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# **On Becoming a Bodhisattva**

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# On Becoming a Bodhisattva

Often, when discussing bodhisattvas, we immediately think of the clay or wooden statues that we pay our respects to in temples, or we conjure up images of paintings or sculptures we have seen of these enlightened individuals. Most people think of bodhisattvas as deities who have many supernatural powers and are mystical, beyond the range of human vision. We think of bodhisattvas as beings who have the Midas touch, are able to command the wind and rain, and can bestow wealth upon us. Actually, bodhisattvas are not deities that sit above us or are beyond our comprehension; the bodhisattva's presence is not distant, but right here in the midst of us. Bo-

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dhisattvas are not idols to whom we make offerings and pay respects. A true bodhisattva is to be found among us, for a true bodhisattva is someone rich in compassion and most earnest in delivering all sentient beings within the six realms of existence.

Throughout history, there were many examples of men and women who truly lived in the spirit of a bodhisattva. For example, Master Ouyi of the Ming Dynasty was one of the four renowned masters of that time and was known for his strict observance of the precepts. Although he was a well-cultivated bhiksu and a key figure in Chinese Buddhism, he did not regard himself as a bhiksu; instead, he called himself a bodhisattva. More recently, there is the example of Master Taixu, who was known for his compassion and dedication to revitalizing Chinese Buddhism. He once said of himself: “A bhiksu I am not, nor have I become a Buddha; instead, I hope, to be called a bodhisattva.” From this, we can see that it is more acceptable to call someone a bodhisattva than to address someone as a bhiksu. There is also the contemporary example of Master Cihang, who vowed that, as a testimonial to his attainment, his physical body would not perish after his passing. When he

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was alive, he liked to be addressed as a bodhisattva. After his passing, his body, indeed, did not perish, and it is still kept at Xichi for people to pay their respects. To honor his wish, he is called the “Cihang Bodhisattva,” which means he is a bodhisattva of compassion and can ferry us across the sea of suffering.

From the above examples, we can see that we can all become bodhisattvas as long as we have the commitment to “seek the Buddha Way and deliver all beings.” In fact, we describe anyone who has made such a commitment as a “bodhisattva with initial determination.” Among lay Buddhists, we call elder lay Buddhists “senior bodhisattvas,” and those who are new to the religion “bodhisattvas with new resolve.” Lay Buddhists also address each other as “so and so bodhisattva.” Thus, the term “bodhisattva” is not limited to enlightened individuals whose statues we see in temples; in fact, we address all those who are determined to embark on the Buddha path as bodhisattvas.

Master Taixu once said, “A truly cultivated person is, in fact, a Buddha.” What this means is that, to reach the perfection of a Buddha, one must first start

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cultivation as a person. In fact, the Buddhist teachings of the human vehicle are as applicable to us as they are to bodhisattvas. With determination, any one of us can become a bodhisattva. Mencius once made a similar observation: “As honorable as Emperor Shun<sup>1</sup> was, as great as Yu<sup>2</sup> was, any determined person is, too.” Of course, there are many stages of bodhisattva development. There are the ten stages of faith, the ten stages of prajna, the ten lines of activities for the universal welfare of others, the ten transfers of merits, and the attainment of ten merits. These stages constitute the first fifty of the fifty-two stages of a bodhisattva toward Buddhahood. Following these fifty stages is the attainment of enlightenment. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Manjusri Bodhisattva are examples of this stage. The development of a bodhisattva is not unlike going through our educational system. Though students in elementary school, middle school, and college are all called students, they do differ in the level of knowledge acquired. Our goal is to make a certain amount of progress in

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<sup>1</sup> A great emperor in ancient China.

<sup>2</sup> A great historical figure credited with saving his country from floods.

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our development as a bodhisattva. But then, how do we move ourselves through the bodhisattva stages?

## **I. The Bodhisattva Character—Selflessness and Compassion**

The development of religious faith calls for a religious disposition. Key elements of the Buddha's development into a fully enlightened individual are his compassion, love, and kindness for all beings. Similarly, what makes an arhat an arhat is his inclination for the peace of nirvana as he shuns worldly existence. As we are all different in character and disposition—some of us are friendly and generous, while others are distant and reclusive—it is good to know what kinds of persons are most inclined to becoming bodhisattvas. To answer this, one should first understand the character of a bodhisattva. Two words best describe the character of a bodhisattva—selflessness and compassion. Selflessness and compassion work hand in hand: with the sense of selflessness comes the sensibility of compassion, and out of the spirit of compassion arises the wisdom of selflessness.

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Let us first understand the embedded meaning of the word “bodhisattva.” This is a Sanskrit word made up of two parts. The first part “bodhi” means enlightenment, while the second part “sattva” refers to any sentient being. Thus, if we analyze the term “bodhisattva,” it embodies “enlightenment and sentience,” and it means “a sentient being with the mind for the truth.” There are two aspects to the term “enlightenment and sentience.” First, it speaks of the commitment and dedication to seek enlightenment, in other words, one’s own efforts in the attainment of ultimate wisdom. Thus, we also describe a bodhisattva as one who seeks the path. Second, the term “enlightenment and sentience” speaks of the devotion to bringing enlightenment to all sentient beings, in other words, efforts for the benefit of all. This is the manifestation of compassion, and it explains why we also describe a bodhisattva as one who delivers sentient beings. Thus, we can see that a bodhisattva embodies, on the one hand, the arhat spirit of transcending the world and seeking the ultimate truth and, on the other hand, the Buddha’s compassion and zeal in wanting to deliver all sentient beings. Indeed, a bodhisattva is one who “seeks the Buddha Way and

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delivers all beings,” an enlightening practitioner who finds fulfillment in the fulfillment of others.

When we think of bodhisattvas, we inevitably think of their kindness and compassion. Like arhats, bodhisattvas strive to practice liberation. Unlike arhats, bodhisattvas are rich in their great kindness and compassion. When bodhisattvas witness our suffering, their flames of compassion are ignited, and they vow to help us free ourselves from suffering. This is in contrast with arhats, who develop a dislike for worldly existence when they see through the conflicts of the world and the suffering of rebirth. Arhats, hence, are focused on attaining *liberation* and entering nirvana. In Buddhist literature, we compare bodhisattvas to “great vehicles” that can ferry sentient beings across the sea of suffering, while arhats are often described as “small vehicles” that are available solely for their own personal use. While the goals of bodhisattvas and arhats are similar, they differ in their approach. The difference lies in the compassion of bodhisattvas, which gives bodhisattvas their empathy toward others’ pain. Compassion is, indeed, the source of energy that provides bodhisattvas with the strength to practice the Mahayana

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spirit of attaining fulfillment for oneself through the fulfillment of others.

What, then, is compassion? The sutras describe compassion as the foundation of the Dharma. It is out of compassion that the Buddha taught the Dharma for more than forty years, gave more than forty thousand Dharma talks, and left us the numerous teachings of the Tripitaka. From this we can see the enormous significance of compassion! There are two aspects of compassion: loving-kindness and sympathy. Loving kindness refers to the sharing of joy (heavenly joy, meditative joy, and the joy of nirvana) and sympathy refers to the removal of pain, the indescribable pain of being reborn in the three suffering realms of animals, hungry ghosts, and hell. With great loving kindness, bodhisattvas heal us of our sicknesses; with great sympathy, bodhisattvas understand our pain. This form of great compassion is markedly different from and is a step beyond the loving and caring emotions with which we are familiar. It is much deeper in meaning and much more embracing. The compassion that bodhisattvas have for sentient beings can be described as a mix of the stern fatherly love and the tender motherly love that our parents have for us,

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always available and willing to sacrifice themselves for our welfare. The great kindness and compassion of bodhisattvas can be compared to the warmth of the sun that is available to all without discrimination; their compassion is limitless, as they listen to all our pleas without reservation. With great wisdom and compassion, bodhisattvas tailor their help to our varying situations as they guide us across the sea of suffering. The best example of a bodhisattva is, of course, the Great Compassionate Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, whose compassion and kindness is universally known. With great compassion, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva made the twelve great vows of helping all sentient beings cross the sea of suffering. When we call to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva for help and guidance, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva manifests in different forms to help us regardless of where we are. Based on the situation and the need, Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva has manifested as a celestial being, as a woman, and as a young boy. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva has been seen carrying a fish basket, riding a dragon, living among bamboo groves, and holding a willow tree branch. In fact, we often use the term “the thirty-two manifestations of Avalo-

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kitesvara Bodhisattva” to describe the many manifestations of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva coming to our aid during our times of crises. This very ability to manifest in differing forms depending on the situation is, in fact, a direct result of the Bodhisattva’s great and selfless compassion.

Taking this a step further, the other side of compassion is selflessness. In the hearts and minds of bodhisattvas, there is no self, just sentient beings. Regardless of what we need—be it money, property, or even his or her life—bodhisattvas willingly give to us without reservation. In the *Jataka Sutra*, a sutra about the previous lives of the Buddha, there is a story about a time when the Buddha was cultivating to be a bodhisattva. In this particular life, the Buddha was also born as a prince. One day, when he was out traveling in the woods with two of his brothers, he saw below a cliff a mother tiger that had just given birth to seven baby cubs. Because of overexertion, the mother tiger became so weak that her life was hanging in the balance. In the meantime, the baby cubs were all crying to be nursed. When the prince saw how sad the situation was, his compassion arose in him, and he decided to sacrifice his life to save the

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life of the mother tiger. He distracted his two brothers and jumped down to the mother tiger so that he might offer himself as a meal for her. The mother tiger was, however, so weak that she did not even have the strength to feed on him. Anxious to save the tigress, he used a sharp blade of bamboo bark to sever his own throat. With the blood gushing out, and disregarding his own pain, the prince slowly crawled to the side of the mother tiger so that she could drink his blood. In giving up his life, he was able to save the life of the mother tiger and her cubs. In the *Jataka Sutra*, there is another story about another lifetime of the Buddha when he was a king. The king loved his subjects and was very generous to his people. He established posts throughout his land to provide relief to whoever needed it. There was even an incident when he tried to save the life of a pigeon by cutting a piece of his flesh to feed a hawk.

Compassion allowed the prince to forget his own fears and give up his own life for the sake of others. With compassion, bodhisattvas perform many selfless acts for sentient beings. Because of the rich compassion that bodhisattvas have for sentient beings, they are very forgiving of our follies and mistakes.

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They are so willing to make sacrifices without regard for themselves that they reach the point of selflessness. Without regrets and fears, bodhisattvas practice their great compassion, as in the saying, “For the sake of sentient beings, I am willing to part with anything.” The *Lotus Sutra* says, “With the strength of great compassion, bodhisattvas deliver all suffering sentient beings.” Bodhisattvas, who have gone through numerous kalpas of cultivation, have already severed all delusions and attained pure living. Accordingly, they could have entered the peaceful realm of nirvana, but out of compassion for sentient beings, they decide to stay within the wheel of rebirth to guide them through the sea of suffering. They show them Dharma methods, turn the Dharma wheel, and even pledge to be reborn in the three suffering realms to help the suffering beings of these realms. When Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva saw sentient beings suffering in the karmic flames of hell, he asked himself, “If I do not enter the gate of hell, who will?” So, he pledged, “I vow not to enter into Buddhahood until all hells are empty.” This means that he, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, will defer his attainment of Buddhahood as long as there is one single being suffering in hell.

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From the above, we can see that compassion is the underlying cause for one to become a bodhisattva. Compassion gives bodhisattvas strength to help us through the sea of suffering; it is the foundation of the Mahayana spirit. Compassion germinates from the wisdom of selflessness, and is incredibly powerful and strong. If we can all just have a little bit of the “bodhisattva character,” our world will be a much better place; conflicts will diminish and harmony will flourish!

## **II. The Bodhisattva Perspective—Prajna and Sunyata**

In the section above, we discussed compassion as the distinguishing characteristic of bodhisattvas. In addition to compassion, bodhisattvas are also very accomplished in the area of prajna-wisdom. When compassion is integrated with prajna-wisdom, it will not be applied blindly without distinguishing what is right from what is wrong. This is the compassion that bodhisattvas have for us sentient beings. For example, if we share our generosity with one who is a compulsive gambler, we are doing him more harm than good. Thus, only when compassion is mixed

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with prajna-wisdom will it help others to do good. We should not confuse compassion with the blind parental love that can spoil a child, or with trifling acts of permissiveness that can encourage bad behavior. Compassion is like our two legs that make us mobile, and prajna-wisdom is like our two eyes that help us tell the true from the false. To embark upon the path of the bodhisattva, compassion and prajna-wisdom have to complement each other.

What, then, is prajna-wisdom? Prajna-wisdom is the wisdom that allows us to see through worldly differences, such as capable versus inept, physical versus mental, or self versus others. Prajna-wisdom is the “non-discriminating mind,” where the clinging to the discriminating notion of self and other objects is absent. In other words, prajna-wisdom allows us to understand sunyata (emptiness), that self and the universe are mutually interdependent, and all sentient beings and self are one. From a worldly viewpoint, our world is full of differences such as tall and short, poor and rich, filthy and pure, or ignorant and intelligent. From the viewpoint of prajna-wisdom, however, all these differences in phenomena do not exist in an absolute sense; they are nothing but the result of

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varying causes and conditions. All phenomena of the universe—be it physical or mental, be it self or others—do not exist on their own, but as a result of a combination of many factors. This is the Dharma-realm of oneness. In this state of mind, all differences are equal; truth and phenomena are integrated.

Bodhisattvas live in this realm of prajna-wisdom. Thus, bodhisattvas do not look at sentient beings as apart from themselves. Sentient beings are their hearts and minds, and their hearts and minds are sentient beings. Our joys and sorrows are, in fact, their joys and sorrows. Our journeys on the wheel of rebirth are their journeys, too. When we get sick, bodhisattvas also become sick. When we act in a deluded way, bodhisattvas also feel our pain. Because of their “non-discriminating minds,” bodhisattvas see sentient beings as themselves. They continually and tirelessly manifest in our world to help us become clear of our own delusions and cleansed of our own karma. In so doing, they reach the state of mind of “purifying the world with great compassion,” in which everything becomes possible. With the great wisdom of the non-discriminating mind, bo-

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dhisattvas attain the ultimate bodhi (enlightenment) and masterfully lead sentient beings onto the path of enlightenment. With pure and great compassion, bodhisattvas work diligently and effectively to free sentient beings from their ignorance. Great wisdom is self-benefiting as it enables bodhisattvas to strive for the state of ultimate bodhi; great compassion benefits others as it motivates bodhisattvas to stay within the wheel of rebirth to help others cross the sea of suffering. To benefit oneself is to benefit others and to benefit others is to benefit oneself. Striving for enlightenment is the same as being willing to stay within the wheel of rebirth to help others and to stay within the wheel of rebirth to help others is the same as to strive for enlightenment. The eyes of prajna-wisdom and the feet of compassion complement each other, and neither one can be lacking. Prajna-wisdom and compassion are the two sides of a coin. There are two, yet there is one; there is one, yet there are two. Prajna-wisdom and compassion are the core of the bodhisattva principle.

When bodhisattvas cultivate the prajna-wisdom of emptiness, they give it their all, are deeply devoted, and will not hesitate to give up their lives as part of

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their cultivation. In the *Tripitaka* of the Southern Tradition, there is a record about one of the previous lives of the Buddha during the time that Dipankara Buddha was alive in the world. Sakyamuni Buddha was then a Brahman by the name of Sumedha. He was very kind and eager to learn about the Dharma. He often paid his respects to the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. One day, Sumedha learned that Dipankara Buddha was coming to teach in his village. He was delighted and was determined not to miss this opportunity to listen to the Dharma. He thought to himself: The road leading to this remote village is bumpy and treacherous. How can I let the feet of a holy person like Dipankara Buddha walk on such a filthy path? With this in mind, he took off his clothes and used them to cover the road that the Buddha had to use. He also prostrated on the ground and let his hair down for Dipankara Buddha and his many arhat disciples to walk upon. With indescribable joy, he welcomed Buddha Dipankara. When he lifted his head and saw the majestic and august look of Buddha Dipankara, his heart was full of admiration and he said, “In heaven above and on earth below, nothing can compare to the

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Buddha. Within the worlds of ten directions, there is also no comparison. I have seen all in this world, nothing is as great as the Buddha.” At that moment, he vowed to help all sentient beings cross the sea of suffering and to attain the same right effect, i.e. enlightenment, as Dipankara Buddha. It is because of his diligence and effort in learning the Dharma that Sumedha attained Buddhahood nine kalpas before Maitreya Bodhisattva.

The *Astahasrika-prajnaparamita Sutra (Sutra of Eight Thousand Verses of Prajna)* records the touching story of Always-Weeping Bodhisattva. The gist of the story is that Always-Weeping Bodhisattva was often saddened by how difficult it was to meet a virtuous and knowledgeable teacher. He often worried about not being able to listen to the Dharma and thus not being able to grow in prajna-wisdom. This distress often brought tears to his eyes, which was why people referred to him as Always-Weeping Bodhisattva, or they called him Always-Mournful Bodhisattva. In earnest, he traveled far and wide to find the right teacher that could teach him what he did not know. Once, he learned that about five hundred yo-

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janas<sup>3</sup> to the east was a city called the City of Fragrance. There lived a cultivated and accomplished teacher, called Dharmauttara Bodhisattva. Delightfully, Always-Weeping Bodhisattva was determined to travel there to listen to the Dharma. He also decided to hire himself out as a servant so that he could use the money to offer to Dharmauttara Bodhisattva. On the road, he kept asking passers-by if they were willing to pay him to be their servant. There were no takers, however, until a big burly man appeared. This burly man offered to buy one of his body parts or organs to be used as a sacrifice. Always-Weeping Bodhisattva, determined to seek the Dharma, did not hesitate to cut off one of his arms to sell to the burly man. This story soon reached the daughter of a rich local merchant, and she was touched. She then prepared five hundred carts of precious gems and followed Always-Weeping to the City of Fragrance. Afterwards, when Always-Weeping heard Dharmauttara Bodhisattva teaching “Suchness never goes and never comes; the nature of emptiness is, in fact, suchness,” he instantly became enlightened. He en-

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<sup>3</sup> A distance that is about a day’s march for the royal army.

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tered into deep meditative concentration and traveled freely in the sea of prajna-wisdom.

From the earnestness shown by Sumedha and Always-Weeping Bodhisattva in their search for the Dharma, we can see the preciousness of prajna-wisdom and the understanding of sunyata. The *Mahaprajna-paramita Sutra* says, “Prajna paramita is the mother of all bodhisattvas and mahasattvas<sup>4</sup>; it is the source of the Dharma.” On the path to becoming a bodhisattva, the cultivation of prajna-wisdom is of utmost importance. It can be compared to the nourishment of a mother’s milk in helping an infant to grow. Likewise, it is with the rich nutrients of the Dharma that bodhisattvas gradually grow and mature in their spiritual development. As they cultivate the prajna-wisdom of sunyata, they begin to lose the dullness of delusion until they finally reach the pure original state of the mind of emptiness. In this state, they can truly taste the meaning of emptiness—without any notion of a self, any notion of others, any notion of living beings, and any notion of lifespan. When compassion is combined with prajna-wisdom, our compassion will not

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<sup>4</sup> Great bodhisattvas

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cling to any notion of living beings or phenomena. This compassion, which is void of the notion of self and others, can be described as “Great compassion without any conditions, and great kindness as we all are one.” This is why sutras often describe prajna paramita as the mother of the Buddhas of the past, present, and future.

In all Buddha lands, there live many bodhisattvas helping Buddhas deliver sentient beings. Some are known for their compassion, while others are known for their prajna-wisdom. Among the many bodhisattvas, we are most familiar with those bodhisattvas who are often portrayed flanking Buddhas. In the *saha* world, Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva are known to assist Sakyamuni Buddha. In the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva and Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva accompany Amitabha Buddha to welcome sentient beings into the Pure Land. The Pure Land of Azure Radiance has Sunlight Bodhisattva and Moonlight Bodhisattva. Of these bodhisattvas, Manjusri, Mahasthamaprapta, and Sunlight are known for their prajna-wisdom. They may be depicted as riding a fierce lion traveling and teaching

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the Dharma, or using the light of wisdom to pierce through the darkness of delusion, or holding the sun wheel to shower us with light. Regardless of how they are portrayed, they all carry with them the sword of prajna-wisdom, with which they sever all afflictions and delusions.

With great wisdom, bodhisattvas see through the emptiness of the five aggregates and thoroughly understand that all phenomena is empty. As they gain insight into the truth, they live according to the truth and do not harbor any clinging or attachment. Out of compassion for sentient beings, they cannot bear to forsake us, but vow to help us cross the sea of suffering. In order to live up to their vows, they often manifest themselves in our world and travel within the three realms to try to reach us. Even though they know that all phenomena are empty, there is no such thing as a self that can be delivered, and there are no living beings to be delivered, they still wholeheartedly go about delivering all sentient beings. There is a Chinese poem that aptly captures this spirit.

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*Establish places to teach the Dharma knowing they are only reflections of the moon on water.*

*Hold Dharma activities knowing they are nothing more than flowers in the sky.*

*Subdue the evil army knowing it exists only in the mirror.*

*Seek Buddhahood knowing it is empty like a dream.*

In summary, bodhisattvas use their great wisdom to practice their great compassion; they use their great kindness to complete their great wisdom. When both prajna-wisdom and compassion are fully integrated and can be employed at will, then we have attained the ultimate bodhi. With this bodhi, we can be worldly yet transcendental, transcendental yet worldly.

### **III. The Bodhisattva Spirit—Perseverance and Diligence**

In our modern society, speed is everything. In trying to achieve ever-increasing speed, we have airplanes, space shuttles, the Internet, microwave ovens, and instant noodles. As we strive to have

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greater speed in everything, we still have to admit that there is no short cut to building a person's character, and a tree cannot grow to its full height in one day. There is a saying that "The nurturing of trees takes decades; the nurturing of humanity is measured in centuries." Certain things just cannot be hurried. If we want to be an expert in anything, we have to spend at least three to five years in that field. The path to being a bodhisattva is just the same—there is no short cut to it. It takes years, lives, and even kalpas of cultivation for one to become a bodhisattva. In the Olympics, the marathon race is the event that best brings out one's perseverance and stamina. To put it simply, the bodhisattva path of delivering sentient beings and seeking Buddhahood is analogous to that of a marathon race. The sutras tell us that for bodhisattvas to become Buddhas, they have to cultivate for three great asamkhyā kalpas and practice all kinds of Dharma methods. After this, they still have to go through a hundred kalpas until they have accumulated all kinds of bodhi seeds and attained the majestic look of thirty-two marks of excellence and eighty notable physical characteristics. In other words, the journey through the path of truth must be taken a step

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at a time. Bodhisattvas must be steadfast in their patience and endurance, working on their progress without lapsing. Only with the test of time can enlightenment be attained. Thus, the bodhisattva spirit is characterized by perseverance, patience, endurance, and diligence.

How does the bodhisattvas' spirit of perseverance and diligence come about? It comes from the development of their bodhicitta. The *Bodhisattva-bhumi Sutra* says, "When all those who belong to the family of bodhisattvas pledge their bodhicitta and practice with right effort and diligence, they can promptly attain enlightenment." Bodhicitta is the seed of Buddhahood; it is the rich soil in which we can cultivate the pure Dharma. Bodhicitta can wash away all afflictions and can eradicate the delusion of sentient beings. Bodhicitta is like a soft comfortable bed in which bodhisattvas can cradle the weary bodies of sentient beings. With bodhicitta, bodhisattvas are not intimidated by the long and arduous journey to Buddhahood; they can distance themselves from the three realms and dwell in the Dharma-sea of Truth. Bodhicitta is the dedication of bodhisattvas in not giving up on sentient beings as they frequent the sea

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of suffering to become willing vessels to be used by sentient beings as ferries. This spirit of perseverance and diligence is the manifestation of bodhicitta. All in all, the development of bodhicitta also marks the beginning of all great vows. Bodhicitta is the foundation of all bodhi paths and the guiding light of compassion. Without bodhicitta, bodhisattvas will not be able to look beyond our transgressions and work for our betterment. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “The cultivation of Dharma without bodhicitta is evil.” Thus, if we want to cultivate the Mahayana bodhi path, we must first pledge our bodhicitta. The arhat Sudhana found this out in a roundabout way. After he traveled about learning from fifty-three virtuous teachers, he met Maitreya Bodhisattva who told him that he must first pledge his bodhicitta. Maitreya Bodhisattva also told him that once he pledged his bodhicitta, all Buddhas would guide him and show him the way of Mahayana compassion, a path that even sravakas and pratyekabuddhas had yet to reach. From this advice that Maitreya Bodhisattva gave to Sudhana, we can see the significance of pledging our bodhicitta.

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Given that bodhicitta is so important, what exactly is our bodhicitta? Simply put, our bodhicitta is our commitment to “seek the Buddha Way and deliver all beings.” This is such an important subject that the Graduate School of Chinese Buddhism at Fo Guang Shan always includes the study of *An Inspiration to Pledge Our Bodhicitta* in its introductory session for new students. This piece was written by Master Shengan of the Qing Dynasty, the Ninth Patriarch of the Pure Land School of Buddhism. Many people today shun work for comfort and moral values are on the wane. The theme of reminding us to be mindful of the ten causes and conditions can help us discover our bodhicitta. To be mindful of the ten causes and conditions is to be grateful to the Buddhas, grateful for our parents, grateful for our teachers and elders, grateful for our benefactors, grateful for all sentient beings, mindful of the suffering of life and death, respectful of our hearts and minds, remorseful for our transgressions, mindful to be reborn into the Pure Land, and hopeful that the Dharma will stay with us for a long time to come. In the sutras and sastras about bodhicitta, we are told that for us to be bodhisattvas, we have to discover our bodhicitta by

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contemplating all Buddhas, observing the sufferings of the physical body, being compassionate toward all sentient beings, and seeking the holy fruit of enlightenment. To contemplate all Buddhas is to emulate all Buddhas, to be a great person, to have great courage, to be willing to sacrifice our wealth and even our lives, and to seek enlightenment. To observe the suffering of the physical body is to understand that the four great elements and the five aggregates are illusive like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows. To be compassionate toward sentient beings is to be compassionate toward the ignorance of sentient beings, who act in delusion without even realizing it, and thus to become determined to deliver all sentient beings. If we can do this, we have discovered our bodhicitta.

The greatness of bodhisattvas, their perseverance, and their diligence are not what most of us can live up to. Bodhisattvas, however, are not almighty and are not divine. Buddhas are not gods, and the same is true of bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are individual beings like you and me; the difference is that they have discovered their bodhicitta and can persevere with diligence. The sutras speak of an incident during

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which the Buddha was teaching to a group of people and most of those listening accepted and received the Dharma with great joy. There was one individual who was most distracted and could not pay attention to the pure and wondrous Dharma. The Buddha used his supernatural power and spoke most eloquently, most patiently, and most compassionately. Even then, this person stubbornly refused to accept the Dharma. The sutras, therefore, tell us that there are three things that the Buddha cannot do: nullify karmic forces, deliver those without affinity and necessary conditions, and deliver all sentient beings without remainder. Although Buddhas and bodhisattvas understand that they cannot deliver the countless number of sentient beings and cannot deliver those without affinity, the enormity of their goal is matched by their bodhicitta that is just as immense and boundless. Thus, they still strive incessantly to achieve the impossible and continue to toil tirelessly to finish an endless task. Their bodhicitta is like a running stream from the thawed snow pack of the Himalayas—always flowing. When the conditions are ripe, they will melt away our long frozen spirit.

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In the *Lotus Sutra*, there is a bodhisattva called Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva who practiced patience and tolerance. With joined palms and utmost respect, he would greet everyone he met saying, “I dare not be disrespectful of you for you are a future Buddha.” Now, some of these people practiced other religions and were not too happy to be so greeted. Not only did they not return the civility, they even cursed at him, threw stones at him, or waved a club at him. As Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva did not want to aggravate the situation, he would back away respectfully while still muttering to himself, “I dare not be disrespectful of you for you are a future Buddha.” From this, we can see that in the eyes of bodhisattvas, we are all future Buddhas who are presently blinded by our delusion, like a precious gem which has temporarily lost its luster after falling into the mud. Countless kalpas after countless kalpas, bodhisattvas pledge their bodhicitta and practice their great compassion. With unparalleled patience and never ending respect, they wake us up to help us discover our own pure nature. Amitabha Buddha is a perfect example of this kind of spirit. In one of his previous lives, he was Dharmakara Bodhisattva cultivating to become a

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Buddha. It was during this lifetime that he made the forty-eight great vows, the strength of which manifests the majestic Pure Land. Dharmakara Bodhisattva vowed that if there were just one being within his Pure Land that had not discovered his or her bodhicitta, he himself would not attain Buddhahood. Thus, the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss is reserved for bodhisattvas who practice continuously without regress and aim to achieve Buddhahood in one lifetime.

There is no short cut to the bodhisattva spirit. It starts with the initiation of one's bodhicitta and manifests in continual perseverance and never ending diligence. The initiation of the bodhicitta marks one's transformation from the ordinary to the transcendental and is the first step on the path of Buddhahood.

#### **IV. The Bodhisattva Practice—Methodical and Eternal**

Buddhism has been both described as a philosophy and a religion. Why? The Buddhist teachings are profound and have given us much insight into various phenomena of life and the universe. It also differs from other religions in the sense that it

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allows room for one to have questions regarding the teachings. In these respects, Buddhism is very much like a philosophy. Although Buddhism is very logical, it does not stop with theoretical pursuits alone. It places a heavy emphasis on practice; thus, it is also described as a religion. The Buddha himself is a perfect example of one who values the importance of practice. After he attained enlightenment, he gave us this important teaching: “Abstain from all evil, practice only the good and purify the mind. This is the essence of Buddhism.” With this, he left explicit directions for sentient beings to purify their minds through the practice of virtues and morals. When non-Buddhists posed to him purely philosophical questions, the Buddha would remain silent and not answer them. The so-called “fourteen difficult questions<sup>5</sup>” fit into this category. These purely philosophical questions are word games and do not pertain to liberation from suffering or to our everyday lives. From these episodes, we can see that the Buddha

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<sup>5</sup> These are fourteen non-sensical questions of form: All is permanent, impermanent, both or neither; all changes, changes not, both, neither; at death a spirit departs, does not or both, neither; after death we have the same body and spirit, or body and spirit are different.

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places a lot of emphasis and significance on practice. Buddhism is a religion that highlights cultivation; it is also a philosophy that deals with life. Specifically, the Mahayana bodhisattva path is founded on putting the fundamental spirit of the Buddha into practice.

How, then, do we practice the Mahayana bodhisattva path? We should go about it methodically like a student going through the educational system. The “school of bodhisattvas” is not unlike the educational system that starts from kindergarten, to elementary school, to high school, to college, and onto graduate school. The Mahayana bodhisattva path can also be understood in terms of stages: the stage of sentient beings whose lives are characterized by suffering; the stage of arhats who are free from the wheel of rebirth; the stage of enlightened bodhisattvas who have severed afflictions and ill habits; and the stage of Buddhahood or ultimate enlightenment. Even the stage of bodhisattvas can be further subdivided into very many stages depending on the level of practice.

The Mahayana bodhisattva practice is characterized by the thirty-seven conditions (or practices) that guide us to Buddhahood. They are: the four subjects of contemplation; the four proper lines of

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exertion; the four steps toward supernatural power; the five spiritual faculties and their five powers; the seven degrees of enlightenment; and the Noble Eightfold Path. These conditions can cure all bad habits and strengthen our practice. They can sever delusions and help us live according to the Dharma-body, the body of teachings. They are also nourishment for the journey on the bodhisattva path. These thirty-seven conditions originated at the beginning of Buddhism, always serving as critical elements of one's practice. In fact, even those bodhisattvas who have attained the ten merits continue to practice these conditions. In addition to these thirty-seven conditions, bodhisattvas also practice the four means of embracing: giving alms, speaking with affection, conducting oneself for the benefit of others, and adapting oneself to others to lead them to the truth. The giving of alms may be further classified into the giving of money and material goods, the giving of the Dharma, and the giving of fearlessness. Giving should be practiced with the threefold emptiness of giving. This means that when giving one should not have any idea of an "I" as the giver, nor of an individual who receives the gift, nor of things

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being given. When we give without the notion of “I” as the giver, we are letting go of the notion of self. When we give without the notion of a receiver, we are letting go of the notion of dualities. When we give without the notion of how much we are giving or the thought of recompense, we are letting go of the notion of phenomena. This is true giving. Speaking with affection is to speak with compassion and to let our warmth and concern for others come through. The *Lotus Sutra* praises Nagakanya, the daughter of the sea dragon king, with these words: “With compassion, she thinks of all sentient beings as her own children.” Affectionate speech can be compared to the nice warm words of a loving mother. It can dissolve conflicts and turn tyranny into loving-kindness. The meaning of affectionate speech is captured with the saying, “Wondrous fragrance flows from the mouth of one who speaks without hatred.” To conduct oneself for the benefit of others is a very important virtue and means that we engage in activities that benefit all sentient beings, that lead them to the truth. In fact, the earlier two virtues of giving and speaking with affection are supporting activities of this one virtue. As long as our activities benefit sentient be-

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ings, it does not matter how grand or how insignificant our activities are. During the Period of the Warring States in China, there was a famous general by the name of Liubei who gave us this very insightful advice on his deathbed. He said, “Do not commit a wrong deed, however minor; do not miss doing a good deed, however small.” The Buddha once helped his blind disciple, Aniruddha, to mend his clothes. From this, we can see that if we do not start with small acts of virtue, there is no way for us to achieve greatness. Even the Buddha—the fully enlightened one—did not pass up this small act of kindness by mending clothes for his disciple! If we should not pass up the opportunity of doing the smallest of good deeds, we definitely should not miss the opportunity to engage in activities that can benefit all sentient beings. Finally, the virtue of adapting oneself to others to lead them to the truth means that we should put ourselves in others’ shoes so that we can teach according to their perspectives. The thirty-two manifestations of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva is a perfect example of how to adapt the teachings to the person and circumstance. For those who are greedy, we teach them to contemplate the unwholesome as-

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pects of the human body. For those who are full of anger, we teach them to contemplate compassion. When we talk with farmers, we converse about farming; with housewives, we talk about housework. This is no different from the Confucian teaching method of directing your teaching to the audience. All in all, practicing these four means of embracing of leading sentient beings to the truth is a very important cultivation for bodhisattvas.

The six paramitas and the ten paramitas are also key elements in becoming a bodhisattva. The six paramitas are the six ways of leading sentient beings to the shore of nirvana. Within these six paramitas, the three paramitas of giving, observing the precepts, and exercising patience benefit others and are tools for the accumulation of merits and blessings. The other three paramitas of diligence, meditative concentration, and prajna benefit oneself and are nourishment for wisdom. Thus, the practice of the six paramitas brings us both blessings and wisdom. It is also a wondrous way to understand and to be in touch with the Dharma. The paramita of giving has already been discussed in the above paragraph. What is emphasized here is that when we give, we should not

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be concerned about recognition. When we truly give in this spirit, we can experience what Laozi said many years ago, “The more you give, the more you have. The more of yourself you give to others, the more of yourself there is.” What this means is that the more we give, the more we have, and that we will not be short of anything. The observation of precepts can help us control our inclination to do wrong and lessen the karmic effect of our past wrongdoings. Regardless of which precept we are observing, the importance lies in the intention. If our exterior behavior is only a facade and a cover for our ill intentions inside, then we are not living in accordance to the precepts. On the other hand, if our intentions are good, then we are observing the precepts even if we have to bend the rules a little to suit the situation. When the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School of Buddhism was in hiding in the woods, he lived among hunters and ate with them. Under this situation, he could only eat vegetables that had already been cooked with meat, but he was no less cultivated. When we observe the precepts, we have to observe them consistently in our minds and behaviors, continually at all times, and persistently under all circumstances. In observing the

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precepts, one may initially feel restricted and practice with trepidation. With the passing of time, the practice becomes instinctive and one feels at ease with it; this is observing the precepts in the highest form. Next, the paramita of patience and tolerance is a cure for hatred and a tool for resting the body and mind. When we are patient and tolerant, we can resolve conflicts. Many such examples can be found in the *Agama Sutra*. There was a very famous general in Chinese history by the name of Han Xin who was known to be able to endure insults. Before becoming famous, Han Xin was humiliated and made fun of by a bully who demanded that he crawl between his legs. He swallowed his pride and did what the bully demanded of him. His tolerance was not a sign of weakness but a key factor in his becoming a famous general later on. In fact, one cannot emphasize enough the strength that may be derived from patience and endurance. In addition to the three paramitas of giving, observing the precepts, and being patient and tolerant, bodhisattvas also work diligently. When they are steadfast in their practice and refuse to give up, they experience meditative concentration

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from which they will attain prajna. At this point, the reach of bodhi is within sight.

The ten paramitas are the six paramitas mentioned above plus adaptability, vows, force of purpose, and knowledge. Adaptability is a skill that bodhisattvas employ to teach sentient beings so that the teaching is suited to the occasion and to the listener. Vows refer to the vows that bodhisattvas pledged when they first embarked on the path of Buddhahood. Examples include the ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, the twelve great vows of Medicine Buddha, the twelve great vows of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, the eighteen great vows of Manjusri Bodhisattva, and the forty-eight great vows of Dharmakara Bodhisattva. Another example is the four universal vows of a Buddha or bodhisattva: “Sentient beings are infinite, I vow to liberate them; afflictions are infinite, I vow to eradicate them; Dharmas are inexhaustible, I vow to study them; Buddhahood is supreme, I vow to attain it.” The pledging of vows is what gives bodhisattvas the force of purpose and knowledge to fulfill the Mahayana bodhisattva way.

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Over the course of three great asamkhya kalpas, bodhisattvas practice the thirty-seven practices to enlightenment, the four means of embracing, the six paramitas, and the ten paramitas. With practice, bodhisattvas gradually transcend the ordinary and join the ranks of the enlightened. The bodhisattva path is a long road that cannot be finished instantaneously. To traverse this road, one must do it methodically, persistently, and consistently. Only then can one move from one stage to the next and experience the taste of eternal joy at each stage.