

Confidence and Its Cultivation

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Why We Need Confidence

The factors leading someone to learn and practice Buddhism vary. For some people, it may be confidence (faith),¹ while for others it may be compassion or wisdom. Nevertheless, confidence is considered the most important factor leading individuals to gain entry into Buddhism. In the complete process of learning and practicing Buddhism, which is the process of confidence, understanding, practice, and realization, confidence is the first and primary element.

¹ The Chinese word here is 信 (*xìn*) and is commonly translated as “faith.” However, we have chosen to use the word “confidence” to avoid confusion with the concept of “blind faith,” and to bring out the deeper meaning of the word, which includes confidence, trust and so on, towards the Triple Gem and the teachings of the Buddha.

In the *Śrāvākayāna*,² it is said that “confidence enables one to enter [into Buddhism], while morality enables one to transcend [*samsāra*].”³ In the *Mahāyāna*, it is said that “confidence enables one to enter [into Buddhism], while wisdom enables one to transcend [*samsāra*].” Although it is fine that there are differences between whether it is morality or wisdom that enables someone to transcend *samsāra*, it is consistent that “confidence enables one to enter [into Buddhism]” and that it cannot be lacking. Therefore, if we want to learn and practice Buddhism, and rely on the Buddha-dharma⁴ to attain ultimate benefits,⁵ we cannot neglect the cultivation and strengthening of confidence. If we are unable to establish sincere and pure confidence in the Triple Gem, then we are not on the path connected to the Buddha-dharma and are merely wandering outside the path of Buddhism.

Soon after he attained Buddhahood, the Buddha thought to himself, “How can someone understand this deep and profound Dharma⁶ that I have realized if they have no confidence [as their basis]?” At that time, the Buddha thought that explaining the Dharma would not be easy, and so he reflected that it was only by having confidence that someone would be able to accept and practice the Dharma. Nāgārjuna⁷ uses a simile to explain this point: People who have no hands are unable to take away

² *Śrāvākayāna*: Technically, it refers to the practices of the *śrāvakas* or direct disciples who heard the Buddha’s teaching in person. However, in our translations this term is used to refer to the *Hīnayāna*, which in general refers to the Buddhist practices that are centered on self-salvation. Historically, the term is applied to the early Indian groups typified by *Theravādins* 上座部 and *Sarvāstivādins* 有部, who held to a monastically centered approach to Buddhist practice. The term *Hīnayāna* is considered derogatory, and so we have chosen to use *Śrāvākayāna* instead.

³ *Samsāra*: A term used to refer to the cyclic existence of sentient beings. In Sanskrit it means “course, passage, passing through a succession of states, circuit of mundane existence, transmigration, metempsychosis, the world, secular life, worldly illusion.” See Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1899, page 1119.

⁴ Buddha-dharma: From the Chinese 佛法 (*fófā*), the use of this term by Venerable Yinshun can have several meanings, including Buddhism and the Buddha’s teachings. In our translations we use the term “Buddha-dharma” to translate 佛法 when it is referring to the Buddha’s teachings.

⁵ Ultimate benefit refers to all the benefits that come with the attainment of liberation from cyclic existence, which are lasting and not temporary.

⁶ Dharma: Has several meanings. When used with a capital “D” it refers to the ultimate truth and the Buddha’s teachings, which help sentient beings to realize that ultimate truth. When spelt with a lowercase “d”, dharma can refer to phenomena, things, method or practice.

⁷ Nāgārjuna: A bodhisattva in South India who lived during the late 2nd century CE. He is regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school and is highly regarded by many Buddhist schools.

any treasure from a treasure trove. Likewise, if people have no confidence in the Triple Gem when they see the Buddha and hear the Dharma, then in the end they would not have attained anything. Accordingly, we can see that the boundless merits of the Buddha-dharma all stem from confidence. Hence it is said, “Confidence is the foundation of the path and the mother from which all merits [arise].” That is how important confidence is!

At one time, the Buddha wanted to teach the people in a fishing village along the Ganges. He manifested a person to walk on the water, from one side of the river to the other. Seeing this, the villagers were shocked. The manifested person remarked, “What is so special about walking on water? This is merely because I have confidence in what the Buddha teaches.” Consequently, the people in the fishing village developed great confidence toward the Buddha and he was able to go to the village and teach them. It is recorded that around 500 to 600 years after the Buddha’s time, Peter, a fisherman, was caught in a storm while out at sea. Suddenly he saw his teacher, Jesus, walking on the surface of the water. When Jesus beckoned him, Peter jumped off the boat and walked toward Jesus. But then he recalled the storm and became afraid. Jesus reproached him for not having enough faith! This story from the Holy Bible parallels the story of the Buddha and the fishing villagers, and similarly highlights the power of confidence.

Right Faith (Confidence) and Blind Faith

When talking about religious beliefs, we must first discuss the difference between “right faith” (confidence) and blind faith. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish between the two, but it is necessary to clarify each in turn. Among the different religions, there is a tendency to criticise the others as promoting superstition. For example, Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations of Christianity pay homage to the Virgin Mary and erect carvings or images of Jesus on the Cross. Some religious followers bow down to the ground and pray to “Our Father in Heaven,” while others pray to God for help when they are ill. However, they criticise the Buddhist practice of paying respect to the Buddha through various statues as being superstitious. They do not attempt to understand the other religion (Buddhism), and try to suppress or erase it instead. They

are just blindly rejecting Buddhism.⁸ An objective answer to the question of what is right faith and what is blind faith cannot be attained from theists with these perspectives.

Blind faith and right faith, or confidence, can be distinguished from two aspects.

One is from the aspect of the object in which someone places their faith. All right faith must have an object that possesses the qualities of being real, virtuous, and capable. Take, for example, having confidence in the Buddha. The Buddha was a historical figure who lived in ancient India and was known as Śākyamuni. He indeed possessed the virtues of an awakened one because he had the virtue of wisdom, which is great awakening, the virtue of pacification, which is the ending of all defilements, and the virtue of benevolence, which is great compassion. The Buddha accomplished the absolute perfection and purification of human nature and so is most worthy of our confidence and respect. The Buddha is our teacher and, because of his virtues, he is able to guide us toward the wholesome practices of liberation. We can attain the same liberation as the Buddha. Hence, the Buddha is real, and has virtues and capabilities. He is worthy of our confidence and respect, and we should respect and believe in the Buddha. Therefore, having confidence in the Buddha is having right faith.

Now, let us look at the alternative concept of the creator of the world. There is no proof that this creator, God, is real. It is said that God bestowed food and drink upon humans, but this is also unverifiable. So, despite having a form and ability that is uncertain, some people believe in God. Is this not superstitious?

Another example of blind faith is that of a traveller at night using the method of calling for their parents or whistling to build up their courage when scared of ghosts.⁹ Although this may have a strong effect on the traveller, it is certainly not the case that their parents or the act of whistling has the ability to deter ghosts. Therefore, in theistic religions, in which the belief in a creator is unquestionable, self-reassurance and self-delusion can arise from the power of blind faith in an external being. A devoted and concentrated

⁸ Inter-faith dialogue has improved greatly since the 20th century. The situation explained here by Venerable Yinshun is based on his own experience when the various Christian faiths began to assertively spread their religion in China.

⁹ The example of calling one's parents and whistling are Chinese cultural traditions.

mind can bring about special spiritual experiences. Both self-assurance and special experiences can yield strong effects. However, these still belong to blind faith if we regard that effect as an act of God or the grace of God. But there is no need for theists to lose hope. Blind faith does have some value (of course, it could also be harmful). Having blind faith is not necessarily bad. At least it is much better than having no faith at all.

The second aspect from which to distinguish confidence and blind faith is the factors connected to the mind, through which one's faith arises. If someone undergoes a process to properly understand things and then is able to see them correctly and believe in them sincerely, then this is faith with wisdom or right confidence. If someone blindly follows something or naively has faith in it by following their parents or friends, then this is definitely blind faith.

Four situations regarding right faith and blind faith can be derived from these two aspects.

The first is where the object of faith has the qualities of reality, virtue, and capability but the subject (person) adopts this faith blindly. This is just like a certain medicine that truly has healing effects from a specific disease. Although the patients do not understand the potency of the medicine, they trust the doctor and so they take the medicine. This situation can still be considered as right faith. However, it is not ideal because there is potential for harm (for example, the doctor may be unreliable or incompetent). Therefore, it is said, "having faith without wisdom will increase ignorance." The second situation is where the object of faith does not have the qualities of reality and capability but someone's faith in that object arises after investigation or giving some consideration, or contemplation, to it. This may look like "faith with wisdom." However, it is undeniably a kind of blind faith. The reason is that such blind faith is due to an incorrect understanding, which is based on an incorrect contemplation. The third situation is where the object of faith has the qualities of reality, virtue and capability, and someone's faith in the object is due to correct contemplation, which is the most precious type of right faith (confidence). The fourth situation is where the object of faith does not have the qualities of reality, virtue and capability, and the person believing in that object just blindly follows what others say. This last situation is the worst case of blind faith.

When learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings, we should aim to have right faith, where both subject and object align. Suppose the ideal case is not possible, then we can still be considered a Buddhist disciple with right faith if we believe in the Triple Gem—cause and effect, wholesome and unwholesome deeds, and the three life cycles, despite not having a correct understanding of them.

Submissive Faith and Confidence

The faith or confidence we have discussed above applies to general situations. When the Buddhist scriptures mention faith, generally this is a reference to confidence in the Buddha-dharma. Therefore, among the Buddhist schools from the north-west of India, such as the schools of Sarvāstivāda and Yogācāra, when they discuss confidence, it has to be pure and wholesome. In fact, confidence is not simply wholesome and pure. This is why the schools of Mahāsāṃghika and Vibhajyavāda from the south-east of India categorize confidence into two types that include what is wholesome and unwholesome. The first type is submissive faith, which is similar to the common belief in a certain ideology. Such faith can be wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral. Take adherents of communism as an example. We cannot say they have no beliefs, but rather that their beliefs lead to impure and unwholesome deeds. The second type of confidence is pure and wholesome. This is taught specifically in Buddhism.

I recall that Liang Shuming once said that the characteristics of western culture are connected to religion and faith, while the characteristics of Chinese culture are connected to ethics and rationality. However, Liang Shuming did not take note of Indian culture, especially the Buddhist culture there, where religion and philosophy are interconnected. The characteristic of Buddhism is that confidence and rationality are in accord; confidence and wisdom function as one. According to Buddhism, faith is clearly inclined to the emotional aspect. However, the object in which someone places their faith is expected to be understood through wisdom. Although the function of wisdom is to understand, the knowledge gained is not merely abstract and baseless. What is realized does have a true substance that is worthy of reverence and respect. In Buddhism, even though confidence and wisdom have their own special qualities, and Buddhists may have their own inclination toward one or the other, the two are not completely unrelated or contradictory. That is to say, confidence is rational, and this

rationality embodies confidence in Buddhism. This point can be fully brought to light through an explanation of confidence.

What is confidence? “A [temporary state of] undefiled mind is its essence”.¹⁰ This definition is very difficult to comprehend, and we need to explain it based on the causes that lead to the arising of confidence and the results that are borne from having confidence. In terms of the perspective of causes, it is said that “deep recognition” is a profound understanding. In other words, it is a “superior understanding.” Because an understanding that is profound and powerful can initiate confidence, hence it is said that “the cause of confidence is superior understanding.” In terms of the perspective of results, it is said that “aspiration is the fruit of confidence.” “Aspiration” is a vow or eagerness to fulfil one’s goals. Where there is confidence (faith), there must be vows or eagerness. This logic is basically similar to Mr Sun Yat-sen’s advocacy, “upon having an idea, one will have a faith and upon having a faith, one will have power.”¹¹

This confidence arises through deep understanding and sincere aspiration. In other words, this confidence is brought about by wisdom and is able to stimulate aspiration. Confidence is defined as a temporary state of undefiled mind. This is its essence. Confidence is an affinity and respect that is sincere and without defilement. This confidence has a power that is able to cause the mind to become settled and clear. That is why this confidence is likened to a water purification tablet that can be used to purify dirty water. Once this confidence arises, one’s mind becomes settled, clear, free from doubts and overflowing with genuine esteem for the Triple Gem. On account of being able to truly see the virtues of the Triple Gem and having thorough confidence in it, Buddhists themselves definitely seek to realize the Buddha-dharma through practice.

¹⁰ 「信是什麼？「心淨為性」，即內心的純潔，不預存一些主觀與私見，惟是一片純潔無疵的心情。」（《佛法概論》，p. 185）

“What is confidence? A [temporary state of] undefiled mind is its essence.” This is the purity of the mind where not a single thought of subjectivity or selfishness arises. There is simply a state of mind, which is pure without any flaws.

¹¹ [Sun Yat-sen, 1954, *The Principle of Nationalism: Lecture One*:](#)

“What is a principle? It is an idea, a faith, and a power. When men begin to study into the heart of a problem, an idea generally develops first; as the idea becomes clearer, a faith arises; and out of the faith a power is born. So a principle must begin with an idea, the idea must produce a faith, and the faith in turn must give birth to power, before the principle can be perfectly established.”

Therefore, we can see that the unbiased confidence taught by the Buddha arises from wisdom and is starkly different from the faith in theistic religions.

The followers of western theistic religions have faith but they place little emphasis on rationality. In their spiritual life, wisdom is unnecessary. Scientists who focus on materialism may have knowledge but no faith. The two parties have created conflicting ideologies. Some people believe that maintaining traditional Christian values have the benefit of stabilizing society. Nevertheless, many are unable to properly harmonize faith and rationality in their lives. As a result, for six days of the week they live as atheists and then on Sunday they attend church to present a life of sincere faith in their God for the day. In this way, the religious life and the rational life are mechanically and forcefully brought together. Subsequently, an internal identity crisis develops. It is no wonder that the hysteria of human emotions and the sufferings in our present time are continually becoming more severe.

In China, there is the philosophy of “knowledge and practice function together”, or “practicing when knowing” (which in fact are inspired from Buddhist teachings). These philosophers argue that if someone’s knowledge is not gained from their practices, that knowledge is not true knowledge. Yet, they fail to understand that if someone regards their knowledge as an abstract knowledge and treat it as a tool for survival rather than embodying that knowledge as part of their being, then there is no guarantee that they will be able to apply that knowledge to their lives.

It is a must that one’s confidence and vows are developed on a foundation of wisdom. This is the only way to ensure that one will put things into practice. In other words, if confidence and wisdom do not function as one, then it is impossible for knowledge to be put into practice. The Buddhist right faith that is based on the mutual enhancement of confidence and wisdom is the true panacea that all human beings desperately need at this moment.

Confidence from Recognition, Confidence with Eagerness and Confidence from Realization

Confidence is essential, not only at the start but also at the end of the spiritual path toward enlightenment. Over the course of practicing the Buddha-dharma, confidence pervades the person's spiritual practices as they progress. Regarding the practitioner's progression, from beginner to advanced, the *prajñā* path can be divided into three stages.¹²

Stage 1 is confidence emerging from acknowledgement, or recognition of the Buddha-dharma. This confidence is an undefiled faith in the Buddha-dharma that develops from a deep understanding of the Buddha-dharma. It is at this point that right faith is accomplished. This is the confidence that emerges when undefiled faith resonates with one's clear understanding of the Dharma. It is the level of "faith with understanding."¹³

Stage 2 is confidence with eagerness. In this stage, confidence can transform into diligent practices on the basis of right faith; that is, confidence from acknowledgement. Over the course of affirming one's confidence and merging with understanding to the eagerness for practicing the Buddha-dharma, confidence becomes stronger as the practitioner progresses closer to their goal. This is the level of "understanding with practice."¹⁴

Stage 3 is confidence from realization, or realization of purity. This is where one realizes the truth as a result of practicing the Dharma. The undefiled faith developed in stages 1 and 2 may have resulted from listening to the Dharma teachings (to know by authority of the scriptures), or from inference with logic (to know by inference). It is only at this third stage that one is able to attain "realization without relying on others," or realization "without reliance on language." Here, one can penetrate the truth by perceiving directly through the senses, and this is the level of "awakening." According

¹² *Prajñā*: A Sanskrit term that means "wisdom;" in particular, it relates to wisdom concerning the ultimate truth.

¹³ Level of faith with understanding: The stage at which a practitioner has both faith and understanding in the Buddha's teachings—*adhimukti*, or correct faith, complete understanding.

¹⁴ Level of understanding with practice: A stage after faith with understanding at which correct faith and understanding of the Buddha's teachings are put into practice and guide all actions—*adhimukti-caryā*.

to the *Mahāyāna*, the confidence at this [third stage] is the bodhisattvas’ “mind with pure and lofty intentions,” which is achieved at the first *bhūmi*.¹⁵ According to the *Śrāvakayāna* this is the “four realizations of purity”, or the “four indestructible confidences,” which are attained at the first fruition stage of Arhathood.¹⁶ At this stage, our confidence in the buddhas, Dharma, saṃgha and noble precepts, which we have believed in all along, is absolute and completely free of any doubt.

It is not difficult for practitioners to attain an instance of undefiled confidence in stage 1. The difficulty lies in the accomplishment of undefiled confidence.¹⁷ For *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, undefiled faith is accomplished at the stage of receptivity,¹⁸ while for bodhisattvas it is attained at the first stage in the ten levels of abiding. In the stages preceding that of receptivity in the *Śrāvakayāna*, such as the stage of summit, practitioners also have some degree of confidence, but it is not yet firm and steady. Similarly, in the ten levels of faith that precede the ten levels of abiding for bodhisattvas, the confidence is described as being like a feather blown about by the wind. Even though a practitioner’s confidence is undefiled at these preceding stages, it is not steadfast and has not attained the level of non-regression.¹⁹ When we develop our confidence, the aim is to make undefiled confidence arise and grow. Moreover, we must develop our confidence to the point from which we no longer regress. If a practitioner

¹⁵ *Bhūmi*: A Sanskrit term with many meanings. In Buddhism it means a metaphysical step, degree, or stage. In this translation we use it to refer to the stages in the final ten stages of the bodhisattva path before the attainment of Buddhahood.

Bodhisattva: A practitioner of the *Mahāyāna* who has made the bodhi vow to help all sentient beings gain liberation from suffering while seeking the ultimate goal of Buddhahood.

¹⁶ Arhathood: The ultimate goal in the *Śrāvakayāna*, where the practitioner attains liberation from cyclic existence through enlightenment.

¹⁷ Note here that “accomplishment of undefiled confidence” means that the undefiled confidence becomes firm and steady.

¹⁸ Stages of engaged effort: In the *Śrāvakayāna*, prior to entering the four stages of fruition, where liberation becomes guaranteed, there are four stages of engaged effort: stage of warmth, stage of summit, stage of receptivity, and stage of the supreme worldly Dharma. Only after reaching the stage of receptivity is confidence steadfast, such that there is no more fear of regression.

¹⁹ Non-regression: In the *Mahāyāna*, a bodhisattva’s final stages of practice are split into groups of tens in the order of the ten levels of faith, ten levels of abiding, ten levels of practice, ten levels of dedication, and ten *bhūmis* (stages). One’s confidence becomes steadfast after accomplishing the ten levels of faith and reaching the first level of abiding. However, it is not until the ten *bhūmis* that non-regression is attained, and the goal of Buddhahood is assured.

is unable to attain superior understanding toward the Triple Gem and the four noble truths, then they will be unable to attain the Buddhist undefiled confidence (right faith).

Even though the Triple Gem and the four noble truths possess the qualities of being real, virtuous and capable, beginners may not necessarily have right faith, but if they are able to have blind faith or submissive faith towards the Triple Gem etc., such faiths can be regarded as right faith in Buddhism, and they are an essential component when learning Buddhism. But, strictly speaking, if confidence (faith) does not arise from superior understanding of the Dharma, it remains unable to reveal the special quality of Buddhism's right faith.

Definitive Path and Provisional Path

Definitive Path

The very first stage of learning and practicing right faith involves the initiation, practice and then accomplishment of undefiled confidence. This very first stage also has two approaches. One is the definitive path to developing confidence. Right faith must be accompanied by right aspiration. In the *Śrāvakayāna*, the aspiration is to leave this cyclic existence as soon as possible, whereas in the *Mahāyāna*²⁰ it is the bodhi vow.²¹ In the *Mahāyāna*, the typical method for developing right faith is to cultivate confidence in the buddhas, Dharma and saṃgha, which must also be supported by the practices of generosity, morality, tolerance, diligence, tranquillity, and insight. This is taught in the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*. From this we can see that the *Mahāyāna* aspiration of benefiting oneself and others is only accomplished through the cultivation of actual deeds and understanding of the teachings. In other words, confidence is not a stand-alone practice. Rather, it is interconnected with all sorts of wholesome deeds, and is developed and accomplished in reliance on practicing such wholesome deeds.

²⁰ *Mahāyāna*: The name attached to a late Indian sectarian movement that became the main form of Buddhism in East Asia.

²¹ Bodhi vow: The vow and aspirations of all bodhisattvas, which is to help all sentient beings gain liberation from suffering while seeking the ultimate goal of Buddhahood. A person cannot be considered a bodhisattva if they have not made this vow.

Regarding the bodhi vow taught in the Buddhist text, the *prajñā* path has three phases. The first is the bodhi aspiration, then comes the bodhi practice, and last is the bodhi realization (or bodhi wisdom). The first two phases are also known as the “worldly bodhi vow,” and the last phase is the “transcendental bodhi vow.” When the bodhi vow is said to be signless and beyond words, this is referred to as transcendental bodhi vow. When the bodhi vow is said to be accomplished through great compassion, then that is from the position of bodhi practice. The vow that a newly initiated *Mahāyāna* practitioner cultivates is from the position of bodhi aspiration, which is to seek the Buddha’s awakening and help deliver sentient beings from suffering.

Beginners are required to learn and contemplate, over and over, the endless suffering of all sentient beings, and the true benefits and relief that Buddhism can bring to sentient beings and the various merits of developing the bodhi vow. This is the most effective way to motivate someone to develop the *Mahāyāna* aspiration. Once the *Mahāyāna* aspiration becomes strong, the practitioners should then take up the bodhisattva precepts. This is exactly the bodhi aspiration, which is also the seed of the *dharmakāya*.²² The bodhi vow is the only fundamental rule, or precept, for bodhisattvas. To take up the bodhisattva precepts is to make the vow. When we practice according to the precepts, we will be able to gradually progress and then accomplish the *Mahāyāna*’s right faith.

Provisional Path

The other path to cultivation of right faith is called the “provisional path.” This is the practice method that caters to bodhisattvas who are faith-inclined. When someone who is spiritually weak begins to practice the Dharma (*Mahāyāna*) and wishes to develop right faith, they especially focus on reverent faith and rely on the powerful blessings of the buddhas to help them develop right faith. Nāgārjuna said that this is an approach that enters the Buddha-dharma through the door of diligently cultivating faith (vow). To take such a provisional path is to delightedly accumulate the virtues of the buddhas and seek rebirth in a pureland. The most complete teaching on the provisional path

²² *Dharmakāya*: This is the body of the truth, as realized by the buddhas. It is one of the three bodies of a buddha and is unmanifested, unlike the physical body of a buddha.

Seed of the *dharmakāya*: The cause that will result in an awakening to the ultimate truth.

would have to be the ten great vows found in the *Chapter on Samantabhadra's Practice* in the *Flower Sūtra*. Given that a buddha is one who perfectly realizes unsurpassed bodhi, on the provisional path one's aspirations revolves around the Buddha gem as its basis for practice.

Among the ten great vows, the first vow is to pay respects to all buddhas, while the second vow is to praise the buddhas. Both of these are the basic courtesies a disciple would undertake if they met with a buddha. The third vow is to extensively make offerings to the buddhas,²³ which is a proper way to accumulate merits when meeting with a buddha. The sixth vow is to request that the buddhas teach the Dharma, while the seventh vow is to request that the buddhas to remain in this world. These two vows originate from the events when Brahma requested the Śākyamuni Buddha to teach the Dharma, and Ānanda did not ask the Śākyamuni Buddha to remain in this world, respectively.²⁴ All of the aforementioned vows are derived from the events in relation to Śākyamuni Buddha's life, and then extended to all buddhas.

²³ *Flower Sūtra, Fascicle 40*: “Moreover good man, [when] referring to one who extensively practices generosity [it means] that in all the endless worlds: in the multitude of buddha fields, as many as motes of dust in the ten directions, and in each buddha field there are multitudes of buddhas, as many as motes of dust, and each buddha is surrounded by many congregations of bodhisattvas. On account of the power of Samantabhadra's vows and practice, [when] deep faith in and understanding of [the buddhas] arise, [we are] able to see them before us. Then with the most superb items as gifts, we make offerings.” 《大方廣佛華嚴經》卷 40：「復次，善男子！言廣修供養者：所有盡法界、虛空界十方三世一切佛剎極微塵中，一一各有一切世界極微塵數佛，一一佛所種種菩薩海會圍遶，我以普賢行願力故，起深信解，現前知見，悉以上妙諸供養具而為供養。」 (CBETA 2019.Q1, T10, no. 293, p. 844c24-28)

Venerable Yinshun, *Pureland and Chan Schools*: “In the *Chapter on Samantabhadra's Practice*, the [practices of] paying respects to all buddhas, praising the buddhas, and extensively making offerings (to buddhas) is similar to the [practice of] recollecting the buddhas (whether visualizing or reciting the buddha's name). This is a unique religious practice because it is a method for practicing and accumulating the merits of a buddha, as well as a method for repentance.” 《淨土與禪》：「〈普賢行願品〉的禮敬諸佛、稱讚如來、廣修供養（佛），即與念佛（觀想或稱名）相等。此為特殊的宗教行儀，因為這是修集佛功德的方便、懺悔的方便。」 (CBETA 2019.Q1, Y17, no. 17, p. 68a5-7)

²⁴ The story of Brahma requesting the Śākyamuni Buddha to teach the Dharma occurred soon after Prince Siddhārtha attained Buddhahood. At that time, the Buddha knew that what he had realized was so profound that many would find it hard to understand and accept. So he was hesitant about teaching the Dharma. Brahma, knowing a buddha had appeared in the world, came to Śākyamuni Buddha and requested that he teach the Dharma. The other story occurs toward the end of the Buddha's life. At that time, Ānanda was his personal attendant. The Buddha did tell Ānanda that if someone asked the Buddha to remain, then Buddha could extend his life span. However, some records say that Ānanda was so aggrieved by Buddha's impending death that he simply did not understand, and missed the opportunity to make that request.

The fourth vow is to repent for past unwholesome actions. The way to practice this vow is, for example, to repent by recollecting the name of a buddha. This method is found in the *Sūtra on Definitive Monastic Code*. The *Mahāyāna* practice of repentance is performed by both monastics and lay practitioners, and therefore the saṃgha's procedures for repentance are not applicable. Rather, the focus is on repenting in front of the buddhas. The fifth vow is to rejoice in the merits of others, and the tenth vow is to dedicate our merits to all beings, universally. These two items are specifically valued in the *Mahāyāna*. The eighth vow is to practice in accord with the Buddha's teachings, which means to learn and practice the causal deeds toward Buddhahood, and the virtues of buddhas. The ninth vow is to always concur with the wishes of sentient beings, and this is to nurture compassion.

These ten great vows have three major and special qualities. The first quality is that all buddhas are equal. Therefore, the practice can focus on one specific buddha (for example, Vairocana) or on all the other buddhas in infinite space and across the entire cosmos. It is not limited to a buddha in a certain time and place. The second quality is the emphasis on mental practice (visualisation or contemplation). Not only are the vows relating to repentance, rejoicing and dedication undertaken through mental practice, even the vows of paying respects, making offerings and praising the buddhas are carried out mentally. This is shown in the sayings, “[When] deep faith in and understanding of [the buddhas] arise, [the buddhas’ images] appear as if before our eyes,” and “[When] deep faith in and understanding of [the buddhas] arise, [we are] able to see them before us.” These are all the provisional paths of recollecting the Buddha in the mind, and when these are accomplished the attainment is the *samādhi*²⁵ of recollecting the buddhas. The third quality is that the ten vows specifically rely on the virtuous outcomes of Buddhahood, including the virtues of the Dharma and saṃgha, to develop confidence; that is, everything arises on account of the Buddha's virtues. Take as an example the compassion, in terms of the ninth vow, of concurring with the wishes of sentient beings: “When bodhisattvas are able to concur with the wishes of all beings, that is the same as concurring with the practice of making offerings to all buddhas. When bodhisattvas respect and willingly serve other beings, that is the same as the

²⁵ *Samādhi*: A Sanskrit word meaning concentration: and which refers to meditative states in which the mind is able to maintain durations of singular focus on an object.

practice of respecting and serving the buddhas. When bodhisattvas cause sentient beings to be happy, that is the same as the practice of making all the buddhas happy. Why is this so? Because the essence of all buddhas is grounded in the mind of great compassion.”²⁶ This third quality is inclined toward faith and thus is similar to the logic in Christianity whereby people should love others because God loves them.

The practice of bodhisattvas who are faith-inclined is to focus their confidence and vows on the buddhas, such that they recollect the buddhas in every single thought. Without forgetting the Amitābha Buddha, they then can attain rebirth in the Western Pureland of Amitābha, in accordance with their vow. Such a practice is regarded as a provisional path because it focuses on confidence and vows, which are just mental practices. Nevertheless, such mental practices can initiate action. When one’s thoughts never depart from the virtues of the buddhas and each thought always wants to learn from the buddhas and concur with the wishes of sentient beings, then as one’s confidence and vows develop, so shall one naturally initiate the greater practices of compassion and wisdom for the sake of protecting the Dharma and benefiting all beings. Nāgārjuna says that practicing the provisional path enables one to “nurture and grow their merits while their minds become gentle and supple ... After developing

²⁶ *Flower Sūtra, Fascicle 40*: “When bodhisattvas are able to concur with the wishes of all beings, that is the same as concurring with the practice of making offerings to all buddhas. When bodhisattvas respect and willingly serve other beings, that is the same as the practice of respecting and serving the buddhas. When bodhisattvas cause sentient beings to be happy, that is the same as the practice of making all the buddhas happy. Why is this so? Because the essence of all buddhas is grounded in the mind of great compassion. It is because of sentient beings that great compassion arises; it is because of great compassion that the bodhi vow arises; it is because of the bodhi vow that Buddhahood can be achieved. This is just like a great tree in a barren desert. If the roots can tap into water then the branches, leaves, flowers and fruits will flourish. The bodhi tree in the wilderness of life and death is the same. All sentient beings are like the roots of the bodhi tree while the buddhas and bodhisattvas are like the flower and fruits. When the waters of great compassion nourish sentient beings then the flower and fruits of wisdom—buddhas and bodhisattvas—will ripen. Why? Because all the buddhas and bodhisattvas use the waters of great compassion to benefit sentient beings. Only in this way can they accomplish *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (unexcelled complete enlightenment or Buddhahood). Therefore, bodhi (enlightenment) derives from sentient beings, without sentient beings all bodhisattvas would never accomplish unsurpassed enlightenment.” 《大方廣佛華嚴經》卷 40：「菩薩若能隨順眾生，則為隨順供養諸佛；若於眾生尊重承事，則為尊重承事如來；若令眾生歡喜者，則令一切如來歡喜。何以故？諸佛如來以大悲心而為體故。因於眾生而起大悲，因於大悲生菩提心，因菩提心成等正覺。譬如曠野沙磧之中有大樹王，若根得水，枝葉、華果悉皆繁茂。生死曠野菩提樹王，亦復如是。一切眾生而為樹根，諸佛菩薩而為華果，以大悲水饒益眾生，則能成就諸佛菩薩智慧華果。何以故？若諸菩薩以大悲水饒益眾生，則能成就阿耨多羅三藐三菩提故。是故菩提屬於眾生，若無眾生，一切菩薩終不能成無上正覺。」 (CBETA 2019.Q3, T10, no. 293, p. 846a10-22)

confidence in the boundless, profound, pure and great virtues of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, [one will] empathize with all sentient beings” and undertake the six perfections.

So, although the ten vows belong to the provisional path, which is a practice for bodhisattvas who are inclined to faith, the *Mahāyāna* practitioners of ancient India also undertook the practices of repentance, rejoicing, requesting and dedication when they paid their respects to the Buddha in their daily practice sessions. The only difference is that bodhisattvas who are compassion-inclined and wisdom-inclined place greater emphasis on the practices of compassion and wisdom, respectively.

