

Benefiting Others and Oneself

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Raising the Issue

In the winter of 1946, I was residing at the Wuchang Buddhist Institute when I received an article forwarded by Mr Luo Yunqiao from the city of Hankou. The article, which had been submitted to a newspaper, raised several doubts about Buddhism. Mr Luo wanted to protect Buddhism and so he hoped I could resolve the doubts and publish a responding article simultaneously.

According to the information provided by the publisher, the article had been written by a young woman who had grown up in a Buddhist family and had learned about the Buddha-dharma from her father. The woman's intentions were not malicious; rather, she had found she could not develop faith in Buddhism [for some reason]. Based on her understanding, gained through what her father had taught her, the woman felt that Buddhism was extremely good, and yet she identified some problems. These issues totaled twenty or so, and they are not easy to answer, although they are not unanswerable. So, I procrastinated on this request with some excuses, and those issues were not addressed at that time.

Recently, I heard that Mr Luo was in Hong Kong and wanted to visit Taiwan. This piece of news reminded me of those issues that I should have resolved seven years ago. Among those was one question relating to benefiting others with compassion. In general, the doubt could be summarized as follows.

The Buddhist spirit of benefiting others with compassion is certainly extremely great. However, who is able to carry out these acts of benefiting others? How do they benefit others? This would require oneself to first attain great awakening, be liberated and free of all fetters. Under such a requirement, among Chinese Buddhist practitioners, how many of them have attained this great awakening, liberation, and freedom from all fetters? If only a few practitioners fulfill the criteria, then all other Buddhist practitioners are not qualified to carry out these acts of benefiting others, and all they can do is to eagerly seek the self-benefit [of liberation] accordingly. This seems to be the reason Buddhism talks a lot about benefiting others with compassion, but only a few actually carry out compassionate deeds. Only those who have attained great awakening,

liberation and freedom from all fetters would have superpowers, and the ability to distinguish the different spiritual capacities of people, and to help people become free from their fetters. One such example is the Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, who seeks out the cries of [beings in] suffering and liberates them [from that suffering] with great compassion and great loving kindness. As such, benefiting others with compassion in Buddhism becomes difficult to realize, and is not something that ordinary humans are capable of!

These doubts, of course, are based on misunderstanding. However, this is not an intentional distortion arising from malice. Rather, it is reflective of the thinking within a portion of the Buddhist community. Fortunately, this is just a portion and this portion does not fully represent true and complete Buddhism.

What is the Meaning of Benefit?

When talking about benefiting others, first we need to understand the meaning of “benefit”. Benefit in the Buddha-dharma covers the meaning of advantage or happiness. In a broad sense, benefit is associated with freedom from falseness, undesirable situations, poverty, and suffering; that is, to realize the truth, attain desirable situations, prosperity, and joy. To benefit oneself and others is to cause oneself and others to gain such kinds of benefits as listed above.

In this world, where there are advantages there are also disadvantages, and where there is happiness there is also suffering. Although the positives are not perfect and ultimate, they do have their relative value in this world. The primary aim of the Buddha-dharma is to benefit people in this world and this includes teachings to help people realize the ultimate great benefit of liberation as well as to gain worldly happiness. The purpose of the Buddha-dharma’s appearance in this world is to enable humans to attain “[worldly]

happiness in this present life, happiness in future lives, and the ultimate happiness of liberation.”¹

Only practitioners of the *Śrāvakayāna* (also called “inferior vehicle”)² are inclined to “eagerly seek to attain self-benefit,” which is to focus heavily on attaining the joy of liberation for themselves. If we neglect the “happiness in this present life,” then we have narrowed the scope of the Buddha-dharma’s aim and abandoned this human realm. It is no wonder that people have misunderstood the meaning of benefit in the Buddha-dharma! When talking about benefiting others, we must avoid falling into the convention of the *śrāvakas*, which is to emphasize self-benefit and a focus on the happiness of self-liberation and freedom from all fetters.

Explaining How Buddhists Can Benefit Others Without First Attaining Great Awakening and Liberation

Benefiting others encompasses two major components. The first is to benefit others with material things, which is called the giving of wealth (tangible benefits). This includes altruistic deeds such as providing aid through food and clothing for people who are stricken by poverty and offering medical treatment for those who are ill. We can assist others by building and/or repairing shared spaces such as roads, creating public gardens or parks, and so on. We can also benefit others by using our own strength and even sacrificing our life.

The second component is to benefit others by offering moral support (intangible benefits), which [in Buddhism] is called the giving of Dharma. For example, we can share knowledge with people who are uneducated, give comfort and stability to those who are anxious, or offer encouragement to those who are weak. In short, this is to cause humans to improve, to head toward a bright future, to move close to the middle

¹ Worldly happiness refers to happiness that people seek such as fortune, fame, security, peace and so forth that are related to existence in this world. This is in contrast to the happiness that comes from transcending the world through the attainment of liberation or nirvana.

² Historically, the word *Hīnayāna* (小乘 *xiǎoshèng*) was used by some *Mahāyāna* practitioners with a negative connotation, to belittle the schools that practiced the *Śrāvakayāna*. We have chosen to translate the term 小乘 into the Sanskrit, *Śrāvakayāna* as a mark of respect to all schools of Buddhism. The only exception is when the context requires the term *Hīnayāna* to be used.

path,³ to develop themselves on the righteous path, and to head toward peace and stability through all types of educational and cultural activities. Such benefits not only employ transcendental methods but also righteous worldly methods. The latter can help a person develop a well-rounded character.

[In fact,] the development of well-rounded character in humans, which includes attaining wisdom and virtues, is the stepping stone to learning the transcendental Dharma. Of course, it goes without saying that the giving of Dharma is more thorough than the giving of wealth. For example, the aid reliefs of food and clothing to the poor is a form of giving of wealth, and this is a temporary measure that addresses only the symptoms. On the other hand, if we can use the righteous Dharma to enlighten them, impart skills and knowledge, and help them find employment (except for the very young, elderly, and severely disabled),⁴ then they will be able to rely on their own proper occupation to sustain a livelihood. [In the long term,] this is much better than temporary relief measures.

Pointing Out the Errors Concerning the Idea that One Needs to First Attain Great Awakening and Liberation

Within Buddhism, the practice of giving transcendental Dharma teachings that lead to the goal of liberation surpasses the practice of giving worldly Dharma teachings that lead to mundane goals,⁵ and both these types of giving of Dharma are better than the giving of wealth. However, this does not mean that we have no need to give wealth or worldly Dharma teachings to others. If we only focus on the benefits of transcendental liberation and freedom from all fetters, then we have fundamentally misunderstood the Buddha-dharma. Even if we look at only the aspect of giving transcendental Dharma, which is to lead humans to attain liberation, the process is not as most people in society

³ Middle path is a Buddhist term referring to a path of practice that avoids extremes of over-indulgence in luxuries and pleasures, and the opposite extremes of ascetic practices such as self-torture.

⁴ The exceptions listed does not mean we do not help children, elderly people, or people living with disability. Rather, the assistance they need is specialized and different to what is needed by healthy and able persons.

⁵ Here, “mundane goals” refers to the worldly aims of the human and heavenly vehicle practices that focus on achieving happiness in this life, prosperity in future lives, and rebirth in the human or heavenly realms.

might think, which contains erroneous concepts.⁶ “Liberation” comes from the continuous and progressive undertaking of different levels of practice. For example, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners initially develop the aspiration to leave this world, which is to plant the causal seed for liberation. Afterwards, they need to cultivate practices that accord with their goal, which makes them gradually mature in their practice. Finally, they gain liberation when they cease all their ignorance and awaken to the truth. For *Mahāyāna* practitioners, initially they aspire to attain the perfect awakening of buddhas (i.e., bodhi vow), which is to plant the bodhi seed. After a very long duration of practice, they mature and only then can they attain the ultimate and perfect Buddhahood. Both *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners must go through the stages of planting the spiritual seed, maturing in the practice and finally attaining liberation.⁷ Therefore, the teachings that aim to help people transcend the mundane world, causing them to immediately realize the final stage of liberation and freedom from fetters in this life, is not the only way to benefit others. After all, when one causes people to plant the spiritual seed and mature along the path, are these not altruistic deeds?

It is true that practitioners usually cannot help others gain liberation immediately if they have not been liberated (but there are a few instances in which a practitioner is able to bring others to liberation, although the practitioner themselves has not been liberated). However, to cause one to attain the benefit of planting one’s spiritual seed or to attain the benefit of maturing along the path is certainly possible for those who have yet to attain the benefit of liberation themselves. Therefore, the [*Mahāyāna*] *Parinirvāṇa Sūtra* teaches that “one who still has afflictions” can also be relied upon (as a teacher) if they are able to understand even a portion of the truth. So, when we properly

⁶ Here, “erroneous concepts” refers to the beliefs and thinking concerning the attainment of liberation or Buddhahood very quickly in this life. There are stories in the *sūtras* about Buddha’s disciples, both the renounced and householders, who gained awakening and/or liberation immediately after hearing the Buddha’s Dharma teachings. From such stories it would seem that attaining liberation in this life is possible, but many people neglect the fact that such disciples have already cultivated the path to liberation for multiple lives.

⁷ It should be noted that the stages of planting the spiritual seed, maturing in the practice, and final attainment of liberation are each cultivated over multiple lives, in general. In Nāgārjuna’s *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* it says that, for the *Śrāvakayāna*, the shortest duration from planting the spiritual seed to liberation requires a minimum of three lives: one plants the seed in the first life, then matures in one’s practice in the next life, and finally attains liberation in the third life. The longest duration for practitioners on the *Śrāvakayāna* can take up to sixty eons, an example of which is Buddha’s disciple Sāriputra. For *Mahāyāna* practitioners aiming to attain Buddhahood, these three stages require even longer durations to be completed.

understand the meaning of the Buddha-dharma, it is obvious that one can bring others to a lower aim of attaining worldly happiness in this present life without first gaining liberation oneself. Even those who help others move toward the ultimate aim of liberation do not need to attain thorough awakening beforehand. However, if we were truly liberated and free from all fetters, then our ability to benefit sentient beings would be even more profound and far-reaching. The young woman's doubt on the matter that one cannot benefit others without first attaining great awakening is not really correct according to the Buddha-dharma. However, some Buddhist practitioners do strongly emphasize the immediate benefit of liberation and freedom from all fetters and, as a result, they promote the idea that one must first benefit oneself before thinking about benefiting others. In the end, it is unclear whether these Buddhist practitioners are able to accomplish this self-benefit (of liberation); meanwhile, they completely neglect to undertake any altruistic deeds!

***Mahāyāna* that Focuses on Benefiting Others**

All Buddhist practitioners have a common goal, which is to attain the self-benefit of liberation and to be free from fetters through awakening to the truth. This requires the practices of purifying one's bodily actions and one's mind as well as developing and expanding one's virtues. The difference between the *śrāvaka* path and the bodhisattva path lies in the emphasis on benefiting oneself or benefiting others. In terms of the bodhisattva path, self-benefit is developed and accomplished by means of benefiting others. This is not to say that the *śrāvaka* practitioners do not benefit others. They do contribute to the preservation and propagation of the Buddha-dharma, bring happiness to the beings in this world, and help sentient beings liberate themselves from suffering. However, they are inclined toward the self-benefit of liberation. In other words, prior to their attainment of liberation, they do not carry out as many acts of benefiting others because their longing to leave this world is too strong. Besides, after they attain liberation, they carry out some beneficial deeds in terms of their work in teaching others when the causes and conditions occur. In contrast, bodhisattvas, prior to their own attainment of liberation, emphasize the benefiting of others on the basis of great compassion. Thus, it is said, "whilst unable to liberate themselves, they want first to liberate others and this is the initial aspiration of bodhisattvas."⁸ After attaining

⁸ *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* 《大般涅槃經》 (CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 590, a22-23)

liberation, they are even more dedicated to helping innumerable sentient beings liberate themselves from suffering. Therefore, most *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners are inclined to focus on awakening to the truth through wisdom, while most bodhisattva practitioners are inclined to the practice of relief motivated by compassion.

Using the Buddha’s Own Path of Practice to Dispel the Thought That One Must First Attain Liberation in Order to Benefit Others

In the canonical texts of early Buddhism, which is commonly referred to as the *Śrāvakayāna Tripiṭaka*, the teachings on the bodhisattva path already appeared in the form of stories about the Śākyamuni Buddha’s past lives (*Jātaka* tales). Over the course of three great eons, the bodhisattva (the Śākyamuni Buddha in previous lives) was born into different positions and professions, such as a king, prince, politician, practitioner of a religion other than Buddhism, farmer, laborer, merchant, businessman, medical professional, or sailor. Sometimes, the bodhisattva was born into another realm of beings, such as into the animal world. In all these lives, the bodhisattva willingly gave wealth and even offered his own life to others for the sake of benefiting sentient beings. Within *Jambudvīpa*, [the sphere we exist in,] there is not a single place where the bodhisattva has not given away his [body, such as his] head, eyes, brain or marrow. He upheld the precepts, practiced tolerance, and diligently cultivated and learned all kinds of Dharma practices. These great deeds are called *pāramitās*,⁹ which may be classified into four, six or ten *pāramitās*. All of these items of *pāramitā* are extracted from the great and challenging acts found in the *Jātaka* tales. These altruistic deeds, based on compassion, were carried out [by the bodhisattva] prior to the attainment of awakening and liberation (Buddhahood). So, what is the name of the scripture that says one cannot benefit others unless one has first liberated oneself? Once the bodhisattva’s practice of accumulating merits matured, while meditating under the bodhi tree, the bodhisattva attained unsurpassed awakening within a single moment, when his wisdom connected with the truth. Such a sudden awakening to attain Buddhahood is all because of the

⁹ *Pāramitā* is also translated as “perfection;” specifically, these are the virtues that are developed to perfection by enlightened beings. The four *pāramitās* refer to the virtues of generosity, morality, diligence, and wisdom. The most common grouping found in *Mahāyāna* teachings is the six *pāramitās*, or the six perfections of generosity, morality, tolerance, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. In Theravada teachings, the ten *pāramitās* are recognized: generosity, morality, renunciation, insight/wisdom, energy/diligence, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

compassionate practices of benefiting others over three great eons. Therefore, the main difference between bodhisattva and *śrāvaka* practitioners is that bodhisattvas vow to remain in the cycle of life and death [over a long time] without eagerly seeking the self-benefit of liberation, and instead focus on compassionate deeds that benefit others.

In the early *Mahāyāna sūtras*, the teachings on the process of the bodhisattva path over three great eons are slightly different from those in the *Śrāvakayāna Tripiṭaka*. The *Mahāyāna sūtras* point out that the bodhisattva practices of benefiting others in the phase prior to attaining awakening focuses on actual beneficial deeds and the deeds arising from superior comprehension.¹⁰ Although these practices are already a rare feat, the merits gained from them are not considered to be exceptional. After bodhisattvas attain thorough awakening to the Truth—attainment of deep understanding of the Truth regarding non-origination—their great altruistic deeds of making the lands of the buddhas sublime and causing sentient beings to mature and be able to practice the path, possess much greater merits. This is because their deeds are aligned with true wisdom. In other words, the actual deeds are perfected by realization of the truth; that is, compassionate deeds and wisdom work together in harmony and without obstruction.

In the *Mahāyāna*, the bodhisattva path can be split into two phases. The first phase is called the path of *prajñā* (wisdom), which requires the duration of one eon. This phase covers the period prior to attaining sagehood; that is, before the level of the first *bhūmi*. The path of *prajñā* corresponds to the “stage of prerequisites” and the “stage of engaged effort” (up to the “stage of insight into the truth”), which are collectively called the “grounds of superior comprehension” by the Consciousness-only school.¹¹ After the attainment of sagehood comes the phase called the “path of skilful means,” which covers the remaining two great eons and begins with entrance into the first *bhūmi*. This phase covers the “stage of insight into the truth” to the “stage of perfecting insight into

¹⁰ Superior comprehension is an initial level of practice to develop wisdom. At this stage, one has not yet awakened to the truth, but one’s understanding of the doctrines is already at a level where one comprehends the teachings in an extensive way, leading to unshakeable confidence in the Dharma.

¹¹ Stage of prerequisites (資糧位 *zīliáng wèi*) is the stage of practice in which one aims to accumulate virtues and merits, which are the prerequisites to help one progress onto the next stages. The stage of engaged effort (加行位 *jiāxíng wèi*) is where one actively exerts effort to develop wisdom through observing the truth, using various insight practices. The stage of insight into the truth (見道位 *jiàndào wèi*) is where the practitioner attains awakening and experiences the truth. Upon awakening to the truth, one is considered a sage.

the truth” in the Consciousness-only school. In general, bodhisattvas in the phase prior to entering the ten *bhūmis* possess unshakable conviction [in emptiness] but have yet to attain awakening. They carry out practices to accumulate countless prerequisites conducive to good fortune and wisdom. The situation above is similar to that portrayed in the *Jātaka* tales.

Bodhisattvas of the ten *bhūmis*, such as the bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara*, are those who have attained awakening to the truth and due to their great compassion can universally guide all beings. Their altruistic deeds are inconceivable. Within the *Jātaka* tales are some cases where the bodhisattva (Buddha in his past lives), while in the stage of the ten *bhūmis*, used a conjured body of non-human form to carry out altruistic deeds.¹² In short, although there are the two phases of pre and post awakening, bodhisattvas in the pre-awakening phase also practice altruistic deeds out of compassion. It is not the case that they single-mindedly seek liberation and self-benefit [as priority]. Therefore, based on the fundamental meaning of the bodhisattva practice, the young woman’s doubt is because of her misunderstanding, and the issues she raised has no basis.

Addressing the Example of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva and the Source of the Erroneous Focus on Attaining Liberation First

The beneficial deeds, such as bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara*’s offering of relief upon hearing cries for help, are what the advanced bodhisattvas practice. [Although the altruistic deeds of the advanced bodhisattvas may not be performed by beginners,] this does not mean that people who have just started to learn the bodhisattva practices in this present world cannot undertake other compassionate deeds that benefit others.

[The true *Mahāyāna* teachings do not overlook the altruistic deeds undertaken by those who have just started to learn the bodhisattva practices,] but there is a group of later *Mahāyāna* practitioners who called themselves the greatest of the *Mahāyāna*, or the most superior of the superior vehicles, and claimed that what they practiced enabled them to achieve the most perfect state in the most sudden approach, or what they realize

¹² Note that this is the *Mahāyāna* viewpoint. The *Śrāvakayāna* view is that, in these lives, the bodhisattva takes on non-human form due to their karma. The *Śrāvakayāna* viewpoint is that prior to Buddhahood, bodhisattvas still possess defilements, while in the *Mahāyāna* theories, bodhisattvas experience a phase in which they still have defilements and a phase in which they have removed some or all of their defilements prior to Buddhahood.

as the most lofty and supreme. They no longer agreed to the approach that takes several great eons to attain Buddhahood. Rather, they single-mindedly and eagerly sought quick attainment. As a result, tantalizing phrases that promoted quick attainment became dominant, such as “to become liberated suddenly,” “to transcend instantly,” “to attain Buddhahood in this very life,” “to perfectly realize the truth in three lifetimes,” “to become a Buddha in this life,” and “to realize Buddhahood by truly understanding our mind.” Then, the following concepts also became dominant: “one should grieve over the situation where their cycle of life and death is yet to end, just like losing their parents,” and “the issue of life and death should be a top priority to be addressed and should be resolved before death, which comes pretty soon.” Such ideas, which contain *śrāvaka* practitioners’ mindset of loathing this world, had unexpectedly become active in the minds of *Mahāyāna* practitioners, who claimed that what they attained was the most perfect awakening, and that what they practiced was the most sudden approach. As a result, such ideas inverted the situation, and practicing [reclusively] in the forests began to be praised as the principal path for bodhisattvas. This change brought about a trend in which bodhisattvas no longer wandered about in cities, towns, and villages in order to practice altruistic deeds. Under the influence of such ideologies, the young woman also has the same viewpoint and cannot see that her doubts are filled with errors.

[These ideologies bring about another situation in which *Mahāyāna* practitioners] do not need to practice altruistic deeds because all the virtues and merits of benefiting others are innately perfected upon Buddhahood. That means that at the moment when one realizes the truth, the virtues of the six *pāramitās* are naturally attained. That is to say, boundless virtues are perfected without any deficiency. From the perspectives of theory and the state of experiencing the truth, there is nothing wrong with such ideologies, and they are supported by the teachings related to the *Dharmakāya*. However, in the eyes of an ordinary person, such aforementioned virtues are merely religious experiences in devotees’ minds. When looking at what they perform in real life, people see only that those bodhisattvas benefit themselves without undertaking any altruistic deeds. Based on this situation, it is unavoidable that this young woman has such doubts.

During the time when the Chinese were fighting against the Japanese invasion, Venerable Taixu visited several Southeast Asian countries. After he returned from his

journey, Venerable Taixi commented that the Buddhist teachings in the southern countries belonged to *Śrāvakayāna*, yet their practices belonged to *Mahāyāna*. Conversely, in the Chinese Buddhist circumstance, the teachings belonged to *Mahāyāna* while the practices were of *Śrāvakayāna*. In fact, though Buddhism in the Southeast Asian countries adopted the *Śrāvakayāna Tripiṭaka*, there are few practitioners who loathe this world and focus solely on meditation for the sake of seeking liberation. This is because they have lost the core aspiration of *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners. When lacking the mentality of eagerly seeking awakening, they accordingly turn their attention to spreading the Dharma in this world and carrying out the affairs related to social welfare and education. In contrast, it is claimed that the teachings promoted in Chinese Buddhism belong to the greatest of the *Mahāyāna*, and it is the same with the practice, which enables practitioners to attain sudden transcendence and direct awakening to the truth. Although both the teachings and practices are claimed to be the greatest of the *Mahāyāna*, they are in fact a so-called *Mahāyāna*, which revives the aspiration of *Śrāvakayāna*, whose aim is to eagerly seek self-benefit and liberation. Due to losing the true *Mahāyāna* aspiration that prioritizes the deeds of compassionate relief, the *Mahāyāna* practices providing relief to the world exist only in philosophical theories that are applied to practices in the form of thoughts.

To Benefit Sentient Beings in the Cycle of Life and Death Over a Long Period of Time

If *Mahāyāna* practitioners, the bodhisattvas, have not attained awakening, liberated themselves, and freed themselves from fetters, how can they successfully advance their practice in the cycle of life and death over a long period of time? Are they not afraid of failure? Can they take control [of each future life's destiny], which is unlike the situation of ordinary people, who are repeatedly reborn in the longevity heavens,¹³ or fall into the evil realms? If we cannot swim, how can we save others in the ocean? Are we not ourselves afraid of drowning? Some practitioners focus on faith and aspiration alone and seek to gain faith that is unshakable. In addition, some focus on realization through wisdom, and eagerly seek liberation and Buddhahood. These inclinations have

¹³ The longevity heavens are considered undesirable because they pose an obstacle to practicing the Buddha-dharma. In these heavens, the lifespan is very long (counted in eons) and these beings are immersed in deep meditative concentration and its bliss. Consequently, they neglect to practice the path.

been influenced by nothing else but the aforementioned concerns. Of course, if we cannot swim, then we cannot jump into the ocean to save people. If we are on shore and out of the water [referring to being liberated or having attained unshakable faith], how can we save the people in the ocean? Because *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners eagerly seek self-realization and to end their cycle of life and death, at the moment when they eliminate their defilements, they are “completely separated from life and death.” That means they are unable to initiate the bodhi vow of remaining in life and death to practice the bodhisattva path over a long period of time.

Pointing out the Great Loss from Seeking Liberation First with Respect to the Mahāyāna Path

In the development of the *Mahāyāna* teachings there is a viewpoint that considers it possible for *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners¹⁴ to move onto the *Mahāyāna*. However, such practitioners are condemned as “scorched seedlings and unviable seeds.” After all, how much effort would be required to bring them to the *Mahāyāna*? How many more eons must they practice to develop their bodhi vow; that is, to practice their conviction in the *Mahāyāna*, before they can reach the first *bhūmi* of the bodhisattva path? Even though they move to the bodhisattva path, their diligence [in the bodhisattva practices] is not as strong compared to the circumstance from which they, at the start, had directly headed for the *Mahāyāna*. This is because their past habitual concern was focused on self-benefit. Accordingly, it is said in the *Mahāyāna sūtras* that bodhisattvas who regress from their bodhi vow [and focus on seeking self-liberation] lose the foundation of the bodhisattva practice.¹⁵ The *Mahāyāna sūtras* also point out that if the so-called *Mahāyāna* practitioners attain the [inferior result] of self-benefiting liberation when their compassionate vows are not strong enough, they will stop progressing on the bodhisattva path.¹⁶ It is truly pitiful that these practitioners do not emphasize

¹⁴ Here, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners specifically refers to those who have already attained the first fruition or higher, and so based on the *Śrāvakayāna* teachings they are certain to attain arhatship. For these practitioners, their awakening to the truth and even attainment of liberation becomes a very strong obstacle deterring them from moving toward and seeking the greater goal of Buddhahood.

¹⁵ The Chinese literally has “bodhisattva precept;” however, there are many precepts but the bodhi vow is the essence and core. Without it none of the other precepts can be considered bodhisattva precepts. Hence, the translation uses the expression of “foundation of the bodhisattva practice.”

¹⁶ When the *Mahāyāna sūtras* say that a bodhisattva’s progression on the path to Buddhahood stops if they regress from their bodhi vow, this does not mean bodhisattvas cannot progress.

compassionate vows to undertake countless virtues of benefiting others, but rather assume they can quickly attain Buddhahood through single-minded focus on self-benefit. Such is the loss of the true *Mahāyāna* spirit!

The Key Skills that Bodhisattvas Need to Progress on the Mahāyāna, Avoid Seeking Liberation First, and Benefit Sentient Beings

To save those drowning in the ocean, we cannot leave the water and remain on the shore. In addition, learning to swim must take place in the water. If bodhisattvas want to perpetually remain in the cycle of life and death in order to practice the bodhisattva deeds, they naturally have to develop themselves and achieve a set of special skills that enables them to benefit sentient beings while in the cycle of life and death. These skills cannot be accomplished by purely relying on the Buddha's blessing. Also, they are not attained by first gaining liberation from the cycle of life and death, and freedom from all fetters. This is because attaining liberation first will bring them to the situation in which they fall into the deep pit (nirvana) of the *Śrāvakayāna*. This set of special skills enables the bodhisattvas to extensively benefit sentient beings while remaining in the cycle of life and death, and includes "strong faith and aspiration," "development of great compassion," and "superior comprehension of emptiness," among which the third item is the most important factor.

[The core of such superior comprehension of emptiness is] to attain the right view regarding the coherence of the two truths. Such a right view should be developed through contemplating the factual situation that all dharmas exist without any intrinsic self-nature being similar to illusions or conjured things. Therefore, it is said in the *sūtras*, "Those who possess advanced and firm worldly right view will not fall into the evil realms even over millions of lives."¹⁷ Only by realizing that the status of life and death is no different from that of nirvana, and both are like an illusion, then we can

However, their progression becomes so obstructed and slow, as if they stop progressing. The following two situations are to alert practitioners to the great loss such choices present: (1) the difficulty for arhats to move to the *Mahāyāna*; and (2) difficulty for bodhisattvas to progress on the *Mahāyāna* if they give up their bodhi vow and instead eagerly seek liberation. This section aims to encourage practitioners to start on the *Mahāyāna*, to progress steadily and protect their bodhi vow.

¹⁷ Based on the Sanskrit version of this quote, "worldly" modifies the noun "right view." Here, this worldly right view is also modified by the word "advanced," which refers to the deeper understanding of emptiness that underlies worldly phenomena, such as cause and effect, dependent co-arising, conditional existence, and so forth.

have no attachment to the cycle of life and death, unlike ordinary beings. Neither would we be like *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, who loathe the cycle of life and death, and eagerly seek to get away from the three realms¹⁸ because they hold the view that “the three realms are like a prison and life and death are like enemies.” Only in this way will bodhisattvas not be fearful of nirvana, like ordinary beings. Instead, they will be able to profoundly understand the virtues of nirvana; but they are unlike the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, who eagerly seek nirvana.

While coursing¹⁹ through the cycle of life and death, on account of our faith and aspirations, compassion and especially the power of superior comprehension of emptiness, we will be able to gradually tame our defilements and achieve the situation in which minor defilements may arise, but we certainly will not lose control and can overcome our defilements. In other words, although we have not cut off all defilements, these tamed defilements are too weak to create any serious unwholesome karmic deeds. If we always regard the suffering of sentient beings as our own and regard the happiness of sentient beings as our own, then day by day our view of self weakens, and our compassion deepens. Under such conditions, why would we have the fear of falling into the evil realms? Only those who care just for themselves worry about the risk of falling into the evil realms at any time.²⁰ [Practitioners of the bodhisattva path always] vow to meet the buddhas, hear the Dharma while remaining in the cycle of life and death, so that they can “practice the bodhisattva path life after life.” This is the core meaning of the early *Mahāyāna* teachings and is also the core meaning of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools. In the *sūtras* the Buddha says, “In the past I often abided in the contemplation of emptiness, thus I was able to attain unsurpassed

¹⁸ Three realms in Buddhism refers to the Desire Realm, Form Realm, and Formless Realm. Within each realm there are different levels and forms of existences. The Desire Realm includes the hells, state of hungry ghosts, animal and human, and lower levels of heavens. The Form and Formless realms include various levels of heavens in which beings have no five desires (i.e. the five desires arising from the objects of the five senses). Rebirth into the Form and Formless realms requires the attainment of karma from practicing deep meditative concentration.

¹⁹ “Coursing” here refers to a bodhisattva’s rebirth in their various lives, which sometimes can be in the human and heavenly realms, which are considered favorable, and sometimes in the unfavorable evil destinies.

²⁰ According to the principle of cause and effect, wholesome deeds bring about fortunate results. Those who are selfish and just care for themselves usually do not undertake many beneficial deeds and thus feel worried about falling into the evil realms if they do not achieve liberation before death due to their lack of wholesome karma.

enlightenment.” This is starkly different to the *Śrāvakayāna* practice, which focuses on contemplating how [the cycle of life and death] is impermanent and thus filled with suffering,²¹ and this brings about the mindset that deeply loathes this world. The *Mahāyāna sūtras* always explain how all dharmas are empty [of an intrinsic nature]. Regular contemplation of such a teaching can help bodhisattvas develop the skill of not abiding in the cycle of life and death, nor nirvana. Such non-attachment is a great skilful means for undertaking the bodhisattva practice to attain Buddhahood. This superior comprehension of emptiness, which is also called “right view of emptiness,” requires the wisdom of learning, contemplation, and then further development into the wisdom of practice. During its development, it must be supported by compassion, faith, and aspiration in order to reach accomplishment. We should always remind ourselves that, “now is the time for learning and not the time for realization.” It is in this way that we can maintain our bodhi mind without regressing, while perpetually remaining in the cycle of life and death, bearing the sufferings that come with life and death, and tolerating the many persecutions by sentient beings. In contrast, if someone realizes emptiness while faith and compassion are insufficient, then they will fall into the result of the *Śrāvakayāna practice*.

[While remaining in the cycle of life and death] bodhisattvas apply the four all-embracing virtues of generosity, kind speech, beneficial deeds, and cooperation to extensively benefit sentient beings. Even though bodhisattvas have yet to attain liberation, they are certainly able to extensively undertake the difficult and even painful practices associated with giving relief to others out of compassion. This is not something that everyone can do initially, but the proper bodhisattva path is truly as such.

²¹ Note that suffering here relates to ordinary beings who experience suffering. Impermanence affects all things, but non-sentient objects will not experience suffering and so, too, enlightened beings who have overcome cyclical existence.

The Human Bodhisattva Practice²² that is Founded on Compassion

Pointing Out an Ideal Path for Buddhists to Benefit Others and Themselves

Bodhisattvas are superior²³ to ordinary humans and also the practitioners of the two vehicles. The mental activities of clinging to this world occurs naturally in ordinary humans, and Buddhist practitioners need not learn it to possess it. This is just like the way water naturally runs downward. The practice of the two vehicles, which focuses on the sole direction of transcending cyclical existence, is skewed toward a mind that loathes the world. Such a practice has only one focus, and so this two-vehicle path is still not that difficult. Only the bodhisattva practice, which requires the skill of no attachment to this world and no abandonment of this world, is the most difficult! This is certainly supported by the *Śrāvākayāna* texts and reality. The mental activities of clinging arise in nearly all beings. In the audience of the assembly listening to Śākyamuni Buddha's sermon, there were some sages of the *Śrāvākayāna*. Although to attain their achievement is not easy, it is still not that difficult. As for bodhisattvas, the *Śrāvākayāna* texts only recorded the Buddha and Maitreya.

This is the historical evidence. From this we can see that the practice of the bodhisattva is extremely rare, like a budding lotus in a bushfire [that remains unscorched]. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras* it is said that within the worlds of the ten directions there are countless great bodhisattvas.²⁴ This may be true for the ten directions, yet in our world there are not that many great bodhisattvas. Now, as for the conjured forms of great bodhisattvas, they may exist everywhere, but ordinary people are unable to recognize that these are the manifestations of great bodhisattvas. From the aspect of the bodhisattva practice in this world, where bodhisattvas start from the status of an ordinary human who still

²² Human bodhisattva practice refers to the Buddhist practice of a bodhisattva that accords with human morality and is based on loving kindness and compassion.

²³ Here, the concept of superior refers to the aspiration of the bodhisattva. This is because their future capacity to benefit beings, due to their aspiration, is superior to that of ordinary beings and two-vehicle practitioners.

²⁴ Anyone who makes the bodhi vow can be regarded as a bodhisattva. The description of "great bodhisattva" refers specifically to those bodhisattvas who have already attained the levels of the ten *bhūmis*, which is very advanced. Those bodhisattvas who have attained the level of non-regression from the *Mahāyāna* are bodhisattvas of the eighth *bhūmi* and higher. These great bodhisattvas can transform and manifest themselves as different beings to help people, but they will not let humans know this is their work.

possesses defilement, the number of great bodhisattvas is few if we look at the facts and do not base the situation on [personal] fanciful or mystical experience. In the scriptures it is said, “Among countless sentient beings who initiate the bodhi vow, there is rarely only one or two who can attain the stage of non-regression in due course.” This is why the scripture says, “[Like] a sack of fish roe or flowers from the amla tree, the number of those newly initiated bodhisattvas are countless at the causal stage, yet those who reach the fruition stage are few.” This is a fact, and not just a provisional teaching to suit certain situations.²⁵

Transcending this world is the work of a great being, and bodhisattvas are the greatest of great beings! If there is a being who initiates the bodhi vow and attains to the state of non-regression [in this world], then the benefit to sentient beings is immeasurable. Their value is like the *maṇi* pearl, which exceeds the total value of all the treasures in this world, combined. We must clearly understand that a bodhisattva who acts according to their vows is a great being! The reason they are great is because they care not for themselves. The way in which they gain their self-benefit is to seek to benefit others. This great aspect is what we should learn. [What bodhisattvas should learn is to] promote the *Mahāyāna* teachings and aspire to the Buddha’s perfection as well as the great deeds of the bodhisattva practice. Although it requires numerous eons of practice, or even suspension of their progression temporarily, they will attain Buddhahood when the right conditions arise because their merits will never be lost once these merits have been accumulated through hearing [the Buddha-dharma and so on].²⁶

The number of bodhisattvas who have attained the stage of non-regression are few. However, there are other courageous and righteous great beings who also sincerely make the bodhi vow to benefit others. As they possess aspiration, compassion, and superior comprehension of emptiness, they can presently train themselves while in the cycle of life and death. That is to say, they can practice altruistic deeds while in this world. In general, those who can delight in, revere, and learn the bodhisattva practices are the ones who are cultivating their bodhi seed. Among humans these are the noble

²⁵ Here, the reference to the low numbers of bodhisattvas who can reach the stage of non-regression in our world is stating a fact and is not intended to be a provisional teaching. The bodhisattva path is not easy to accomplish.

²⁶ This sentence is highlighting that as long as bodhisattvas do not give up their bodhi vow, they will attain Buddhahood eventually. This is to address the reason not many bodhisattvas reach the stage of non-regression; it is because they gave up.

and wise ones, or the superior ones in this world. Although these bodhisattvas who diligently benefit others for the sake of the Dharma and humans are still ordinary beings, they are much better than people who only work toward their own liberation. This is also true of the bodhisattvas who have temporarily failed in their bodhisattva practices. This type of human bodhisattva practice is founded on compassion. In general, in terms of the beginning levels, those who cultivate such a practice are called bodhisattvas of the ten wholesome deeds, and they are truly noble people who aspire to the Buddha vehicle. As for the advanced levels, those who cultivate such a practice are the ones who always vow to benefit the world. They are the genuine practitioners of the *Mahāyāna* and can truly benefit sentient beings in the world.

Bodhisattvas, including those who are on the external and internal stages of ordinary being, and up to those who have gradually attained to the stage of the noble beings,²⁷ have not attained the self-benefit of liberation. However, they are still able to undertake the practice of tolerating hardships and even to sacrifice themselves for the sake of benefiting sentient beings. Using righteous human practices as the stepping stone toward the Buddha vehicle, bodhisattvas gradually become more advanced in their cultivation of the practices. This is the bodhisattva's correct practice of the middle path. If Buddhists truly have the intent of a bodhisattva, possess the qualities of a bodhisattva, and understand the true spirit of why bodhisattvas benefit others, then they certainly will not eagerly seek self-benefit in which, if they do not realize the aim of self-liberation first, they grieve as though they have lost their beloved parents. The real [*Mahāyāna*] Buddhist spirit of benefiting others has become restricted, misinterpreted,

²⁷ “Stage of external ordinary beings,” “stage of internal ordinary beings,” and “stage of noble beings” refer to progressive levels based on the practitioner's degree of wisdom. In the *Mahāyāna*, the stage of external ordinary beings refers to ordinary beings who are outside of the Buddhist circle; they have not taken refuge or begun to learn the Dharma. The stage of internal ordinary beings are Buddhist practitioners in the phase of cultivating the ten levels of faiths, and such practitioners are still developing their aspiration for and confidence in Buddhahood. The stage of noble beings is when the practitioner is cultivating the next phases of the ten levels of abiding, ten levels of practice and ten levels of dedication, which are higher levels of attainment, and these three phases are also called the three noble stages (三賢位 *sānxián wèi*). Practitioners in this stage are regarded as noble beings because of their superior comprehension of emptiness, but they have yet to attain enlightenment. Once these levels are accomplished and the practitioner enters the stage of the ten *bhūmis*, this is when they have attained some level of awakening to the truth and are referred to as a sage. Note that this explanation adopted by Venerable Yinshun is based on the Indian texts. The ancient Chinese masters have a different explanation for the stages of external and internal ordinary beings and the stage of noble beings.

and distorted. This situation must be fundamentally corrected! To achieve this, we must investigate the bodhisattva practices to reveal the real spirit. Only in this way can [our practice of benefiting others] meet the true intent of the Buddha and repay the gratitude of sentient beings. Only in such manner can we respond to people's doubts.