

THE PRACTICE OF THE BODHISATTVA PATH

Buddhism is a religion that emphasizes practice, but it is also a philosophy with ethical characteristics. The Buddhist sutras contain many profound doctrines on truth and the universe, and in this sense it can be considered a philosophy. However, Buddhism places great emphasis on the application of morality and ethics to life, so it can be classified as a religion. In fact, the Buddha himself was regarded as a moral role model. After the Buddha attained awakening, he repeatedly taught that we should, "Do nothing that is unwholesome, do all that is wholesome, and purify the mind" with the hope that all sentient beings could purify themselves through moral conduct.

Practicing the bodhisattva path is just like any other kind of learning; one must go step by step. From the state of an ordinary person who has afflictions to the state of the bodhisattva who has cut off all defilements, there are definite stages of cultivation. In order to progress through these stages and become a sage, a bodhisattva must fulfill the thirty-seven aspects of awakening, the four means of embracing, and the six perfections.

However, the most important teaching for developing the bodhisattva path is that of the six perfections. Called the six *paramita* in Sanskrit, it means "leading to the other shore" or having accomplished the goal of awakening. The six perfections liberate us from delusion and lead us to awakening, liberate us from evil and lead us towards the right path, and liberate us from suffering and grant us happiness. The six perfections liberate all sentient beings from the shore of affliction and ferry them to the other shore of liberation. The six perfections are forms of practice that bodhisattvas must cultivate in order to become Buddhas:

1. *The perfection of giving.* To be generous without any attachment to form is the perfection of giving. All gifts should be given without any attachment to what is being given, who is giving, or who is receiving the gift. This is

the way that a bodhisattva gives.

2. *The perfection of morality.* This is to respect and not violate sentient beings. Observing the Buddhist precepts, acting in accordance with right Dharma, and practicing the path of benefiting sentient beings is the bodhisattvas' way of upholding the precepts.
3. *The perfection of patience.* This is the sense of equanimity that allows us to endure what is difficult to endure. To learn all teachings, one should practice patience by being tolerant in the face of persecution, by being accepting amidst adversity, and by contemplating all truths. When one is able to do what is difficult to do and endure what is difficult to endure without retreating in fear, this is the bodhisattvas' way of practicing patience.
4. *The perfection of diligence.* This means to fearlessly refrain from what is unwholesome and do what is wholesome. Bodhisattvas do not fear obstacles, but diligently develop courage, diligently practice the Dharma, and diligently bring joy and benefit to others. They do not tire of teaching even the most obstinate of sentient beings and apply their efforts ceaselessly.
5. *The perfection of meditative concentration.* This means to not differentiate with the mind and maintain right mindfulness. Bodhisattvas apply meditative concentration to settle themselves and others, and to demonstrate right mindfulness to all sentient beings.

6. *The perfection of prajna-wisdom.* *Prajna* is the great wisdom that is beyond the duality of emptiness and existence. Bodhisattvas skillfully apply their *prajna*-wisdom to inspire sentient beings to do what is right and good, and gradually liberate them from their suffering.

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Ven. Master Hsing Yun

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The vehicle of the bodhisattva

That all Buddhism has a bodhisattva path follows from the fact that all Buddhism knows the story of the ascetic variously named as Megha (in the *Mahāvastu*) or Sumedha (in Pali sources) and

his meeting with a previous buddha, Dīpaṅkara. Megha could have chosen to become a disciple of Dīpaṅkara and followed the path to awakening, and thus become an arhat in that very life. If he had done so that would have been the end of the matter: there would have been no Gautama Buddha, only the arhat Megha. But he did not follow the path to immediate arhatship; instead he chose to practise the perfections (*pāramitā/pāramī*) and so eventually—many, many lifetimes, many, many aeons later—he became the *samyaksam-buddha*, Gautama. The reason for Megha's decision is that he was inspired by the compassionate ideal of the bodhisattva path: having become awakened himself, he would lead others to awakening.⁴ The traditional notion of the arhat is that he becomes awakened and then effectively disappears from saṃsāra; the bodhisattva, on the other hand, spends many aeons in saṃsāra perfecting spiritual qualities, and, in the process, working for the benefit of sentient beings; eventually he becomes a fully awakened buddha, but only when the teaching of the previous buddha has disappeared from the world. In choosing the path of the bodhisattva, Megha thus forgoes his own immediate release from suffering, as an arhat, in order to become a buddha and teach the path to the cessation of suffering to other beings.

Thus even 'Mahāyānists' (people who accept the Mahāyāna vision) do not necessarily begin their spiritual practice with the motivation of the bodhisattva simply established in their hearts; they must first undertake various practices in order to arouse and cultivate this motivation in the form of 'the mind of awakening' (*bodhi-citta*): spiritual practice begins by letting go of the delights of this world, by arousing a sense of the pain and suffering of saṃsāra and desiring release; it is only then that the motivation of the bodhisattva becomes crucial.¹¹ That is to say, at the beginning of the path we are almost inevitably primarily motivated by the wish to rid ourselves of our own individual suffering; it is only as we progress along the path that we come to understand that, in fact, suffering is above all something that beings share in common; with the dawning of this realization we are moved by compassion and the desire to help others; our motivation for following the path shifts and we enter the Mahāyāna proper. The bodhisattva thus at once turns away from saṃsāra as a place of suffering and at the same time turns back towards it out of compassion for the suffering of the world: