

The Correlation among the Three-Vehicle Bodhi

One might ask: “Aren’t there five vehicles in Buddhism, including the Human, Deva, Sound-hearer, Solitary-realizer, and Buddha Bodhi Vehicles? Why do we only discuss the Three-Vehicle Bodhi?” As a matter of fact, religious or spiritual growth groups generally teach people ways to alter and transform their destiny; or they teach people methods of taking rebirth in the heavenly realm. However, none of these is capable of changing our destiny of being trapped in the cycle of birth and death. On the other hand, in the practice of Buddhism, if individuals can attain the liberating wisdom of the Sound-hearer Vehicle to free themselves from the cycle of birth and death, they will certainly be able to accomplish the relatively simpler goals in the Human or Deva Vehicle. For example, once the sound-hearer attains the first fruition, they will achieve liberation after taking rebirths back and forth between the human and deva realms seven times at the most. Hence, discussions about and investigations of the contents of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi have already encompassed the Human and Deva Vehicles. Let us discuss the contents of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi next.

Over two thousand five hundred years ago, Buddha Sakyamuni realized the True Mind, saw the Buddha-Nature, and attained Buddhahood under the Bodhi tree. First, we need to think about the following: Which vehicle among the five did Buddha Sakyamuni cultivate to attain Buddhahood? It is the Buddha Bodhi Vehicle. In the *Discourse on the Great Legend* among the *Agamas* collection, Buddha Sakyamuni said that he was able to achieve Buddhahood by following the tradition and lineage passed down by all the previous Buddhas. Just like Buddha Sakyamuni, Bodhisattva Vipassin became a monastic after observing that all humans suffer from birth, aging, illness and death, and subsequently attained Buddhahood by cultivating the Bodhisattva Way.

After having attained Buddhahood, Buddha Sakyamuni observed that the goal of becoming a Buddha would be too ambitious and unfathomable a task for the sentient beings born in the “degenerative age of five turbidities”¹ (“impure world of five turbidities”); therefore, he first

¹ The five turbidities in the degenerative age or impure world are degeneration of: (1) life span (*āyuhkaṣāya*), (2) views (*dṛṣṭikaṣāya*), (3) afflictions (*kleśakaṣāya*), (4) sentient beings (*sattvakaṣāya*), and (5) the eon (*kalpakaṣāya*).

taught the Human, Deva, Sound-hearer, and Solitary-realizer Vehicles. He taught the Mahayana Path to Buddhahood (Buddha Bodhi Vehicles) last. In the *Agama Sutras*, it is stated that the Buddha first taught the principles of giving, precept observance, and attaining rebirth in heavenly realms. Only if a person was receptive to these principles would the Buddha further explain the Sound-hearer Bodhi and Solitary-realizer Bodhi, and finally teach the person the Buddha Bodhi. Therefore, we can conclude that the Buddha's main purpose of first teaching the Human, Deva, Sound-hearer, and Solitary-realizer Vehicles was to pave and lay the path to Buddhahood for the sentient beings born into this degenerative age of five turbidities. Thus, there must first be the Path to Buddhahood; the other four vehicles were then established later to facilitate the accomplishment of the Path to Buddhahood. The Buddha Bodhi Vehicle already encompasses and contains the contents and principles of the previous four vehicles.

Some people assert that the Mahayana teaching started to appear and arise only after the era of Sectarian Buddhism, though such assertion does not make sense. How could Buddha Sakyamuni not teach and know the way to Buddhahood and proclaim to become a Buddha while those who came after him managed to teach the way to Buddhahood? In fact, the rise and widespread popularization of Mahayana after the period of Sectarian Buddhism is already the second arising of the Great Vehicle teachings. The first appearance of the Mahayana took place right after the Buddha had completed the foundational teachings of the Human, Deva, Sound-hearer, and Solitary-realizer Vehicles. However, cultivating the way to Buddhahood is an ambitious goal that is too far-reaching for some people. After having cultivated the Sound-hearer or Solitary-realizer Vehicle, some practitioners lost their lofty aspiration and become stagnant on the path to Buddhahood. The Buddha and bodhisattvas would reproach these practitioners for their limited mindset, call them "people of Hinayana (small vehicle)", and literally name them as "the scorched sprouts and rotten seeds." In other words, the seeds or sprouts to become Buddha among these practitioners had been scorched or rotten; this is an admonition on the practitioners of the Two Vehicles.

Those who turn away from Hinayana towards Mahayana before their realization of the prajna wisdom will be called "the bodhisattvas of the shared teachings" in Mahayana since what they cultivate is commonly shared by the Two Vehicles. After they have realized the True Mind, they will be called "bodhisattvas of distinct teaching" because what they have

cultivated and realized are different from those of the sound-hearer and solitary-realizer in the Two Vehicles.

If the intention of the Buddha was only to teach us how to liberate ourselves from the cycle of birth and death, he would not need to teach the Solitary-realizer Vehicle because the Sound-hearer Vehicle alone was enough to accomplish this liberation. Why then was the Solitary-realizer Vehicle still taught? It is because the wisdom cultivated through the Sound-hearer Vehicle is too limited and narrow with a meager and restricted mindset. Thus, after having instructed the cultivation of the Sound-hearer Bodhi, Buddha Sakyamuni went on and taught the Dharma of solitary-realizers to help sentient beings acquire broader wisdom in understanding this world so that they would finally stride on the way of Buddhahood. Thus, from the correlation among the five vehicles, we can understand that the Human and Deva Vehicles are steps on a ladder used by the Buddha to help sentient beings attain Buddhahood. Therefore, there must first be the existence of the complete Buddha Bodhi Vehicle as the ultimate goal prior to any of the other four vehicles.

Yet from another perspective, Buddha Sakyamuni did not pass down the Buddha title to any arhat upon his entering into nirvana, but prophesied that Bodhisattva Maitreya would become the next Buddha in the “eon of increase” in the future. Therefore, the state of realization attained by arhats is not identical to that of the Buddha; it is in fact very different from the state realized by the Buddha.

Next, let us investigate what the core of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi is. This core is the so-called “theory of eight consciousnesses.” Every sentient being has eight consciousnesses—the eight minds that include the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, mental, manas (mental faculty), and the eighth consciousnesses (*tathāgatagarbha*). The teachings in the Three-Vehicle sutras all revolve around these eight consciousnesses.

One might ask: “Are we not made by the Creator?” If there was really a Creator of human beings, then He should know the exact process of this creation. Yet, we have not seen any Creator capable of explaining exactly what this process is and the detailed method that was used to create a life; thus, such view is not convincing at all. Furthermore, scientists have a hard time proving the existence of the Creator. On the other hand, in terms of Buddhist cultivation of exploring the origination of being, the

Buddha taught the existence of eight consciousnesses. Moreover, the existence of each of the eight consciousnesses mentioned above can be realized (verified) one after another through the cultivation process instead of relying on blind faith. In addition, the Three-Vehicle Bodhi mentioned above also conforms to the principle of cause-and-effect of both the mundane² and trans-mundane³ world.

Let us take eating as an example; if one man eats a meal, then he will feel full, but others will not; this is the most basic principle of cause-and-effect. As another example, suppose two countries were at war. A soldier from country A shot and killed an unknown soldier from country B who had no idea who killed him. The visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile and mental consciousnesses of the soldier from country A did not register the identity of the soldier from country B whom he killed; similarly, the first six consciousnesses of the soldier in country B did not register who killed him. Thus, we can infer that the law of cause-and-effect cannot be executed or accomplished based only on the first six consciousnesses; there must exist other consciousnesses, which include the eighth consciousness that possesses the holding and storing functions, and the seventh mental faculty, to carry out and accomplish the principle of cause-and-effect in the world in current and future lives.

Therefore, the eighth consciousness mind is crucial and is the core in the cultivation of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi; it has various names in the Three-vehicle Bodhi. For instance, it is called the original mind, root consciousness, fundamental reality, non-arising dharma, nirvana, or *ālaya* consciousness in the Sound-hearer Vehicle. In the Solitary-realizer Vehicle, it is called the embryo-entering consciousness. In Mahayana, it is called the True Mind, True Suchness, *ālaya* consciousness, and retribution consciousness. Which mind does the well-known *Heart Sutra* refer to? Actually, the mind expounded in the *Heart Sutra* is the True Mind, that is, the eighth consciousness, *ālaya* consciousness.

In summary, the contents of the Buddhadharma include the five vehicles: starting from the Human Vehicle and Deva Vehicle, followed by the Sound-hearer Vehicle and Solitary-realizer Vehicle, and culminating in the Buddha Bodhi Vehicle. Their interconnection begins with the Mahayana at the core. From there, the other four vehicles spring to form

² Worldly, pertaining to the ordinary world or to the practices of unenlightened sentient beings.

³ Beyond the world or transcendent, pertaining to liberation or to the practices of enlightened sentient beings.

the steps of the ladder towards the attainment of the Mahayana (Buddha Bodhi Vehicle). The core of the Three-Vehicles is the group of eight consciousnesses; with them, the law of cause-and-effect of both the mundane and trans-mundane world is established.

