

The path of the bodhisattva: background information

In Buddhism, the ultimate spiritual status is one of enlightenment. However, the focus for Mahayana Buddhism in general is on the way of the bodhisattva ("being whose essence is wisdom") or, as Snelling calls the 'spiritual hero' - as opposed to the path of the arhat - that is held as the route to enlightenment. According to Mahayana thought, for individuals 'buddha nature' (tathagata garbha) is inherent. However, this is in need of stimulation in order to begin the bodhisattva path. This 'awakening' or stimulation affects what is known as the bodhicitta ('intelligence consciousness').

Once the 'intelligence consciousness' is aroused the bodhisattva will proceed to undertake personal vows (**pranidhana**). Vasubandhu lists ten vows common to all bodhisattvas, however, these are wished for not only for themselves, but to be shared with all other beings. The most famous vow is one in which the bodhisattva makes his or her ultimate expression of compassion and selflessness. This promise makes this individual a true bodhisattva. In it there is a vow to aspire to enlightenment but only enter into full and complete enlightenment when all other beings have become enlightened. Therefore, at the point of enlightenment, the bodhisattva will make the ultimate sacrifice and return to the world of samsara to help other beings.

The Bodhisattva must first go through a series of ten **bhumis** (stages), each with a parallel perfection (**paramita**). These are:

(1) Delight and joy

At this stage the perfection of generosity (**dana**) is generated for the benefit of others. Merit accumulated is to be invested in the future aspiration of Buddhahood for himself and others.

(2) Purity

At this stage all actions are spontaneously pure and moral virtue (**sila**) is perfected. Heavenly Buddhas are visualised in meditations.

(3) Brightness

Patience (**ksanti**) is perfected at this stage through meditation on compassion. Patience helps one to persist in fathoming the profound dhamma.

(4) Inflammation

Here the purifying bodhi is said to consume all remains of ignorance and vigour (**virya**) is perfected. It is at this stage that a practitioner can become ordained and follow the seven categories of virtues. The seventh category is the 8-fold path.

(5) Very difficult to conquer

At this stage insight is highly advanced and meditative trances (**dhyana**) are perfected; as Suzuki writes, "the Bodhisattva has developed an intellectual power to penetrate deep into the system of existence."

The path of the bodhisattva: background information

(6) Mainifest

Wisdom (**prajna**) is perfected and the bodhisattva has an ability to see into the very fabric of existence and identify its true nature as 'empty' of essence. Whilst experiencing this, the bodhisattva also reflects upon the plight of other beings trapped in samsara. It is at this crucial stage that the bodhisattva, now equal to an arhat, makes the decision to return to samsara for the sake of other beings.

(7) Going far away

At this stage skilful means (upaya kausalya) is applied and the bodhisattva is able to project himself into different worlds to help and teach others. He tirelessly practises the ten virtues of perfection.

(8) Immovable

A bodhisattva cannot fall away from this stage. It is at this stage that all desire and aspiration for Buddhahood are removed from the consciousness. Suzuki writes, "The conscious striving that distinguished all his former course has now given way to a state of spontaneous activity, of saintly innocence, and of divine playfulness. He wills and it is done. He aspires and it is actualised."

(9) Good intelligence

The Bodhisattva acquires four complete and comprehensive knowledges: the nature of things as empty; their individual characteristics as subject to rebirth; their indestructible nature beyond duality; and, their eternal order and intrinsic value.

(10) Clouds of dharma

Here knowledge (**jnana**) is complete. The bodhisattva is surrounded by lesser bodhisattvas and Buddhas offer blessings in preparation for final Buddhahood.