

Receiving and Upholding Bodhisattva Precepts

To most people, a bodhisattva is simply someone with great compassion. When others are suffering, bodhisattvas are always willing to offer whatever support and help that are needed with no complaint or regret and never asking for anything in return. However, this is not an accurate definition of a bodhisattva on the Path to Buddhahood. A bodhisattva is always compassionate but a person who is compassionate is not necessary a bodhisattva. Compassion is just one of the various virtues and prerequisites of a bodhisattva. If anyone with compassion is a bodhisattva, bodhisattvas can then be commonly found in numerous religions. This is not reasonable. The word bodhisattva is a portmanteau formed from the words bodhi and sattva. Bodhi means enlightenment, specifically the enlightenment in the Great Bodhi or Buddha Bodhi. It is the attainment of supreme, complete, and perfect enlightenment. Sattva means a sentient being. A bodhisattva means a sentient being with a Buddha Bodhi disposition. In other words, a bodhisattva is a sentient being with great bodhicitta (bodhi mind, enlightenment seeking mind) questing for supreme, complete, and perfect enlightenment.

Upon taking the three refuges, a person may be called a bodhisattva after having made the four great vows¹ to pledge his dedication to attain Buddhahood and help liberate all sentient beings. However, such a bodhisattva with initial resolve is considered a bodhisattva by name only, a nominal bodhisattva. One has to realize bodhi in order to be considered a true bodhisattva. The realization of bodhi can be differentiated into profound or thorough and superficial or scanty realization. For example, on the Path to Buddha Bodhi, there are bodhisattvas at the stages of worthiness (the stages of ten abidings, ten practices, and ten dedications) and bodhisattvas at the noble stages (the ten grounds, virtual enlightenment, and sublime enlightenment). In the Sound-hearer Bodhi, there are bodhisattvas of shared teaching.

A bodhisattva with initial resolve who has not yet realized the bodhi may regress easily. Even after having made the four great vows, one may still regress and not be able to continue to advance on the Path to Buddhahood due to various unsatisfactory

¹ Though sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to help liberate them all; though afflictions are inexhaustible, I vow to eradicate them all; though the teachings are immeasurable, I vow to study them all; though the Path to Buddhahood is unsurpassed; I vow to attain it.

conditions, deficient living conditions, etc. In those cases, these people's minds have basically regressed. Or one may have associated closely with a bad mentor and become influenced by teachings of erroneous concepts, resulting in regression from the earlier initiated bodhicitta.

Nonetheless, one superior function of the bodhisattva precepts is its ability to allow the bodhisattva who has taken the precepts to remain qualified as a bodhisattva as long as one has not violated any of the severe precepts. This is similar to a student being able to keep his learning status until graduation as long as he has not violated any rules of the school and passes all examinations. Likewise, one who has taken the precepts is qualified to continue to be a bodhisattva and as long as one has not violated any precepts, one will be able to practice on the bodhisattva way until the attainment of Buddhahood. In other words, one will attain final graduation and complete the Bodhisattva Path.

Bodhisattva precepts are the cultivation foundation for bodhisattvas. Only after taking the precepts can one become a true bodhisattva, and only a true bodhisattva can become a Buddha. Therefore, taking the precepts is a prerequisite to becoming a Buddha. All Buddhas in the past, present, and future become Buddhas only after having taken the precepts. Hence, the bodhisattva precepts are also called the great precepts of a thousand Buddhas.

Why must an initially resolved bodhisattva take the bodhisattva precepts? The following four points will help address this question.

1. Enable one to stay away from unwholesome dharma. The principle function of the bodhisattva precepts is to guard and guide bodhisattvas' physical, verbal, and mental conducts and prevent them from committing unwholesome acts and fall into the three lower destinies of rebirth. It will take an incredibly long time for one to eventually return to the human realm again after having fallen into the three lower destinies of rebirth. Even after the eventual return to the human realm, habitual tendencies to perform unwholesome deeds will easily lead one into committing unwholesome acts again and propel one into the three lower destinies of rebirth again. Such cyclical journeys between the human realm and the three lower paths imply that the amount of time one spends in the human realm is many folds shorter than that in the lower destinies. It is also unclear how long it will take for one to have the opportunity to encounter Buddhadharma again. Taking the precepts can protect bodhisattvas who have yet to reach the stages of worthiness

from falling into the three lower paths. It will also enable them to practice Buddhadharma in the human realm life after life, spread true Dharma, prevent them from receiving bad retributions such as living difficult lives, lacking resources for the path, possessing short life span, being born in the land without Buddhadharma, etc., when they are reborn in the human realm.

2. Enable one to cultivate wholesome dharma. The bodhisattva precepts include restraining precepts that prohibit one from committing unwholesome conducts as well as precepts that require one to perform salutary wholesome acts. It is a violation of the precepts if one is able to but chooses not to perform a salutary act that can benefit sentient beings or cultivate the wondrous Dharma that will help oneself advance toward Buddha bodhi. Therefore, the precepts help ensure that bodhisattvas cultivate wholesome conducts and advance sequentially on the Path to Buddhahood.
3. Enable one to rapidly accumulate stocks of merit and wisdom. There are some who practice Buddhadharma for just a few years and manage to attain awakening to the True Mind via Chan contemplation. There are those who practice Buddhadharma for their entire life but still cannot attain any awakening. There are individuals who practice diligently and advance persistently in their Dharma cultivation after awakening. On the other hand, there are others who progress painfully slow. Why are there such huge differences? In essence, it is all about the accumulation of the stocks of virtue. Those with insufficient virtue will haggle over every ounce with sentient beings in the mundane world and hinder their own Dharma cultivation. Keeping the bodhisattva precepts will let one rapidly accumulate virtue and expedite one's Dharma cultivation.
4. Enable bodhisattvas to realize bodhi rapidly. The bodhisattva precepts form the foundation of cultivation. There is not even one single bodhisattva who can obtain the meritorious virtues from attaining the vision of the path as well as for the cultivation of the aspects of the path without taking and keeping the pure precepts. Gaining the vision of the path is realizing Buddha bodhi. The realization of the bodhi begins with attaining awakening to the True Mind. For example, the prerequisite of refining gold is first having a gold mine. If there is no gold mine, then there is no such thing as refining gold. Therefore, in order to attain Buddhahood, one must first ascertain the foundation for attaining Buddhahood. Awakening to the True Mind is ascertaining the foundation for attaining Buddhahood. Volume

one of *The Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Dongshan Wuben* states the reason why sentient beings cannot attain Buddhahood in that they have no knowledge of where Buddha arises from. Awakening to the True Mind is discovering where the Buddha arises from, realizing the origin of life, and realizing that the origin of the five aggregates is indeed the Tathagatagarbha. Awakening to the True Mind is tantamount to finding the Tathagatagarbha, enter the door to the Path of Buddha Bodhi, and start cultivating the six paramitas extensively from the inside. One who has not yet realized the bodhi is practicing the six paramitas from the outside because one is still outside the door to the Path of Buddha Bodhi. It is essential for initially resolved bodhisattvas to take the bodhisattva precepts in order to become true bodhisattvas who have realized bodhi.

However, what is the right attitude toward the taking of bodhisattva precepts? After hearing that it is necessary to take bodhisattva precepts to cultivate Buddhadharma, some people would feel that the precepts resemble ropes that constrain and tie them up so they feel that their freedom is compromised and decide not to practice Buddhadharma anymore. Actually, the precepts represent the yardstick for the physical, verbal, and mental acts of bodhisattvas. When one's mental activities conform to the code, one will not sense the presence of the constraint of the ropes. Only those who want to cross the line would sense the presence of the ropes.

What should we pay attention to when taking the bodhisattva precepts? Firstly, one should take the three refuges along with the four great vows to fulfill the prerequisites of taking the precepts. Secondly, one should not take the three refuges or receive the bodhisattva precepts from places of worship, practice, and training that do not propagate true Dharma. What are the places of worship, practice, and training that do not propagate true Dharma? For example, places of training and practice that defame Buddhadharma by claiming that Mahayana is not Buddha's teaching, those who practice erroneous dharma and advocate the taking of the four refuges instead, etc. Thirdly, one should comprehend the content of each precept and know how to exonerate the misdeeds after having violated a precept. When one has met these requirements, one is ready to take the bodhisattva precepts.

How does one uphold the bodhisattva precepts after receiving them? For those who have not yet realized the True Mind, they can only uphold the precepts by paying attention to the rules and characteristics and conditions of whether the precepts have been observed or violated because they have yet to realize the true essence of the

precepts. For bodhisattvas who have realized the True Mind, they can observe factually that the seeds of engaging in wholesome as well as unwholesome deeds are in fact all stored in their own individual Tathagatagarbha as is because they have found the Tathagatagarbha. The seeds will also remain there perpetually with no exception. When the timing and conditions mature in the future, they will undoubtedly reap the corresponding karmic consequences. Bodhisattvas will not engage in unwholesome deeds but instead focus on performing wholesome deeds with increased effort and dedication. As such, the power of precept appears. In other words, they have attained the true essence of the precepts. From then on, they use wisdom to uphold precepts and will not feel being constrained. They will naturally uphold and observe the precepts and will not violate any precepts in the future.

The bodhisattva precepts are also known as the three sets of pure precepts. How should we constructively uphold the three sets of pure precepts? First, the set of disciplinary precepts should be observed with the spirit of “maintaining all pure precepts and not leaving out even a single pure precept.” In addition to observing the ten grave precepts, one should not commit what the local law prohibits because the law is the basic standard of moral behavior in a country. Also, one should not commit what violates the local moral code, such as spitting, littering, cutting in line, etc. Such are self-centered behaviors when one only thinks of the convenience of oneself and neglects other people’s feelings. Secondly, the set of precepts to practice virtuous deeds should be observed with the spirit of “practicing all virtuous deeds and not leaving out even a single virtuous deed.” All virtuous deeds that are beneficial to sentient beings should be practiced, no questions asked. Third, the set of precepts to benefit all sentient beings should be observed with the spirit of “helping save all sentient beings and not leaving out even a single sentient being.” These precepts of benefiting all sentient beings are violated if one possesses the ability to benefit sentient beings and to refute incorrect teachings by contrasting them with the authentic Dharma but refuses to do so. For example, if someone has accused you of engaging in evil practice and you refuse to help save him, such is a violation of the precepts to help sentient beings. Some might allege: “You practice whatever you choose to, and I practice whatever I like. Everyone minds their own business and one should not criticize others.” However, if a bodhisattva sees clearly that a Buddhist practitioner follows and practices erroneous teachings and is certainly going to fall into the three lower destinies of rebirth and is savable but refuses to do so, where then is the compassion of a bodhisattva? Bodhisattvas who strictly observe this precept will not hesitate to save and protect sentient beings from erroneous doctrines.

Even though the Buddha says that one will become a Buddha in the future by reciting “Namo Buddha” just once, Buddha does not mean that one can become a Buddha by just reciting the term only once and do nothing else. In fact, before becoming a Buddha, one must take the bodhisattva precepts to qualify as a bodhisattva and should actually practice what bodhisattvas should and should not do. After practicing accordingly for many eons, one will eventually complete the Path to Buddhahood. Only until one takes and observe the bodhisattva precepts will one eventually become Buddha in the future.

