

The Three Essentials for Learning the Buddha’s Teachings

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Faith and Aspiration, Loving Kindness and Compassion, and Wisdom

The Buddha-dharma¹ is both profound and vast—so much so that ordinary people often have no idea where to start. However, the Buddha-dharma is not confusing, nor is it disorganized. In fact, there are structured guiding principles throughout. Ancient noble sages have pointed out that “all practices include expedient means which are provisional, and those directed toward the ultimate which are definitive. Their purpose, in fact, is no other than to guide us toward the Buddha-vehicle.” These practices enable us to turn away from evil and turn toward righteousness (five-vehicle path), or to separate from bondage and head toward liberation (three-vehicle path), or to move from the inferior to the superior (one-vehicle path).²

All buddhas come to this world with no other intention than this “great purpose”—that is, to share the benefit of the Buddha’s teachings with sentient beings according to each person’s spiritual capacity. Therefore, the teachings are presented using various approaches: a simple approach, a profound approach, a categorized approach, and a

¹ The term “Buddha-dharma” refers to the entire body of the Buddha’s teachings, which comprises many expositions on the principles and methods of practice. The myriad practice methods available can cause confusion. Venerable Yinshun’s aim with this teaching on the three essentials is to remove the confusion and reveal the guiding principles we should follow.

² The one-vehicle refers to bodhisattvas. A bodhisattva is someone who has made the vow to practice and become a buddha. The path that they cultivate is called the bodhisattva path or one-vehicle path. On the accomplishment of this path, the bodhisattva becomes a buddha, one who is fully awakened with perfect wisdom (bodhi). Therefore, this path is also called the bodhi path. If you then add the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* (two-vehicle) you then get the three-vehicle. The *śrāvakas* seek the attainments of an arhat by listening to the Buddha’s teachings and practicing accordingly. The *pratyekabuddhas* gain enlightenment through deep investigation of dependent origination. The term *pratyekabuddha* is derived from the fact that *pratyekabuddhas* usually attain enlightenment at a time when there is no buddha in the world. Finally, if we add humans and heavenly beings to the three-vehicle, you get the five-vehicle. Each vehicle has different aims for practicing the dharma according to the spiritual capacities of the practitioners. In his teaching *The Way to Buddhahood*, Venerable Yinshun explains that practitioners of the five-vehicle and three-vehicle can progress to the one-vehicle and ultimately become buddhas—that is, attain Buddhahood.

sequential approach. In terms of learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings, all practices can be considered part of the process of a bodhisattva's training, which is the proper bodhi path to Buddhahood.

Because of the varying conditions at different periods (the nature of each era) and the differences between individuals' spiritual capacities and tendencies, unavoidably the study and practice methods may vary. However, if one explores the essence of these various methods, it will become clear that there is no diversity within the Buddha-dharma. On the contrary, the Buddha-dharma can be understood as embodied within three elements, and this embodiment leads back to the one path. This is not only the case for the one-vehicle path but also for the five-vehicle and three-vehicle paths. This is why the three elements are specifically called "the three essentials for learning the Buddha's teachings." They are the three essentials in the study and practice of the Buddha's way, or the three essential guiding principles that embody all methods of learning the Buddha's path.

What Are the Three Essentials?

The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* says that [bodhisattvas should cultivate the bodhisattva practices with] "intentions toward the Buddha's wisdom, great compassion as the foundation, and nonattachment as skillful means."³

The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* provides an extensive explanation of the learning and practices of bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas should comprehensively learn all practices, and while being undertaken, all practices (which are no other than the cultivation of merits and wisdom) must be grounded in the three essentials. All bodhisattvas depend on these three essentials in practice; and the purpose of all study and all practices is to perfect and accomplish these three essentials. Therefore, they are at the core of both the study and the practices of a bodhisattva! Of the three essentials, the ancient sages have well said, "losing these, then eighty thousand dharma⁴ troves become obscured, just like

³ In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, these three essentials are often mentioned, sometimes individually, sometimes in pairs, and, on a few occasions, all three together. Venerable Yinshun identified these three essentials as key guiding principles, and in this teaching on the three essentials, he explains their meaning and how to use them in practice.

⁴ Note that the word "dharma" has several meanings. Here, it refers to the Buddha's teachings. It can also mean natural law, truth, phenomena, or manifestations.

traveling in the dark at night; attaining these, then the twelve categories of canonical texts become clear, just like clear vision during day time.”⁵

1. Faith and Aspiration—Bodhi Vow

Buddha’s wisdom, also known as unsurpassed bodhi, is the ultimate perfection of the Buddha’s virtues and relies on right awakening as its foundation. Intentions toward the Buddha’s wisdom requires the practitioner’s every thought to accord with unsurpassed bodhi. This means having faith and confidence in the fact that all buddhas really do possess unsurpassed bodhi and that the virtues of unsurpassed bodhi truly have superior manifestations and boundless beneficial influence. Faith and confidence in unsurpassed bodhi accordingly gives rise to the aspiration to realize unsurpassed bodhi. In short, “intentions toward the Buddha’s wisdom” is also known as the aspiration for (as well as faith and confidence in) bodhi—that is, the aspirational bodhi mind.

2. Loving Kindness and Compassion

Great compassion may sometimes be abbreviated to compassion. In a wider sense, great compassion includes both loving kindness and compassion. Even more comprehensively, it includes loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Compassion refers to the desire to free sentient beings from suffering when seeing them in that situation; loving kindness is the desire to fulfill sentient beings’ needs when seeing them bereft of good fortune and joy. All practices of a bodhisattva begin with and develop from loving kindness and compassion. In other words, loving kindness and compassion are prerequisites. It is said, “bodhisattvas are born only from great compassion, and not from any other virtues,” indicating that unless loving kindness and compassion are present, other merits and wisdom cannot be regarded as part of the bodhisattva path. Therefore, the mind of great (loving kindness and) compassion is truly the essence of the bodhisattva path!

3. Wisdom—Prajñā

Nonattachment is the insight of *prajñā*. This is the true (ultimate) insight into emptiness, which does not attach to any concepts or forms. This insight into

⁵ “Twelve categories of canonical texts” and “eighty thousand dharma troves” both refer to the same thing: the complete teachings of the Buddha.

emptiness—which arises from, and is nurtured by, compassion and aspiration—does not allow one to sink into a state that is void and dull. On the contrary, nonattachment is the great skillful means. With this wisdom, the practice of loving kindness and compassion can be accomplished, allowing the goal of unsurpassed bodhi to be fulfilled.

Therefore, the three essentials of the bodhi vow—faith and aspiration with confidence, great compassion, and insight into emptiness—are the true substance of the bodhisattva path and the real virtues that make a bodhisattva a genuine bodhisattva.

The Three Essentials as Practiced by the Different Vehicles

In view of the uniqueness of the bodhisattva practice, [the three essentials of] great bodhi vow, great loving kindness and compassion, and great wisdom—[that is,] *prajñā*, are beyond the entire human, heavenly and two-vehicle practices. But, at the same time, the three essentials can encompass all the wholesome practices [of the human, heavenly and two-vehicle paths].⁶

1. Faith and Aspiration

In terms of faith and aspiration, at the level of human and heavenly practices, the practitioners “long for sagehood and the heavens” and regard the state of “truth, goodness and beauty” as their aim. At the level of two-vehicle practice, the intention and longing is for the true dharma—that is, to head toward nirvana (bodhi or awakening), otherwise known as the mind for liberation. At the level of bodhisattva practice, the aspiration is the great bodhi vow.

2. Loving Kindness and Compassion

As for the essential of great loving kindness and compassion, in the human and heavenly practices, practitioners are able to cultivate “compassion that arises from a

⁶ In this part of the discussion, Venerable Yinshun shows how the three essentials manifest in the different vehicles, and the aim is to highlight that the three essentials run through all the vehicles and practices. In his work *The Way to Buddhahood*, Venerable Yinshun also shows how the three essentials relate to the three superior human qualities of recollection, pure conduct, and perseverance.

perception of sentient beings in suffering.”⁷ In the two-vehicle practice, practitioners can achieve “compassion that arises from a perception of sentient beings in accordance with dependent origination.”⁸ In the bodhisattva practice, the aim is to accomplish the “compassion that arises out of perception of sentient beings, but without any attachment.”⁹

3. Wisdom

Regarding wisdom, at the level of the human and heavenly practices, wisdom consists of worldly knowledge. At the level of the two-vehicle practice, wisdom is an inclination toward the truth [which is without adequate compassion]. The bodhisattva practice encompasses the wisdom of nondiscrimination (i.e. the fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination and the derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination).¹⁰

As shown above, the practices cultivated at each level are very different when considering them from the perspective of the mental activities that arise when facing different objects. If we look at the essence of these mental activities, they are no other than faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. Therefore, from one aspect, the three essentials of the bodhisattva practice are beyond all [other

⁷ In the *Mahāyāna* teachings, compassion can be categorized into three types. The first is “compassion that arises from a perception of sentient beings in suffering” (*zhòngshēng yuán cí*, 眾生緣慈). Ordinary beings do not understand that all dharmas are actually empty. Thus, they think sentient beings are real. Therefore, when they see sentient beings suffering, compassionate empathy arises.

⁸ The second type of compassion is the “compassion that arises from a perception of the cycle of life and death” (*fǎ yuán cí*, 法緣慈). This is the compassion of the *śrāvakas*. Although they have realized dependent origination and they know there are no real sentient beings, they have yet to fully penetrate the emptiness of all dharmas. Their compassion arises from seeing the process of endless cycles of life and death and of how beings are caught in them without end.

⁹ The third type of compassion is the “compassion that arises from a perception of sentient beings, but without any attachment” (*wú suǒ yuán cí*, 無所緣慈). This is the compassion of the buddhas and great bodhisattvas, who have deeply penetrated the emptiness of all dharmas. With their profound wisdom, they can see clearly that beings exist conditionally as dependent entities and that the cycle of life and death is a result of dependent origination, but importantly, they understand that all are essentially empty. This allows them to arouse compassion to help beings without attachment to any form of dharma whatsoever.

¹⁰ The “fundamental wisdom of nondiscrimination” (*gēnběn wú fēnbié zhì*, 根本無分別智) refers to the wisdom that leads to full realization of the empty nature of all dharmas. This wisdom conforms completely to the truth, as if it were merged with the truth such that they become indistinguishable. Therefore, this wisdom transcends the worldly state of relativity, and hence there is no subject and object; it is completely free of any signs—nondiscrimination. This wisdom is attained in a meditative state. After the meditator emerges from the meditative state, this wisdom gives rise to the “derivative wisdom of nondiscrimination” (*hòudé wú fēnbié zhì*, 後得無分別智), which understands the conditional existence of things. Hence, bodhisattvas can skillfully continue working to teach and guide sentient beings so that they become capable of practicing the path.

practices], and from another aspect, they encompass all the wholesome practices of the mundane and supramundane realms to draw all practices back to the bodhisattva path. The table below summarizes how the three essentials are practiced in the different vehicles.

Three Essentials	Human and heavenly practices	Two-vehicle practice	Bodhisattva practice
Faith and aspiration	Longing for sagehood and the heavens	Mind seeking liberation	Bodhi vow
Loving kindness and compassion	Compassion that arises out of perception of beings in suffering	Compassion that arises out of perception of beings in accordance with dependent origination	Mind of compassion
Wisdom	Worldly knowledge	Wisdom inclined toward the truth	Insight of <i>prajñā</i>

When we aspire to learn the Buddha’s teachings, regardless of whether we are a layperson or a monastic, we must cultivate the aspiration and practices of a bodhisattva. Only by learning to be a bodhisattva can we accomplish Buddhahood. The true virtues of the bodhisattva practice are the three great essentials, discussed above. We should reflect and ask ourselves the following questions: Am I learning and practicing? Am I developing these three essentials? If not, can I consider myself a bodhisattva who practices the *Mahāyāna*? We should be alert to what we have not done well and urge ourselves to progress, looking upon the bodhisattvas as our role models!

Confucianism, Christianity, and Buddhism

The core principles in the study and practices of a bodhisattva are the three essentials of *Mahāyāna*: faith (with confidence) and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. Although these are essentially built upon the natural characteristics of humans, they possess further purified and deepened qualities. Therefore, there are similarities between Buddhism and other [religions and philosophies in this world]. However, other religions and philosophies either focus on one thing and assume it encompasses everything else or fall into the situation of attaining one thing and, meanwhile, losing

the others. Never have they perfectly accomplished all. This can be seen in a comparison of Buddhism with Confucianism and Christianity.

The Case of Confucianism

Confucianism, which is inherent and representative of the mainstream in Chinese culture, has intellect, benevolence, and courage. These are called the “three universal virtues.” These virtues are regarded as the common traits of the path of cultivation undertaken by humans (i.e. to cultivate oneself, manage the family, govern the country, and bring peace to the world¹¹). The three universal virtues of Confucianism are similar to the *Mahāyāna*’s three essentials. Generally, intellect is similar to wisdom, benevolence corresponds to loving kindness and compassion, and courage is comparable to faith and aspiration. However, on a closer look, there are differences.

In terms of faith and aspiration, for example, it is said in the Buddha-dharma, “aspiration is built upon faith and confidence, and diligence (perseverance) is built upon aspiration.” This indicates that, based upon faith that is sincere, genuine aspiration will arise; relying upon genuine aspiration, the courage and diligence for practice will accordingly arise. In other words, aspiration is assured because of faith and confidence, and courage and diligence result from aspiration. This is a developmental process and is definitive without exception. Although courage and diligence pervade all wholesome deeds, their arousal must stem from faith and aspiration.

Confucianism, however, places too great an emphasis on the [realistic] ordinary human practices and therefore lacks enriched vision. Accordingly, the faith and aspiration that stem from those ordinary human practices are not strong and sincere, and the virtue of courage, as a result, is unable to realize its full potential. Moreover, in Confucianism, faith and aspiration arise under the influence of ideas such as “admiration toward

¹¹ “To cultivate oneself ... ” is a teaching from the *Book of Great Learning*. This Confucian text considers good governance as the key to bringing about justice and benefit to the people. In the time of Confucius and Mencius, the notion of family, country, and world was not the same as the present-day definition. These three sequential divisions refer to aristocratic clans that held power and ruled over a certain area. So, in this context, it is understandable why one needs to manage (govern) the “family” well, in order to be able to govern a “country” and ultimately the “world.” What this implies is that only a minority (the aristocratic clans) can undertake the deeds of benefiting others. In Buddhism, the bodhisattva teachings of benefiting others are not dependent on the power to govern people but on compassion and wisdom, which can be developed by anyone. So, although Buddhism and Confucianism both aim to benefit others, the approach to achieve this is very different.

sages,” “the principle of heaven,” and “conscience,” as well as some other [conflicting] ideas, such as “fear of the mandate of heaven, fear of sages, fear of the words of great men.” As a result, faith and aspiration, and the courage that stems from them—to know shame is akin to courage”—does not prevail widely in the general populace.¹² This weakness in courage, therefore, cannot compare to the faith and aspiration that arises from “longing for the heavens” or the “aspiration to accomplish Buddhahood.”¹³

Due to the revival of Confucian culture—neo-Confucianism in fact—the Chinese people, under the influence of this ideology, have gradually become dispirited and weak. From their faith and aspiration, they are unable to arouse the virtue of courage and lack the spirit of strength, resoluteness, and willingness to sacrifice their life. Regardless of whether the aim is to improve the development of the human character or to revitalize the spirit of the Chinese people, the primary matter for Confucians to take heed of is to value the virtue of courage based on the arousal of sincere faith and aspiration.

The Case of Christianity

Christianity¹⁴ (which includes Catholicism and other denominations¹⁵), typifying the spirituality of modern Western culture, also has three major virtues: faith, hope, and love. Christianity is a God-based religion. Its teachings are centered on having faith in God; with faith in God, there is hope, and because God loves humans, his followers likewise should love humans. In short, everything revolves around and stems from God, and this of course is starkly different from Buddhism. Nevertheless, in general,

¹² In Buddhism, faith and aspiration arise as the result of a great vision, whether it be longing for the heavens, nirvana, or Buddhahood. This vision inspires devotees to strive forward in their practice. On the other hand, faith and aspiration for Confucians are founded on a vision that is limited to the present human existence and influenced by conflicting ideals. Moreover, their courage is conditional upon having a deep sense of shame. Therefore, with Confucianism’s limited vision and lack of shame, faith and aspiration and courage do not arise easily in the followers of Confucianism.

¹³ This particular paragraph in the Chinese text has a different structure from this English translation. The Chinese is written in a way that more or less lists the causes and effects, making it open to various interpretations. This translation is written in such a way as to clarify for the English reader the links between the causes and the effects, based on our understanding of the text.

¹⁴ Here, the translation does not exactly correspond to the Chinese text but instead has attempted to relate the meaning. In the Chinese, 耶教 (*yējiào*) is a term Venerable Yinshun uses to refer to all denominations of faith that relate to Jesus.

¹⁵ The text in Chinese literally means “Catholicism and Christianity.” In this translation, we have chosen to use the term “Christianity” for 耶教 (*yējiào*) to avoid repetition in the parentheses.

Christian faith and hope are akin to faith and aspiration in Buddhism, and Christian love is similar to loving kindness and compassion in Buddhism. What Christianity lacks, however, is wisdom.

Although Christianity does now promote faith that is rational and reasonable, the intrinsic quality of Christianity, from a religious perspective, does not place great emphasis on wisdom. It is said that Adam and Eve stole and ate the forbidden fruit, and as a result, their eyes became bright. This, in the eyes of Christianity, was sinful and the root cause of death. However, this story is also representative of humankind's self-awareness and of the beginnings of the development of knowledge. The progress and development of knowledge and the marvelous achievements in science shook the foundations of the Church and orthodox Western culture, and a gap emerged. On the one hand, irrational religious sentiments (faith and hope) developed, while on the other, there were brutal antireligious persecutions.¹⁶

From the perspective of the virtues of humankind, and the promotion of a better future for the Chinese and the world, the bias in the virtues of Christianity must undergo a thorough transformation. Otherwise, Christianity will struggle to be accepted in modern society for a long time.

The Inadequacies of Some Buddhist Schools

In Buddhism, the *śrāvaka* practices, which are based on the Buddha's skillful teachings, are rather inadequate for the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion. Among the *śrāvaka* practitioners, some focus on faith and are therefore inclined toward faith-based practices,¹⁷ while others focus on wisdom and are therefore inclined toward dharma-

¹⁶ The Chinese text here is somewhat vague about the actual event being referenced. However, historically, there have been periods of obvious conflict between the Church and science. One example is the Roman Catholic Inquisition and its investigation of Galileo and other scientists who made discoveries that contradicted the Bible. The other example is the antireligious persecutions, of which a possible example is the destruction of churches and the clergy (including other religions) by previous communist regimes in Russia and China.

¹⁷ An example of faith-based practices is the practice of the six recollections: Buddha, dharma, *saṃgha*, precepts, generosity, and the heavens.

based practices.¹⁸ Yet, there are none who focus on compassion.¹⁹ This is the opposite of Christianity. Christians emphasize faith and love but are weak in wisdom, whereas *śrāvaka* practitioners focus on faith and wisdom but lack loving kindness and compassion. Both have inadequacies; neither is perfect. What represents perfection and the ultimate is the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva practice, which has the three essentials as the core of its study and practices. The perfection of the *Mahāyāna* practice is certain and definite. Although Confucianism may not be as broad and profound as Buddhism, the spirit of its three universal virtues is closer [than are the following Buddhist schools] to the three essentials of the bodhisattva practice.

The Pureland School of Chinese *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (which more or less has its roots in India, but became fully developed in China) also has three essentials: faith, aspiration, and practices. The sequential order of faith, aspiration, and practices reveals the process where, by relying on faith, aspiration arises, and by relying on aspiration, practice—with diligence—develops. “Practices” here means “to practice diligently,” which does not include loving kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Some Pureland practitioners engage purely in verbal recitation: “Homage to the Amitābha Buddha,”²⁰ as their practice. They do not cultivate wisdom, and as for loving kindness and compassion practices, these can wait until they return to this (*sahā*²¹ or “endurance”) world in the distant future. If we look at this from the perspective of the three essentials

¹⁸ An example of dharma-based practices is the four preliminary factors to enter (*sì yùliú zhī*, 四預流支) associating with good wise teachers (*qīnjìn shànshì*, 親近善士, *satpuruṣa-sevin*), listening to the righteous Dharma (*tīngwén zhèngfǎ*, 聽聞正法, *saddharma-śravaṇa*), contemplating the Dharma properly and thoroughly (*rúlǐ zuòyì*, 如理作意, *yoniso-manasikāra*), and practicing the noble eightfold path to attain nirvana (*fǎ suǐfǎ xíng*, 法隨法行, *dharmānudharma-pratipatti*).

¹⁹ “Yet, there are none who focus on compassion.” Here the word “compassion” refers to great compassion. *Śrāvaka* practitioners have compassion, but they do not actively cultivate great compassion as do the bodhisattvas and buddhas. Moreover, the percentage of *śrāvakas* who actively cultivate compassion practices is not large enough to constitute a categorical group like the faith or dharma-based practitioners. There are *śrāvaka* practitioners who incorporate compassion in their practice, such as Venerable Subhūti and his practice of nonconfrontational *samādhi* (*wúzhèng sānmèi*, 無諍三昧). In this practice, Venerable Subhūti always considers whether his actions will cause people to be unhappy. When making a decision, he prioritizes the interests of others, even if it brings him much discomfort or inconvenience. Notwithstanding this example, in the vast majority of *śrāvaka* practitioners, the focus is on wisdom to realize self-liberation.

²⁰ The Amitābha Buddha is a buddha with a buddhfield or pureland called *Sukhāvatī* (also translated as “Western Pureland” or the “Land of Bliss”). One of the major conditions for rebirth in *Sukhāvatī* is that the practitioner must recollect Amitābha Buddha’s name wholeheartedly, and this has developed into the practice of verbal recitation of the buddha’s name.

²¹ The word *sahā* is Sanskrit, and in the Buddhist context, it is used to describe the world system in which we live. The word *sahā* also means to “bear” or “endure,” reflecting the quality of this world where sentient beings endure hardship and suffering.

of the *Mahāyāna*, this is a result of the peculiar and unbalanced development of the Pureland School, which neglected the complete characteristics of the true *Mahāyāna* path. The Pureland School later spread to Japan, which is a classic example of a theistic nation. In trying to adapt to the Japanese culture, the Pureland School branched into a new sect, the True Pureland School (*Jōdo Shinshū* School), which claims that faith is all that is needed to gain rebirth in the Pureland; even the recitation of the name of the buddha is considered unimportant. This is similar to Christianity according to which salvation is attained simply through having faith in God.

However, we should bear in mind that the core principle of the bodhisattva practice is to take the three essentials as a whole and ensure that the three work together harmoniously.

Entering, Advancing, and Perfecting the Three Essentials²²

Finding an Entryway via One of the Essentials

When studying and practicing the bodhisattva's three essentials, we must not attend to one essential and neglect the others. When we start the practice, however, there is no harm in beginning from one (or two) as the entryway. For example, in the case of wisdom, some people are more interested in intellectual studies, such as philosophy, psychology, and logic. When they encounter Buddhism, they feel that the dharma is logical and philosophically profound. Thus, they decide to learn the Buddha's teachings. Such people enter from the gate of wisdom. Regarding compassion, there are those who delight in doing good, and they engage in many social welfare activities. When they meet with Buddhists or participate in Buddhist events, they agree with and praise the Buddhist spirit of loving kindness and compassion. As a result, they decide to study the Buddha's teachings. Such people enter via the gate of loving kindness and

²² In this next section, Venerable Yinshun aims to explain the key structure of the path. In the Chinese text, the title he has used for this section is an idiom, which literally translates as “Passing through the door, stepping up to the hall, and entering the inner room” (*rùmén, dēngtáng, rùshì*, 入門·登堂·入室). This idiom is intended to describe the progress from the beginner level to the advanced levels. Given the lack of a parallel saying in English, we have chosen to translate the title to reflect the meaning. The key structure of the path is also reflected in the structure of the content—that is, the discussion presented here follows the progressive stages along the path.

compassion. In the case of faith and aspiration, some people tend to admire the inconceivable virtues of the triple gem²³ or have had experiences of supernatural connections with buddhas and bodhisattvas. Because of this, they decide to study the Buddha’s teachings. These people enter from the gate of faith and aspiration. In short, at the start of practice, people can enter via different ways, and this is because beings have different capacities and natures.

Generally, those whose innate characteristics are inclined toward desires tend to enter from the gate of loving kindness and compassion, those whose personality possesses qualities related more to anger tend to enter from the gate of wisdom, and those whose characteristics consist more or less of ignorance tend to enter via the gate of faith and aspiration.

Advancing Along the Path to Cultivate All Three Essentials

Nevertheless, after entering, studying, and practicing the Buddha-dharma, we cannot remain forever at such an [early] stage. If seasoned practitioners of the Buddha-dharma, after ten years, twenty years—or even into old age—remain at this beginner level, they will fall into adverse situations.

Having Faith and No Wisdom

In the case of the *Śrāvakayāna*,²⁴ there are the faith-based practitioners who focus more on faith, and dharma-based practitioners who focus more on wisdom, but they certainly do not fall into a situation where they have faith and no wisdom, or wisdom without faith. These two kinds of practitioners in the *Śrāvakayāna* emerge due to the different tendencies in their spiritual capacities.

Both the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*²⁵ and the *Vibhāsā*²⁶ point out, “with only faith and no wisdom, ignorance grows and increases; with only wisdom and no faith, erroneous

²³ Tripe gem refers to the Buddha, Dharma and *Samgha*.

²⁴ *Śrāvakayāna* refers to the two-vehicle path.

²⁵ In the Buddhist canon of the *Mahāyāna* and *Śrāvakayāna* traditions, each has their own version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Here, Venerable Yinshun is referring to the text from the *Mahāyāna* canon.

views develop and increase.” Where practitioners have “only faith and no wisdom,” they merely rely on faith and do not seek further understanding or cultivate wisdom; specifically, they do not seek a clear understanding of the triple gem, in which they believe, or of the dharma practice that they are studying. They are unable to reap the true benefits of studying the Buddha’s teachings. Practicing in this manner, there is little difference in the minds of these practitioners between following the Buddha and worshipping the gods and spirits. It is nothing more than blind faith—superstition. It is unfortunate that many Chinese Buddhists in modern times fall into this situation.

Having Wisdom without Faith

In cases where practitioners have only wisdom and no faith, the impending danger is even greater! Nāgārjuna says, “If practitioners have no foundation in faith and precepts but long to understand emptiness, what they perceive concerning emptiness is erroneous.”²⁷ These practitioners wrongly interpret emptiness with erroneous views and then claim that the law of cause and effect is nonexistent. This is because they think themselves to be intelligent about everything and cannot initiate sincere faith toward the pure virtues of the triple gem.

The consequence of superstition is relatively minor, whereas erroneous views can lead one into the hells. This clearly demonstrates that both faith and wisdom must be cultivated equally, without any bias toward or neglect of either.

Partiality for Wisdom or Compassion

Similarly, in the *Mahāyāna*, there are bodhisattva practitioners who pay more attention to the cultivation of wisdom or to the cultivation of compassion. These bodhisattvas are attentive to (focus more on) one of these aspects, but they do not neglect the other. However, if practitioners cultivate only wisdom without compassion or compassion without wisdom, they are not on the bodhisattva path. Moreover, where practitioners appear to cultivate both compassion and wisdom, if their virtues of compassion and

²⁶ This text, *Vibhāsā*, is a shortened title. The full title according to the Taishō Tripiṭaka, the widely used edition of Buddhist canon, is *Abhidharma-jñāna-prasthāna-vibhāsā* (*āpídámò fāzhì dápípóshā lùn*, 阿毘達磨發智大毘婆沙論).

²⁷ “Precepts” here refers to the practice of uplifting one’s morality and ethics by practicing the ten wholesome deeds. These ten wholesome deeds are regarded as the core general principles encompassing all kinds of precepts in the Buddhist practice.

aspiration are not firmly established and they are eagerly seeking realization and liberation, they will certainly fall into the path of the *Śrāvakayāna*. Similarly, if their loving kindness and compassion are strong but their wisdom is inadequate, in the process of cultivating the bodhisattva practices, they will become “corrupted bodhisattvas”²⁸ and regress to worldly or even heretical practices. This is because without the skillful means of nonattachment, the bodhisattva practices cannot be accomplished.

In sum, it is reasonable to enter via a single essential as the first step to commencing Buddhist practice. However, if practitioners want to study the righteous bodhisattva practices, and to progress and advance along this path, they must cultivate all three essentials. These three essentials can mutually support and advance each other, and gradually guide practitioners to reach the higher levels.

Perfecting All the Virtues

Finally, one reaches the profound and ultimate stage of the Buddha-dharma. This stage may be called either the great bodhi or the great nirvana. In other words, this is the ultimate attainment of Buddhahood. At this stage, the three essentials are no longer separable and distinguishable; they have become a single perfection without any inadequacy or deficiency.

Some may think it is fine to focus and specialize on just one aspect of the Buddha-dharma: “Why is there the need to cultivate all three essentials?” This is a misunderstanding! In the case where practitioners achieve the profound state by using one single practice, they definitely possess all the virtues and understand how they interrelate as well as how they mutually support one another to become perfect. To achieve the profound state by using one single practice simply means that practitioners can begin at one entryway and, relying on this entryway as the focal point, are then able to complete the other practices. It is certainly not the case that these practitioners forego all the other virtues.

²⁸ Some translations will use the term “defeated bodhisattva,” which is a closer translation to the Chinese. Yet the meaning here includes falling away from the path and into heretical views, hence we have chosen the word “corrupted”.

As *Mahāyāna* practitioners, we study and practice the bodhisattva path and aim to achieve the perfection of Buddhahood. Is it plausible then that bodhisattvas and buddhas could have faith and no wisdom, or have wisdom and no compassion? In fact, the term “buddha” is an honorific title for one who attains perfection in all virtues. When learning the Buddha’s teachings, we should have the Buddha’s virtues, which are lofty and perfect, as our goal, and we should strive to cultivate these [virtues]!

Making the Bodhi Vow, Practicing the Path, and Attaining Wisdom

If bodhisattvas make the bodhi vow with sincerity and if they practice the bodhisattva path wholeheartedly, then they definitely possess all three essentials of *Mahāyāna*: faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. Although there may be some degree of emphasis [on one or another of the three essentials], they are still practiced as a whole. This is because if bodhisattvas were to neglect the faith and aspiration of *Mahāyāna*, then their loving kindness and compassion and their wisdom would be akin to Confucianism’s benevolence and intellect. If bodhisattvas neglect the loving kindness and compassion of *Mahāyāna*, their faith and aspiration and their wisdom would be no different from that of the *śrāvakas*. If bodhisattvas neglect the wisdom of *Mahāyāna*, then the essentials of faith and aspiration and of loving kindness and compassion would be much the same as the faith and love in Christianity. In fact, the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva path is the only path that can completely express the truth of the Buddha-dharma and befits this human realm as the unequalled path of practice. This path is embodied in the union of faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. These three essentials mutually support and advance one another, and as a result, the three ultimately become perfect and fully accomplished.

[Throughout the path of practice,] none of these three essentials can be lacking. However, during the course of practice, there is a staged process where the focus on each essential varies. That is, at times, there is more focus on one essential, and then at another time, the focus is more on another essential. In this way, the three essentials are cultivated until all three are perfected over the course of practice. When an ordinary person embarks on the bodhisattva path, it is vital that they know the sequence of practice. If a practitioner overemphasizes the ideal of different practices are without

variation, then everything and anything would be merely lip service. In fact, what this will prove is that nothing has been accomplished.

Bodhisattva Path in Two Stages and Five Steps

The course of the bodhisattva path is widely discussed in the Buddhist scriptures and exegesis. Generally, there are two stages throughout the path: the stage of *prajñā* and the stage of skillful means.²⁹ When an ordinary person embarks on the bodhisattva path, the very first step to undertake is the bodhi vow. Upon making the bodhi vow, they immediately enter into the bodhisattva's training. Making the bodhi vow stresses the importance of faith and aspiration. After making the bodhi vow, the next step is to engage in practice. The bodhisattva's practices in principle aim to benefit others, and as such, the accumulation of merit and wisdom is certainly not only for oneself. This stresses the importance of loving kindness and compassion. When the prerequisites of merit and wisdom are met, and compassion and wisdom become well balanced, then the bodhisattvas can realize the nature of equality in all dharmas. This stresses the importance of *prajñā* ("deep understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination"³⁰). What has just been explained are the [three main] steps in the stage of *prajñā* on the bodhisattva path: making the bodhi vow, undertaking practices, and realizing the nature of emptiness.

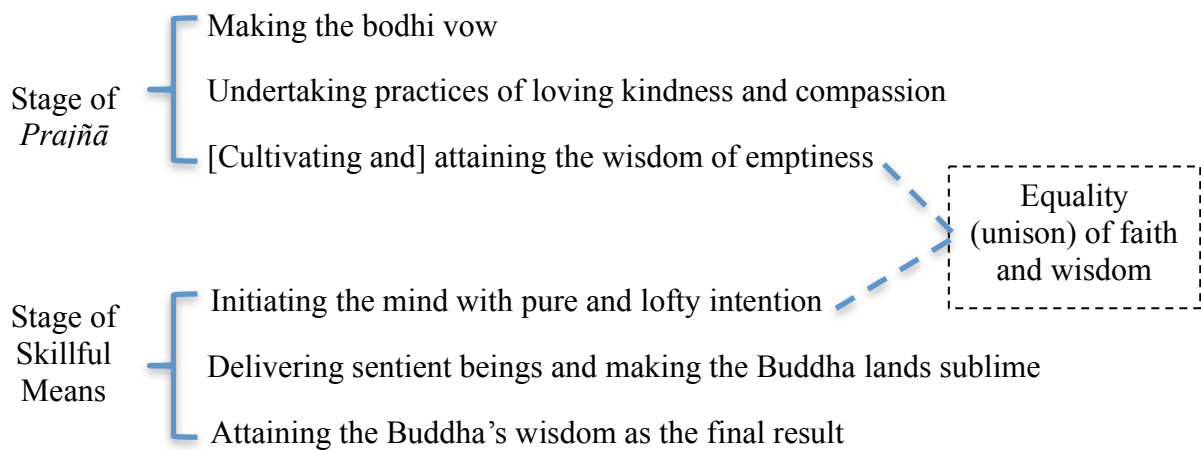
In the course of the bodhisattva path, the point at which a bodhisattva realizes the nature of emptiness is [effectively] the step of initiating the bodhi mind in the stage of skillful means. This is where the bodhi mind is connected to the ultimate truth, where faith and wisdom are in unison—also called "faith with realization." After this point, the bodhisattva practices are focused on delivering sentient beings and making the lands of

²⁹ In Chinese, the term 方便 (*fāngbiàn*) generally denotes two concepts. One is the concept of expedient path, which is related to the special methods of practice for certain practitioners who cannot directly start on the one-vehicle path. The other is skillful means, which refers to the tact of the bodhisattvas as they undertake their practices after deeply penetrating the truth. The latter especially refers to helping and teaching sentient beings in accordance with the bodhisattva's advanced faultless wisdom.

³⁰ "Deep understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination" is the translation of the Chinese term 無生法忍 (*wúshēngfǎ rěn*), which comes from the Sanskrit compound *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*. It is the achievement of profound wisdom, which deeply understands the truth that all dharmas neither arise nor cease, and this is the experience of the state beyond this phenomenal world. This wisdom is attained at the advanced stages of the final ten stages or ten *bhūmis* before attaining Buddhahood.

the buddhas sublime;³¹ the emphasis here is on the great practices of loving kindness and compassion that do not depart from wisdom. In the [final] step, where perfection is achieved, bodhisattvas completely attain unsurpassed bodhi—Buddha’s wisdom—which can be said to be the [ultimate] attainment of wisdom. This is the course of practice in the stage of skillful means: initiating the bodhi mind, practicing the path, and attaining the Buddha’s wisdom.

When the stages of *prajñā* and skillful means are viewed as a whole, there are five steps in total. This is the unequivocal course of practice for bodhisattvas, and it is important for those who practice the bodhisattva path to never forget this course of practice!



The Whole Path in Three Phases

These two stages with their five steps can be summarized into three phases. The initial phase is the step of making the bodhi vow. The intermediate phase consists of the three steps of practices (from the practices of compassion to wisdom, and then from wisdom

³¹ “Making the lands of the buddhas sublime” is a rendition of the Chinese expression 莊嚴國土 (*zhuāngyán guó tǔ*). It is where the bodhisattvas help prepare a favorable environment conducive to practicing the path.

to compassion).³² The third phase is the attainment of the Buddha's wisdom as the final result. Considering this process as a whole, it is the course of progressing from the state of an ordinary being to the state of Buddhahood, and through this process, the three virtues are continually being deepened and purified until they are perfect.

Summary of the Stage of Prajñā

In fact, the inherent situation of ordinary beings is dominated by (ignorant, defiled, and impure) desires. However, they can harness this desire in the development of faith and aspiration. Then, with the practices of loving kindness and compassion, it is possible to attain the sage's³³ wisdom. The sage's wisdom is also the sage's faith and aspiration (i.e. the mind with pure and lofty intention). This means, in the bodhisattva path, a bodhisattva's faith and aspiration is the mind with pure and lofty intentions. This mind also possesses a quality where faith and wisdom are united, which is achieved by cultivating compassion and refining wisdom.

Summary of the Stage of Skillful Means

Relying on the bodhisattva's faith and aspiration [which at this step is very pure but not completely pure], bodhisattvas can ultimately attain the same perfect wisdom as that of the buddhas, which is the complete purification of faith and aspiration. They achieve this by developing extensive practices associated with loving kindness and compassion and refining their wisdom. [The three essentials of] wisdom, loving kindness and compassion, and faith and aspiration are not perfected until the completion of this final step. The bodhisattva path, which begins with the state of an ordinary being and continues with the undertaking of the bodhisattva practices, is extensive and deep to the point where it is boundless, yet the core of this path is based on the three essentials.

³² The expression "from the practices of compassion to wisdom, and then from wisdom to compassion" captures the process of cultivation in the intermediate phase, which covers the second and third steps in the stage of *prajñā* and the first and second steps in the stage of skillful means. In the stage of *prajñā*, the focus is on the cultivation of wisdom, with reliance on the practices of compassion. In the stage of skillful means, compassion becomes more profound and thorough, with reliance on the wisdom of emptiness.

³³ "Sage" refers to any practitioner who has awakened to the truth of emptiness and includes the *śrāvaka* practitioners of the first fruit and above, the *pratyekabuddhas*, the bodhisattva practitioners in the ten *bhūmis*, and the buddhas.

Recollecting Buddhas, Being Vegetarian, Reciting *Sūtras*

Faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom—these are the essentials of the bodhisattva practice. The cultivation of numerous different dharma practices is merely the further practice and development of the three essentials. These different dharma practices have many degrees and stages, making them very deep and vast. For now, let us look at some expedient practices for beginners. The main practices of Chinese Buddhists are recollecting buddhas,³⁴ vegetarianism, and recitation of the *sūtras*. These practices belong to the initial expedients on the bodhisattva path.

Recollecting Buddhas

Although the meaning and function of the practice of recollecting buddhas is not limited to one facet, its main objective is to stimulate the initiation of faith and aspiration. The initiation of faith and aspiration of a bodhisattva refers to the initiation of the bodhi mind—that is, the directing of all intentions toward the wisdom of buddhas. It is not easy to initiate faith and aspiration for unsurpassed bodhi (a buddha's wisdom). Unsurpassed bodhi is what buddhas have perfectly attained; buddhas are those who possess unsurpassed bodhi—the wisdom of buddhas. Buddhas possess countless hallmarks and features of great beings and have powers and strength that are far-reaching and without limit. They have omniscience and incomparable loving kindness and compassion. Even when still practicing the bodhisattva path, they had already acquired indescribable virtues from carrying out many acts of benefit to themselves and others. Therefore, buddhas are ideal role models. We should respect and admire buddhas for their virtues and be grateful for their loving kindness and compassion. In other words, every thought should have buddhas as the place of refuge and object of respect. By revering buddhas in this way, the initiation of faith and aspiration to learn buddhas' teachings is most potent. Having buddhas as our role models effectively encompasses the triple gem because buddhas teach the dharma, and on account of the dharma, there is the *saṃgha*.

³⁴ In this practice any buddha can be adopted as the main focus it is not limited to the Buddha of our world, Śākyamuni Buddha.

It is with this aim of initiating faith and aspiration to learn the teachings of buddhas that the *Mahāyāna sūtras* extensively teach the practice of recollecting buddhas and praise the excellence of initiating the bodhi mind. In terms of recollecting buddhas, the point is to recollect the virtues of a buddha (virtue of perfect wisdom, virtue of purity, virtue of benevolence³⁵), recollect a buddha’s manifest hallmarks,³⁶ contemplate on the truth (the true meaning of buddha), and/or recollect the pureland of a buddha. [This practice of recollection] can be extended to include prostrating, praising, or making offerings to buddhas; repenting in front of buddhas, rejoicing in and aspiring to the buddhas’ virtues; requesting buddhas of the ten directions to give teachings and remain in the world, and so on.³⁷ All of these fall into the extended definition of practices for recollecting buddhas. In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*³⁸, it is said that there are bodhisattvas that enter the Buddha-dharma relying on faith (and aspiration) with diligence, and they delight in accumulating the virtues of a buddha. These are the faith-inclined bodhisattvas in the *Mahāyāna*. The aforementioned practices relating to recollection of buddhas, which belong to the easy path,³⁹ are especially revealed for them. In fact, the easy path is merely a stepping-stone to the difficult path (practice centered on wisdom and compassion). Therefore, the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā* says that beginners practice recollection of buddhas, repentance, requesting, and so forth, and

³⁵ The translations of the Chinese terms for the second and third virtues are based on the quality that each reflects, as displayed by the buddhas. The virtue of purity refers to a buddha’s perfection with respect to ending all defilements and leaving no trace at all. In the Chinese, the literal word “cut off” (*duàn* 斷) is used, meaning to cut off all defilements. The virtue of benevolence translates literally from the Chinese as “gratitude” (*ēn* 恩). Here, the Chinese word “gratitude” is not referring to the buddhas’ gratitude but instead to the immense gratitude that sentient beings have for the buddhas’ benevolence in helping them attain liberation.

³⁶ In the *sūtras*, it is said that each buddha possesses thirty-two great hallmarks and eighty secondary characteristics, which are a reflection of the virtues a buddha has achieved.

³⁷ These practices correspond to the first seven practices of a Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s ten great vows; the remaining three practices are to always follow the teachings of the buddhas, to always accord with the wishes of sentient beings, and to dedicate one’s merits universally to all beings.

³⁸ This is a famous exegesis by Nāgārjuna, which explains the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (specifically the version with the length of 22,000 *ślokas*). The extant record of this exegesis is in Chinese titled 大智度論 (*dàzhìdù lùn*).

³⁹ The distinction between an easy and difficult path to Buddhahood is closely connected to the Pureland School. Generally, the easy path refers to the practices of the Pureland School, in particular the practices aimed at accumulating the virtues of a buddha, such as repentance in front of the buddhas, rejoicing in the buddhas’ virtues and requesting the buddhas to give teachings and remain in this world. These practices were taught to those who aspired to the *Mahāyāna* but were too weak in capacity to walk the usual path of the six *pāramitās* and helping sentient beings to Buddhahood, which takes countless great eons and requires phenomenal endurance. The easy path helps these practitioners to build their faith, merits, and virtues, so that they are able to practice the six *pāramitās*—the difficult path. The difficult path is likened to walking along the road, while the easy path is likened to travelling in a boat.

through these practices, their minds become pure and their faith deepens. After this, they are able to cultivate the advanced practices centered on wisdom, compassion, etcetera. Similarly, *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* says, “initially when sentient beings begin learning the *Mahāyāna*, they should develop right faith. However, some are weak.” Therefore, they are taught to “focus solely on recollecting a buddha” as this can “protect their faith” so that their bodhi mind does not waver or dwindle. The first and foremost purpose of recollecting buddhas is to care for and encourage the development of faith and aspiration—that is, to cause faith that has not yet arisen to arise, and to nurture faith that has arisen to become stronger and stable. Recollection of buddhas is a mental activity that focuses on recollecting the virtues of buddhas wholeheartedly and never forgetting them. This in fact, is an especially effective and expedient way to encourage faith and aspiration to arise. As for the verbal recitation of a buddha’s name,⁴⁰ this is a preliminary measure for those who cannot undertake even the easy path well.

Being Vegetarian

Vegetarianism, or more accurately “not to eat meat,” is a virtue in the tradition of Chinese Buddhism. For a Buddhist, it is not required that one becomes a vegetarian. Some Buddhists do consume meat, such as Buddhists from Sri Lanka and so on who follow the Theravada tradition, and some Tibetan and Japanese Buddhists. Among the Chinese Buddhists, some think vegetarianism belong to the Theravada tradition and that in the *Mahāyāna*, vegetarianism is not necessary. This understanding is wrong. Vegetarianism is a practice that is specifically promoted in *Mahāyāna* texts: *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, *Mahāyāna-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, *Āṅgulimālyā-sūtra*, etcetera. Though there are many reasons and purposes for not eating meat, the main purpose is to nurture loving kindness and compassion. It is said in the *Mahāyāna-parinirvāṇa-sūtra*, “consuming meat kills the seed of great compassion.” Bodhisattvas are supposed to benefit and help all beings and provide relief to beings in suffering. How then can they bear to harm, kill, and eat them? Where is the loving kindness and compassion in that? The bodhisattva practice is built upon loving kindness and compassion; therefore, in the

⁴⁰ The practice of verbal recitation of a buddha’s name generally refers to the recitation of the Amitābha Buddha’s name, which is the most common practice among Chinese Buddhists.

practice of the *Mahāyāna*, there is no doubt that meat must not to be consumed. In fact, there are two kinds of practice to develop compassion. One is passively to not eat meat and the other is actively to release lives—that is, to save lives of sentient beings. These are doable and effective ways of nurturing compassion.

Reciting the Sūtras

Regarding the recitation and memorization of the *sūtras*, this is also an expedient means of practice, although, at the beginning, it is usually performed by merely reciting the texts continually, without seeking understanding [of the teachings]. This method has a number of functions and purposes, but the primary one is preliminary practice for developing wisdom. The practices to develop wisdom (the ultimate wisdom is the realization of true *prajñā*) include the three wisdoms of learning, contemplation, and insight with tranquility. This is further elaborated upon in the ten righteous dharma practices: copying the *sūtras*, making offerings to the *sūtras*,⁴¹ introducing the *sūtras* to others, listening and learning, chanting, briefly teaching the *sūtras* to others, familiarizing oneself with and memorizing the *sūtras*, extensively elaborating on the *sūtras* to others, contemplating and discerning, and practicing insight with tranquility.⁴² The first eight are practices that fall under the wisdom of learning and its preliminary practices. To sum up, the practice of reciting *sūtras* without understanding can also be an effective measure for developing further understanding of the doctrines, the knowledge of learning. This is similar to the approaches that were used in private schools in ancient China. First, students repeatedly read and memorized a text in order to be familiar with it. After [committing it to memory], they received lectures on the text so that they could understand the text clearly.

Problems with the Way These Practices are Undertaken

The practices mentioned above—recollecting buddhas, being vegetarian (releasing lives), and reciting the *sūtras*—are common to Chinese Buddhists. For beginners, they indeed serve as proper entry methods to the bodhisattva path. These are entry-level

⁴¹ Making offerings to the *sūtras* may sound odd, but this practice aims to develop respect for the teachings. In the way that a buddha's image is placed on an altar so too the *sūtras*, and offerings are made to the text.

⁴² Here, tranquility must be attained and form the foundation to the practice and attainment of insight.

expedient methods undertaken to nurture the *Mahāyāna* faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

Unfortunately, some practitioners recite and memorize the *sūtras* for the sake of merit, and they slight the investigation of the doctrines, which negates the function of this expedient method for the study of wisdom. Similarly, there are those who practice vegetarianism and the releasing of lives. Although they release lives and do not eat meat, only a few cultivate enough loving kindness and compassion to actively provide relief to human beings who are suffering in the world. In other words, these practitioners focus on caring for animals but neglect to care for human beings. This is to put the cart before the horse. This situation occurs because they do not know the purpose [of being vegetarian]. Accordingly, their practice does not nurture loving kindness and compassion.

Comparatively speaking, those who practice recollecting buddhas are somewhat more successful in nurturing faith; although, generally they fall into superstitious beliefs, and a few eagerly seek self-liberation. For these practitioners, if they can truly aspire to the bodhisattva vow of seeking the Buddha path and delivering sentient beings [from suffering]—that is, arouse the mind of benefiting themselves and others and initiate the vow of great diligence for the sake of the dharma and humans—this is rare and wonderful!

The practices of recollecting buddhas, vegetarianism, and reciting the *sūtras* are special expedient methods of bodhisattva practice. However, because practitioners disregard the practice of wisdom, neglect the development of loving kindness and compassion, and easily fall into superstitious beliefs, these skillful means have never performed their function well in Chinese Buddhism. Practicing in this way does not constitute part of the bodhisattva practice (nor would it even suffice as a preliminary practice toward entry into the *Mahāyāna*). This is indeed the root cause of Chinese Buddhism's deterioration. It is sad that Chinese Buddhism has fallen into such a situation! This type of practice cannot lead to the realization of the Buddha-dharma's great benefit. [Practicing in such a way] is insufficient to save oneself, let alone save the world. When learning the Buddha's teachings and studying the bodhisattva path, it is imperative to clearly understand the true goals of these special expedient methods. We should not recollect buddhas merely for the sake of undertaking the practice of recollection.

Neither should we be vegetarians merely for the sake of practicing vegetarianism, nor recite the *sūtras* merely for the sake of practicing recitation. Rather, the purpose of practicing the recollection of buddhas is to establish proper faith and aspiration. Likewise, the aim of practicing vegetarianism is to nurture loving kindness and compassion. As for reciting and memorizing the *sūtras*, the goal is to develop wisdom. These are expedient methods, and their purpose is to further our cultivation of faith and aspiration, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

Therefore, through the practice of recollecting buddhas, genuine practitioners of the Buddha-dharma and the bodhisattva path should be inspired to be diligent and to make the great vow to attain the Buddha's wisdom and deliver sentient beings from suffering. From our practices of vegetarianism and of releasing lives, we should nurture loving kindness and compassion and follow through with many undertakings that provide social benefit to human beings. Through reciting the *sūtras*, we study the doctrines in order to develop wisdom. Only in this way are the functions of these three entry-level expedients fully utilized and the foundations for the study of the bodhisattva path firmly established. As shown in the Chinese proverb, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," these are but the initial steps. From here, there remain countless expansive and profound practices [along the path], and we should progress toward these and move forward directly!

~ End ~