

The Three Vehicles of Buddhist Practice

by

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Chapter 2

The Mahayana

The Buddha taught the Theravada path to beginning students because it was suitable for them. The second vehicle (Skt. *yana*) is the Mahayana which means the “greater vehicle.” It is called “great” because it involves very great motivation, a vast view, and enormous practice.

The attitude of the *bodhisattva* who practices the Mahayana is very great. First of all, he or she has an attitude of only wishing for good and virtuous things to come to others and that anything unvirtuous or harmful be eliminated. The Theravada practitioners have this good attitude, but they mainly desire the development of their own progress and to have no obstacles or negativity on their path to liberation. It is a healthy thing to wish good things and progress for oneself, but if one concentrates too much on that and tries to develop only self-interest there is the danger that it will eventually prevent reaching enlightenment. The next vehicle of the Mahayana prevents the obstacle of self-interest.

The attitude of the bodhisattva, a Mahayana practitioner, is not being concerned just for oneself, but feeling the same concern for everyone. The reason a bodhisattva has unbiased love and compassion is that when we identify with a certain group and concentrate only on that group’s concerns, there is the danger we might harm others outside the group. Therefore, the Mahayana path cultivates a completely unbiased love and compassion, caring equally for every being including

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The Mahayana Path

nonhuman beings such as animals. Normally, we care for our friends and relatives and helping them may set others against us. Or we care for our race and set ourselves against other races or cultures. Or we care for humans and subjugate animals in order to make life better for mankind. All of this is the usual way of biased thought.

The Mahayana approach is to care equally for any sentient being (which is any being who has a mind). This is because we realize that since beginningless time, each and every being has had the same basic wish to find happiness and to be free from suffering. In that respect, all beings are the same and therefore we try to help them equally and without any partiality.

The Four Immeasurables

The attitude of the bodhisattva is to want to help all beings find happiness and to relieve them of all their suffering. The bodhisattva doesn't believe there are some beings who want happiness and others who don't. The bodhisattva doesn't think that there are some who need to be freed from suffering and others who don't need to be freed from suffering. He or she realizes that absolutely all beings need help to attain happiness and all beings need to be liberated from suffering. So the concern is for each and every being. In his commentaries, *Patrul Rinpoche* stressed the need for meditating on impartiality from the beginning of Buddhist practice. Normally, we meditate on the *four immeasurables* as they appear in the prayers which is in the order of limitless love, limitless compassion, limitless joy, and limitless impartiality. Patrul Rinpoche stresses the need for meditating on impartiality first because this removes the danger of having partial or biased love, partial or biased compassion. When we begin on

the path, there is a strong tendency to have stronger love towards those we like and lesser love towards those we don't like. Once we have developed wisdom with this meditation, it becomes true love which cares for each and every person without any bias. This is the purest compassion because it is impartial and equal.

We meditate first to cultivate impartiality, then we go on to meditate on great love, then on great compassion, and finally on *bodhichitta*. The first immeasurable, impartiality, means not being influenced by attachment or aggression. Great love means wanting everyone to attain happiness. Great compassion means wanting to free everyone from suffering. Bodhichitta, however, is subtler as it is the wish to attain Buddhahood to help all beings. Its very nature is a loving and compassionate mind. What makes it subtle is that bodhichitta implies the development of wisdom (Skt. *prajna*). Without that wisdom, the love and compassion of the bodhisattva is incomplete love and incomplete compassion. With this incomplete love, we may really want to help others, but we may be ineffectual and may even harm the person we want to help. With incomplete compassion we really want to relieve the suffering of others and yet we don't know how to free them of their suffering. So, in the development of bodhichitta it is vital to develop our wisdom and understanding along with our love and compassion. This is the real meaning of bodhichitta and the reason why it is subtle and difficult to cultivate.

For example, suppose there was someone who was very hungry and we didn't have sufficient wisdom, we might think, "Oh, there's an easy solution, I can show him how to fish." We teach him how to fish and then in the short-term his hunger is alleviated and he can care for himself. However, we have shown him how to harm other beings¹² and so this act will

create negative karma which will bring him nothing but trouble and difficulties in the future. So, even though our motivation was good and we exercised compassion, because of our ignorance, we weren't helping him at all, but made the situation worse. In other words, we need to act with love and compassion in a way that always brings good to all beings and takes into account the future implications of the act. This is the wisdom of the bodhisattva.

Another way of acting through love and compassion is not harming anyone. This is good in the short-term, but this doesn't result in lasting benefit. For example, we can give a poor person a gift of food and clothes. Although the motivation is good and it doesn't harm anyone, there is relatively little benefit because once the food or clothing are used up, the problem returns. The bodhisattva aims for is a very great and lasting benefit. So when a bodhisattva helps someone, he or she tries always to give that person the very best, which is to establish them on the very best path. If we can show someone how to enter the supreme path, then the benefit is great and will increase not just immediately, but throughout all time. This doesn't harm others and helps the person develop in every aspect. So the love, compassion, and care that the bodhisattva has brings everyone to the supreme path and is really what is meant by true love, compassion, and the activity of the bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva's pure motivation is extremely powerful and skillful. For instance, communism also has a view or philosophy, but spreading that philosophy involved great armies, vast amounts of wealth, and a great deal of fighting and violence. Even all those armies and military equipment didn't really convince people of the truth of communism. In contrast, the Buddha didn't spend millions to propagate his ideas or

employ vast armies with sophisticated weapons to convince people of the validity of what he was saying. He just had a begging bowl and taught many people. Because of his powerful and pure motivation, his ideas touched millions and millions of people and his teachings are still spreading. When the Buddha taught the dharma, he did it with the greatest love for everyone without any bias. He did it without wishing to bring harm to a single sentient being. He did it with a very pure compassion and wisdom. After 2,500 years all of his teachings are still perfectly intact and are still spreading and touching others without any effort on the Buddha's part showing the power of his pure motivation.

The bodhisattva's motivation of the Mahayana is vast, far-reaching, and extremely powerful. Of all the things that one tries to awaken in the Mahayana this motivation is really the key. From the very beginning one tries to develop this very vast and powerful attitude in which one develops love and compassion along with wisdom that is unbiased and a genuine desire to free everyone from suffering. This approach is the very core of bodhichitta, the driving force or motivation. The opposite of this is to have a biased mind and this selfish attitude poisons the environment. Bodhichitta, on the other hand, is very beneficial for oneself and for all others. So, when someone has bodhichitta, whatever he or she does, is like medicine or *healing nectar* (Skt. *amrita*) which brings calmness, peace, and the coolness discussed before. It is very beneficial and is like a great and powerful medicine. It just flows out quite spontaneously and naturally from the presence of one's bodhichitta. Take the supreme example of bodhichitta: when the Buddha taught, he led a very simple life and everything happened spontaneously around him. These far-reaching effects were a completely natural outflow of this very

therapeutic healing, coming from the very pure motivation which he had. This is very special. If one looks, for instance, at the Catholic church, one can see that it is a very powerful organization and a great deal of effort goes into spreading the doctrine as an organized business. There are missionaries and a definite effort to spread the philosophy and view. Even though there is all that effort and organization, it does not necessarily spread the view of Catholicism. With the Buddhist dharma, in contrast, there is the natural radiance of bodhichitta and the activity of the Buddha which through his very pure mind allows the dharma and its meaning to spread from one person to another in a very spontaneous and natural way.

The two main characteristics of the Buddha's activity are its spontaneity and its lasting power. One can see how various cultures of the past such as the Greek civilization influenced the world and one can see how that influence was very short-lived. The activity of the Buddha, however, is spreading and increasing all the time without any break in continuity and is always effective wherever it is. The Buddha's activity is also always appropriate and fresh. In the first centuries after the Buddha's passing away, the Buddha's activity was very appropriate. Even 2,000 years later it is still very meaningful and appropriate.

The view or approach of a bodhisattva to the Mahayana teachings is rooted in the second turning of the wheel of dharma. This second main phase of Buddha's teachings is called "the second turning" or sometimes "the intermediate turning." The first turning was concerned with the Four Noble Truths and was the basis for the Theravada. The second turning was the main basis for the Mahayana. The main topic of the Buddha's teaching in this turning is what is called voidness or emptiness.¹³ The Buddha described the empty nature of both

outer phenomena of the universe and inner phenomena in the mind of the perceiver. Then later on, in the third turning, the Buddha mainly taught about wisdom (Skt. *jnana*).

When Thrangu Rinpoche was in Germany there was one person who said that he appreciated Rinpoche's teachings very much, but when it came to the teachings on emptiness, they somehow made him feel depressed and uncomfortable. He said that if Rinpoche taught more about the existence of something rather than nonexistence of something, it would probably make him feel better. Because of this discomfort, emptiness will be explained in terms of the simultaneity of emptiness and interdependence called interdependent origination.

Interdependent Origination

Properly speaking, all phenomena are empty. This emptiness, however, does not mean phenomena are completely nonexistent. It is not a blankness of everything. What it means is that all things depend upon one another for their manifestation because they are interrelated. What we have seen before is that we project a global idea of “I” onto what is in fact many, many different things; so that when we look for the “I” we cannot find it as a substantial entity. We find on closer examination a complete absence of “I,” an emptiness of “I.” Yet, we can see that in the relative sense because of the way we project this idea, there is a certain relative existence of the “I” in terms of these projections. So, sometimes we associate this idea of self with our body, sometimes with our consciousness, and sometimes we even associate “I” or “mine” with the country that we live in. Therefore, the idea of “I” is related to something, it is based on something, it depends on something like the body or the idea of a country. And yet, when we look for it, we can’t find it. It is empty.

When one studies emptiness, one examines how things appear, that is, how existence manifests and is dependent on everything being interdependent. All outer phenomena are related and rest upon one another. Yet, when one looks for the “things” being existent in themselves independently, one finds emptiness; they simply don’t exist.

For instance, if I take a two-inch and a four-inch stick of incense, the four-inch stick is the longer one and the two-inch stick is the shorter one. If I show this to a hundred people and ask, “Which one is the longer one?” they would all say that the four-inch stick was definitely the longer one. Then when I add a six-inch stick and remove the two-inch stick, the four-inch

stick becomes the shorter one. If I ask a hundred people they will all say that the six-inch stick is the longer one and the four-inch stick is the shorter one. So I can't really say this is long or this is short without seeing the interrelationship of the two. There is the relative definition of things and that definition depends on other factors to which the thing is related. Things depend upon one another; they are interdependent; and this is the way all phenomena manifest to us. They don't have a meaning and significance by themselves; their significance emerges because of their relationship to other things.

There is an interdependence of all phenomena. That dependence applies to everything, but this dependence is particularly strong in terms of the labeling and recognizing the mind of the observer. If one takes away the observer with the ideas of long-short or large-small, then things by themselves don't have largeness or smallness. It is only when an observer is present and from this relative point of view decides that this is large, this is small, this is good, this is bad, this is beautiful, this is ugly, etc. Without the observing mind, these characteristics aren't present. So, the pleasantness or unpleasantness of phenomena depend upon the person relating to it. If someone is attached to an object thinking they want it, it becomes a nice and desirable thing. If it is something they don't like, it becomes distasteful, something to get rid of. All of this depends upon the observer's mind; interdependence takes place mainly between the defining mind and the apparent world.

Thus, the way things are defined depends on the individual who is observing and defining. For instance, if two tigers see each other, they find each other quite attractive. They think, "Oh, how nice" when they see each other. However, when a man sees a tiger, he thinks, "Oh, this is terrible!" not "Oh, what an attractive thing." Then the other way around, if two people

meet each other they think, “Oh, how nice. That’s my friend.” Yet when a tiger sees someone, he doesn’t think, “Oh, that’s nice. It’s a human.” He thinks, “Yum, food!” So we see from these different relationships that the quality of nice, attractive, food, or frightening is not contained within the object itself, but depends upon who is relating to that object and the way we label, define, and conceive of that object. We tend to label and define everything and we conceive of objects as real even though our concept is based on a relative, dependent process; things just manifest to us and because of this they have reality for us.

It should be obvious that the conventional existence of things depends upon the mind of the observer. Because of this, the Buddha gave teachings on the simultaneity of emptiness and interdependence and showed how these affect us. Interdependence, relative existence, and emptiness go hand in hand; the two are simultaneous and in combination. As we have seen in the example of the tigers and people, it is not that there is an absolute quality permanently engraved into the object; it is a relative quality that is there because of the observer. Because of interdependence in the relative world, there is this manifestation of these various relative qualities. Yet, when we examine them closely, there is nothing of an absolute value to be found in them. If we look for the absolute quality of beauty, edibility, or as we saw with the sticks, the absolute quality of longness-shortness, bigness-smallness, etc. these qualities cannot be found.

On the relative level, things continue to manifest to us, even though on the ultimate level they are empty. This means that suffering and all things happen on a conventional level. Yet, when we really search, we can never find the suffering, only the emptiness of suffering. So, in our relative life, we have

all these various experiences which are interdependent. In this deluded existence we produce the various disturbing emotions; sometimes we are attached to things, sometimes we become aggressive towards various people; sometimes we become jealous or proud. The way to overcome these disturbing emotions is not to work with the outer phenomena, but to work with the mind which experiences these things. So, for instance, we have an enemy; we can't just get rid of the enemy because, if we were to kill the enemy, then his or her mother, father, brothers or sisters would end up being our enemies. So destroying the outer enemy is not very practical. Whereas if we can work with our mind which relates to that person as an enemy and we can change that relationship to love and compassion and patience with what is taking place, the situation of an enemy is no longer there because the interdependence between us and "enemy" has been changed. To help us learn how to undergo this sort of transformation the Buddha taught the simultaneity of emptiness and interdependence.

Conventional and Ultimate Truth

We may wonder if realizing the absolute or ultimate truth doesn't make everyday life and ordinary things meaningless. It does not because when we gain realization into the ultimate nature of phenomena, everyday life does not contradict this understanding, but is a part of it. This is called the realization of the two truths. This means that we study the ultimate level the way things (or phenomena) really are and on the conventional level we study the way things occur according to the laws of interdependence. The conventional world has its relative truth and the ultimate also has its truth. If it weren't

like that, ultimate truth would be called “the truth” and conventional truth would be called “lies.” But it is called the ultimate truth and the conventional truth because it is understanding the true nature of phenomena when we look at the ultimate level or understanding the way phenomena manifest when we look at the conventional level.

When we realize both of these truths together, it helps us to live in the relative and it is of great practical use. For instance, if someone becomes angry and aggressive towards us, normally we become excited and flare up and fight back. If we realize that what is taking place is a relative and dependent situation, and we are aware of the two truths, then we don’t need to strike back. Because we don’t strike back, we don’t harm ourselves by generating negative karma and we don’t harm the other person. So the two truths are useful. We can see the two things happening: the relative situation emerging and the value of the ground of ultimate truth.

It is the same with desire. Normally we are subject to desire and wanting things. If we can’t get them, we become upset thinking, “I must have that. I can’t carry on without it.” or “I need it.” And if we don’t get it, our life becomes very miserable. Or if we have something like a precious statue or vase and one day it gets scratched or breaks, we become upset and feel, “Now it is ruined. I loved that thing.” However, when we understand relative and ultimate truth, we realize there is something useful to be learned if we get it or don’t get it. Therefore we develop equanimity. We don’t build a situation of desire or become heart-broken if something gets scratched or spoiled. So understanding the two truths enables us to live very skillfully and once we have that deep realization, then we still go on trying to make the relative world more beneficial. It all becomes like a play or a dream. We are still working to

make a beneficial situation, but because there is no longer any grasping or attachment, we work in a more relaxed way.

We may think wanting to practice the dharma is also grasping. But there is a difference between desire and desire for good which is often called “aspiration.” In Tibetan these are two different words. Desire (Tib. *chagpa*) means wanting things for oneself. It has the feeling of attachment, involvement, grasping, and self-interest. Aspiration (Tib. *möpa*) has the meaning of concern with positive things, of helping others, and of seeing what is necessary and wishing to do what is necessary and useful. As our wisdom and insight grows, hopefully, our desires will decrease. Our aspiration will increase because of the increase of wisdom and insight. An example of this might be that we fall asleep and begin to dream of being attacked by a tiger. We are full of fear and if there is someone nearby who is clairvoyant, he or she would see what we are dreaming and would know we were dreaming of a tiger. So the clairvoyant wakes us up and says, “There is no need to be frightened of the tiger. It’s just a dream. It is not really there.” When we see the true nature of things (ultimate truth), our aspiration grows and we want to do what is beneficial and useful. We are like the clairvoyant person and aspire to help relieve the suffering we see in others.

The effect of attachment can be seen in the behavior of couples. If they are not very involved with each other and just like each other, then they can have a sweet and smooth relationship. But when they have great attachment and involvement in each other, then it only takes one of them to go somewhere for a few minutes or to talk to someone else to cause the other partner to ask, “What did you say? What did you do? Where did you go?” One can see that great involvement in the situation causes a lot of difficulties. When one

develops wisdom, the attachment decreases and aspiration increases.

At Namo Buddha in Nepal (where Thrangu Rinpoche has his three-year retreat center) the Buddha in a former life gave his body to the tigress and her cubs who were starving. There was a great benefit to him when he saw the tigress and her cubs before him, because at that instant he realized that the thousands and thousands of previous physical lives had not really served much benefit to beings. Each time that he died his body was burned and buried, but it had not been of much use to anyone. He could see that there was the opportunity to actually use the substance of his body for some real benefit, to save lives by feeding the tigress and her cubs. Because he had this blend of compassion and wisdom, he knew that by giving so totally he would develop and perfect the *perfection* (Skt. *paramita*) of generosity and through its karmic power would give tremendous impetus to his development of wisdom in the future. The Buddha could then see not only the immediate benefit of giving himself to the tigress, but also see how this act would bring very great benefit in the future.

Luminous Clarity

The motivation and attitude of the bodhisattva and the Mahayana practitioner are composed of two main elements: the understanding of emptiness and the understanding of the *dharmadhatu* aspect. These are the main topics of Buddha's second turning of the wheel of dharma. With this view one sees how everything is empty, but at the same time within that emptiness everything takes place infallibly according to the process of interdependence. The second main aspect of the view of the bodhisattva is what is called the "luminous clarity"

or the “wisdom” aspect. This is the main topic of the last turning of the wheel of dharma. This emptiness is not a great blank or voidness. If it were just that, it would be the very opposite of the idea of manifestation. If there is just emptiness, then there can be no manifestation because the two are incompatible with each other. To think of emptiness just in terms of voidness is not correct because emptiness is the non-presence of a thing, it is its true essence. Nevertheless, through a process of interdependence on a conventional level things do manifest: they take place simultaneously with emptiness. So, we can’t think of emptiness in terms of just voidness because there is manifestation, yet when we look for the essence of the emptiness, we can’t find it. So this emptiness has the nature of *luminous clarity* (Tib. *salwa*). The Tibetan word *salwa* is associated with the brightness of sunlight or a very powerful light. Once there is that brightness, everything can be seen and distinguished very clearly. So the nature of emptiness is luminous clarity because it has the ability to let things manifest very precisely from within it. This luminous clarity is synonymous with the wisdom aspect of emptiness because wisdom sees everything clearly. But that wisdom does not have a solid existence; therefore it is not an objective reality that we can feel an aversion or an attraction towards it. The very nature of this wisdom is emptiness. That is why we speak of the union of wisdom and emptiness. When we look at the very essence of emptiness, we find it contains this very wisdom, this clarity, that understands everything. By analyzing that wisdom we discover no objective existence. So its very nature is emptiness; at one and the same time there is wisdom and there is emptiness.

Buddha-nature

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The union of wisdom and emptiness is the essence of Buddhahood or what is called *Buddha-nature* (Skt. *tathagatagarba*) which contains the very seed, the potential of Buddhahood.¹⁴ It resides in each and every being and because of this essential nature, this heart nature, there is the possibility of reaching Buddhahood. Even though it is in everyone, it is not obvious nor does it manifest because it is obscured by the various thoughts and disturbing emotions which block realization.

That Buddha-nature is present in each and every being but does not always manifest. This is exemplified in the *Uttaratantra* by an image of a lotus flower, which is ugly when it is a bud. But inside it there is a small and perfect Buddha statue. At first one only sees this homely flower. Yet, when the flower blossoms one can see the form of the Buddha, which has always been there. Similarly, full Buddha-nature is in everyone's mind, yet its radiance and presence is covered up.

Another example given in the *Uttaratantra* is of honey surrounded by many bees. Honey is quite sweet and tasty but as long as it is surrounded by bees, one can't taste that sweetness. The example shows again that there is something at the very heart, yet because of these swarms of bees which represent our disturbing emotions, one can't gain access to something which has been there all the time.

The third example is of grains of rice inside their husks. To get the nutritional value from the grains one has to remove the shell and husk. Whether one husks the grain or not, there is always that same grain inside and as far as the grain is concerned there is no difference. But if one wants to have access to the nutritive value, one must remove the shell.

The example of the statue of the Buddha inside the lotus shows how Buddha-nature is inside beings but is covered up by

desires, attachments, and involvements. One has many different disturbing emotions. The first main disturbing emotion of attachment is represented by the lotus because when one finds something very attractive, one wants to be involved with it. The lotus flower at one stage is very beautiful and has a nice shape and color which is associated with beauty and attractiveness. Actually, when one considers it, the lotus has a very limited use apart from its beauty. Also that beauty changes—one day it very beautiful, the following days it wilts, fades and rots and the beauty is gone. This is the very nature of desire—at one point things seem very attractive but very quickly one realizes that they are not so useful or lasting as they seemed. In the example of the lotus it is not until the petals of the flower open and fall away that one can see the form of the Buddha that was there all the time. And it is the same with desires—until one's desires have been eliminated, one cannot see the Buddha-nature which has been inside sentient beings all the time.

The second example of honey points to the covering or blocking presence of the second disturbing emotion of aggression or anger which is characterized by bees. Honey itself is very sweet and tasty. This is like Buddha-nature which is very useful and beneficial for everyone. Yet, around the honey are all those bees whose nature is the very opposite. The bees sting and are very aggressive. As long as the bees are there, the situation is very difficult. So it is with the nature of aggression and anger which is also very unpleasant; it stings and hurts. The honey is there all the time and one can't get to the honey because the bees are all around it. If one can find a way of gradually getting rid of the bees, one can get the honey. Likewise, when one eliminates anger and aggression, one can develop this really beneficial Buddha-nature.

The third example of grains of rice inside their husks is used to point to the nature of the third main disturbing emotion which is ignorance or confusion. The husk is very tough and difficult to separate from the grain which makes it a good example of confusion which is also thick, strong, and difficult to get rid of. This confusion prevents us from having access to Buddha-nature.

Generally speaking, beings have a great deal of ignorance. Compared to animals, of course, humans are more clever in many respects and have more wisdom. But the wisdom of humans is quite limited. For instance, humans like ourselves can't see what is happening beyond the walls of this room; they can't see what is happening in the rest of the world. Knowledge stops where the wall is. Even though humans can see other people inside the walls, they have no idea apart from a few vague indications what's happening inside of people's mind because human perception doesn't stretch that far. Even when we think we perceive other's thoughts, we often make mistakes. If we have a friend, for instance, the friend goes out and we may start thinking, "I wonder what he is saying about me" and we develop a whole train of thought and become convinced that he is saying bad things about us. By the time he comes back there can even be a fight just because we have guessed the person's intentions wrongly. Or we may think an adversary is changing his intentions towards us by acting in an open way which can also cause a lot of trouble if the enemy in fact is still an enemy. It is hard for us to see things as they really are.

When we learn about the Buddha's teachings, we learn about the nature of desire, the nature of aversion, and so on. It takes a long time for us to understand what is really being taught. Even though we may know about the shortcomings of

desire, yet due to our habitual patterns it takes a long time to act in a way which corresponds to our knowledge. The perception of the deeper aspects of truth is very hard for us to quickly understand because ignorance is so pervasive. That is why it is compared to the husk of a grain: It is tough, hard, and takes a lot of effort to remove.

These three examples show how Buddha-nature is like a precious essence or jewel inside us, which is covered up by desire, aggression, and ignorance. The Buddha taught the dharma to show us how to have access to this precious Buddha-nature.

There is another example in the *Uttaratantra* which illustrates this. There's a very precious statue made of gold which ages ago had fallen and became covered with dirt. Because no one knows it's there, for generations and generations people leave their rubbish there and it becomes more and more covered because no one realizes it is underground. One day a man who is clairvoyant comes along and sees this precious golden statue under the ground. He then tells someone, "Do you know that there is a precious and beautiful golden statue there under the ground. All you need to do is dig it up, clean it, and you will own this extremely valuable thing." Someone with sense would heed the man, take the statue out of the ground, clean it, and possess what has been there for such a long time. This example is very vivid: Since the beginning of time this precious Buddha-nature has been in all beings, yet it has been covered with the dirt of the disturbing emotions. Because one doesn't realize one has this precious nature within, disturbing emotions build up. But then the Buddha who is like the man with clairvoyance tells us, "You know, there is Buddha-nature within you. All you need to do is uncover and clean it so all the exceptional qualities it has

will manifest.” Those who heed the Buddha’s teachings can discover this incomparable thing which has been within us all the time and which we never knew was there until we were told. For that essence to be revealed we need to meditate on the truth, on the essence of phenomena, the way things really are. If we do that, we clean away all the delusions and disturbing emotions which have been covering up that essence. So we meditate on the essence of everything which is emptiness. Through meditation we will discover this emptiness has within it wisdom and clarity. Through the process of becoming used to the emptiness and luminous clarity which is the universal essence or *dharmata* we will automatically eliminate all of the delusions which have been blocking that vision. Once we see the truth of phenomena, all the deluded aspects can’t exist at the same time. So to clear away the obscurations and blockages to Buddha-nature, we need first to know about the essence of emptiness and clarity. Once we know it exists, we meditate on it to become closer and closer to Buddha-nature.

The Six Paramitas

The practice of the Mahayana of the bodhisattva is mainly concerned with the six perfections or *paramitas*. There are in fact ten¹⁵ paramitas but six of these are most commonly spoken of. So we will discuss the six paramitas which constitute the bodhisattva’s practice.

The Buddha said that when we do dharma practice, it should be done in a genuine and heartfelt way. This means that when we practice dharma, we must not just do it as an outer show or pretense or like a theatrical performance where actors dress up as kings and ministers even though they are not really kings and ministers. We must practice dharma wholeheartedly

and very properly with our body, speech, and mind. When we perform virtuous actions with our body, our mind should be there also working for dharma. When we say things, our mind should mean it as well. Practicing the dharma wholeheartedly is very important. If we do a prostration, for instance, our mind should also be filled with faith, devotion, and confidence to make that prostration meaningful. But if we just prostrate with the body and the mind is not involved with it, then it is more like theater with us just going through the movements, but the power is not there. It is the same when we recite mantras. If we recite a mantra and at the same time our mind is visualizing, we are filled with certainty, confidence, and faith; then all the power of the mind will be there and it will be a very good practice. But if we just recite the mantras and our mind is elsewhere, then it is just a show and the power is not there. It is not necessarily a bad thing to just do a prostration or a mantra mouthing the words. It just means the power is not there; just as it is not necessarily a bad thing that people pretend to be king and ministers in the theater. So, if we really want to get everything possible out of practice, we need to do it very sincerely and wholeheartedly with our body, speech, and mind.

With this wholehearted approach the bodhisattva's practice is the practice of the six paramitas. The first is generosity which means giving. There is giving to those who are worse off than us such as the poor, needy, and hungry. Then there is giving to those who are better off than us which means offering them the three jewels. These are the two main areas of generosity of the bodhisattva. When giving to those who are worse off, what is important is compassion and when giving to those who are better off what is important is faith, devotion, and confidence. So when we give to the poor, it relieves their poverty and hunger temporarily because of our compassion.

When we make offerings to the three jewels, we make an expression of devotion. If we never give to those worse off, then compassion isn't there and it is not complete. In the same way, if we don't make offerings to the three jewels, then our faith, confidence and appreciation in the meaning of the three jewels isn't quite right either. So offerings are a very important sign of what is going on in terms of compassion and devotion. Beside cultivating love, compassion, and devotion, the bodhisattva also has to actually practice the paramita of generosity.

The second paramita is moral or virtuous conduct. The very essence of virtuous conduct is that we do everything with love and compassion so we do not directly harm other beings. If we have love and compassion and yet harms other beings, it is a sign that our love and compassion isn't really there. So, if we are loving and compassionate, we must really never harm other beings. This is the bodhisattva's experience to love and compassion. Therefore virtuous conduct is mainly concerned with the discipline of practicing right conduct with our body and speech so that we don't hurt others directly or indirectly.

Generosity and virtuous conduct depend mainly on ourself. If we make an effort to be loving and compassionate, it is relatively easy to develop generosity. Also, if we are loving and compassionate, it is relatively easy to maintain high moral conduct because this depends mainly on working with ourself.

The third paramita deals with something more difficult. It deals with how we react to situations arising from others, particularly what we do in the face of physical and verbal aggression from others. This is the paramita of forbearance, often called patience, which is remaining loving and compassionate in the face of aggression. The training of patience is the training of keeping our love and compassion in the face of those difficulties which come from other people. So if our love

and compassion is incredibly stable, when others hit us, no matter how much they hurt us physically, we never respond in a like manner. Our only response is one of love, compassion, and understanding. In order to practice generosity, virtuous conduct, and patience in the face of difficulties, we need the fourth paramita of diligence to implement the first three paramitas and make them increase and become even more powerful factors in our life.

Diligence doesn't mean some terrible drudge or difficult effort. Rather it is very joyful, meaningful, and vital. If we really think something has benefit, we value it, and we will do it very joyfully and out of this there is an automatic flow of diligence and industry. If we think something is not very important, then we will think it is a drag and a bore and we will do a little bit and then become lazy and stop. Later we may try to do a little bit more and stop again because of laziness.

Diligence means to practice without falling under the influence of laziness and practicing because we realize the tremendous value of that practice. Once we have gained an insight into its value, effortlessly there will be joy and keenness to get on with it. Then automatically we will put lots and lots of effort into it to make it a very productive thing. We will become diligent thus increasing the preceding paramitas.

The fifth paramita is meditative concentration. The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*. This is the active word and the word is derived from the root (Tib. *khom*) which means "to accustom oneself to something." So to meditate means to commit and to accustom oneself to meditation. It really means training the mind to settle. Even though we say "my mind," the mind which belongs to us is not under our control. Because we have not worked on it very much, our mind tends to be very distracted; it switches from one thing to another all the time.

For instance, we may decide, “I am not going to get angry anymore.” Even though we decide this in one moment, we don’t have control over our mind and so we fall under the influence of anger a little later. We may promise not to be subject to desires any more and then we lose control and our mind is suddenly full of desires. So, we think “my mind is under my control,” but when we look at it carefully there is not that much control there. It is not like our hand. If we want the hand to go somewhere, we can put it there. If we want it to come back, we can bring it back. But the mind is not nearly so tamed and doesn’t respond to those commands so well. This is mainly because we haven’t really done much work in bringing it under control. The word “meditation” has this implication of training or habituating our mind so that it does what we want. We habituate our mind by meditating again and again. This is the nature of meditation and the main point of the fifth paramita is mental stability through meditation.

The sixth paramita is wisdom or prajna in Sanskrit. How much happiness we get out of worldly things depends on how much understanding and wisdom we have. So wisdom is the very root of happiness and joy and determines the value of all other things. In the ultimate sense the benefit that we can get depends very much on our wisdom and understanding. Also the ability to help others depends on the degree of our wisdom. Developing ourselves also depends on the degree to which we have cultivated wisdom. For all these reasons wisdom and understanding are the very root of happiness and out of them joy emerges. How then do we cultivate this wisdom? For a Buddhist it is cultivated by the three main approaches of studying, contemplating, and meditating.

The Three Knowledges

The first knowledge or *prajna* in Sanskrit is studying, an act which does not have direct access to wisdom. We don't naturally know how to develop wisdom, so we turn to the teachings of the Buddha. By studying the teachings, we begin to grasp the ways to the development of wisdom. Now study in itself will not bring the growth of much wisdom. We need to go on to the second *prajna* which is contemplation of the teachings in which we think again and again about the meaning of what we have studied to really get to the heart of it. Even this won't bring about the highest, deepest, or ultimate benefit; we need to take the third *prajna* which is to meditate. It is through meditation that we actually attain the ultimate emergence of wisdom. Of the three main modes of developing wisdom, by far the most important one is the wisdom that emerges from our meditation.

All beings have already within them Buddha-nature or this Buddha-potential which has the essence of luminous clarity and wisdom. This is the very highest wisdom, the power to know everything very clearly and directly. All the power of wisdom is already there, but it is still obscured. Until we have purified the obscurations covering it, we can't use that wisdom because we don't have access to the great clarity within us. We see this even when we try to analyze a simple object. Between us and the thing we are trying to understand there is this intermediate space full of thoughts. We interact with things through a great layer of intellectual activity or subtle subconscious thoughts. It is therefore very hard to actually know something directly because this constant interference of thought takes place. If we study for even a few minutes a great number of thoughts just pop up in our mind. From this we can

begin to understand what an obstacle thoughts present to our actual development and understanding.

When we meditate, the purpose of meditation is for our mind to become stable and no longer distracted by the influence of thoughts. Our mind becomes calm and under control. Once the mind is calm, we can have a much more direct and immediate contact with reality and develop wisdom more rapidly. This is why the wisdom which develops in meditation is important.

The Fruition

So far we have examined the view, the meditation, and the practice in the Mahayana. Now we will move on to fruition which is Buddhahood. The word for “Buddha” in Tibetan has two syllables, *sang gay*. These show the two main qualities or principle aspects of this highest goal of Buddhahood. The first is the aspect of purity which means one is free from all the impurities of the disturbing emotions, from ignorance, and from all the obscurations. The syllable *sang* means “awakened,” “awakened from that sleep of ignorance,” or “purified from that ignorance.” The second syllable *gay* means “blossomed” because being free from impurities, all of the deep wisdom of the Buddha becomes present and this clarity and knowledge has completely blossomed and is completely free from obscurations. So Buddhahood is the complete blossoming of the highest wisdom and purity.

The teachings of the Buddha can be divided into three main levels or *yanas* which are the Hinayana (Theravada), the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana. Another way of analyzing them is to look at them in terms of the *sutra* and the *tantra* level of teaching. The Sanskrit word *sutra* was translated into Tibetan

as *do* which means “teachings” or “explanation.” Generally, the sutra level of teachings contains all of the explanations, all the ways of presenting the vast meaning that the Buddha gave in his life of teachings. So the sutra tradition is a way of presentation of the Buddha’s teachings.

The other aspect is the tantra. When the Sanskrit word “tantra” was translated into Tibetan, it became *gyu*, which means “continuum.” Sometimes it is called *mantra* which in Tibetan is *ngak*. This word “continuum” shows that there is this presence of Buddha-nature in all sentient beings. They have had this essence from the very beginning of existence and will possess until they reach Buddhahood. So, by gradually working on the path, step by step, one develops one’s full potential and reaches Buddhahood. This constant or continuous presence within us is what is worked with in the tantric teachings. These are teachings related to the Vajrayana which will be discussed next.

The Mahayana Path