

**virtue** - a positive aspect of a person’s character, like faithfulness or honesty

**wisdom** - intelligence, sensibleness, insight, understanding

What are the Six Perfections?

In **Mahayana** Buddhism the ideal aim is to become a Bodhisattva and after that, to help all beings achieve enlightenment. In order **to become a Bodhisattva a Buddhist must** achieve all of the Six Perfections in their own life. These are:

1. generosity or giving
2. morality
3. patience
4. energy
5. meditation
6. wisdom.

Generosity

There are **three types** of generosity in **Tibetan Buddhism**:

1. giving material **goods** like food, clothes, money;
2. giving **protection from fear** – helping others who are in trouble or afraid;
3. **giving the Dhamma** (teaching it to people).

Giving the Dhamma is seen as the best one because it helps people to help themselves and find solutions to their problems. The intention behind giving is also important. A person should **give without expecting** anything in return.

Morality

This involves following the **Five Precepts**. (See the summary sheet on the Five Precepts or the Buddhism textbook page 70-71.) This means Buddhists should be non-violent, vegetarian, non-thieves who abstain from misusing sex, alcohol or drugs and who tell the truth.

Mahayana Buddhists also follow an ***extra* five precepts**:

* not to talk about other people’s errors or faults;
* not to praise oneself/not to speak badly of others;
* not to be stingy;
* not to be angry;
* not to speak badly of the Three Refuges (the Buddha, the Dhamma & the Sangha).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rather than a list of rules they will see these things as positive helps to become happy.

Patience

This means that the Mahayana Buddhist will aim to have great **endurance** and **tolerance** in the face of suffering and frustrations. They will try to show patience to those who treat them with anger or behave unskilfully towards them. Acceptance of the first Noble Truth (**dukka** - the existence of suffering) is a major help with this.

Energy

This is about **mental energy** and the ability to concentrate on meditation or study for a long time. It also is about having **energy to live out the Dhamma** for a whole lifetime or lifetimes.

Meditation

This is important for the **development of wisdom** and all virtues. By meditating on generosity, morality, etc. the Buddhist tries to achieve the Six Perfections in his or her life. The aim is to pick one thing and think about it in all of its aspects and consider how it could be applied to one’s life. (See also the Meditation Summary handout or the textbook pages 52-57, 68-69.)

Wisdom

Through the other five perfections wisdom is achieved. By doing these things the Buddhist is to gain **great understanding** **of how to live morally**, perform skilful actions and follow the Dhamma. Wisdom must be combined with compassion; not just a useful thing for oneself.

How the individual develops the Six Perfections

1. First, **meditation** is one of the main ways, as mentioned above.
2. Second, the Buddhist will try to live out the perfections by **trial and error** in their life, seeking to learn from their mistakes.
3. They may turn to other Buddhists for **advice** on this.
4. They may also study the **scriptures**.

Possible Exam Questions

Explain two types of generosity. (4 marks)

Explain two ways in which the Six Perfections could be applied to the treatment of criminals. (4 marks)

Explain two of the ways in which a Mahayana Buddhist will try to develop the Six Perfections in their life. In your answer you must refer to scripture. (5 marks)

Explain two of the Six Perfections. In your answer you must refer to scripture. (5 marks)

‘It is impossible to achieve the Six Perfections.’ (12 marks)

‘Generosity is the easiest of the Six Perfections to achieve.’ (12 marks)

1. You do not need to memorise this list but being aware of it will help you. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)