

The Development of the Bodhi Vow

Author: Venerable Yinshun

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Bodhi Vow is the Seed of *Mahāyāna* Practitioners

When learning the Buddha-dharma, the *Mahāyāna*'s teaching is perfect, and making the bodhi vow is the first thing *Mahāyānists* must learn. This is especially so in Chinese Buddhism, which has a long history of promoting *Mahāyāna* teachings and emphasizes making the bodhi vow. For example, at morning and evening chanting services held before the Buddha, *Mahāyāna* Chinese Buddhists recite the vows of refuge in the triple gem, which include “[I take refuge in the Buddha, and I wish that all sentient beings] awaken to the great path and develop the unsurpassed bodhi mind.” The purpose [of reciting these vows] is to ensure that each Chinese Buddhist, at every moment, can bear in mind the fundamental intention of the *Mahāyāna*, which is to make the bodhi vow and benefit others as well as oneself. Therefore, when fellow *Mahāyāna* practitioners

hold gatherings, they always encourage each other to make and maintain the bodhi vow. This is evidence of how highly regarded the bodhi vow is within the domain of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

The bodhi vow is the cornerstone of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, so much so that without the bodhi vow, there is no *Mahāyāna*. Although one may focus on meditation, wisdom, tantric practices, charity work, or liberation from cyclic existence, if one cannot align these practices with the bodhi vow, the results of one's efforts fall into the *Śrāvakayāna* goal or, even worse, are no different from the results of non-Buddhist practices. Thus, if one aims to attain Buddhahood and deliver sentient beings from suffering, one must make the bodhi vow. Making the bodhi vow is a stage akin to the planting of a seed. After a certain amount of time and with the right conditions, the seed will naturally sprout, grow, flower, and fruit [these four stages of growth are like the subsequent practice]. This process not only applies to those who make a direct entry into the *Mahāyāna* but also to those who turn from the *Śrāvakayāna* to the *Mahāyāna*, which is possible only because of the [past] merit of having made the bodhi vow.

For example, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is recorded that, in this life, Śāriputra and the other *śrāvaka* disciples intended to practice and attain the *Śrāvakayāna* [goal] only. However, in the end, they were able to turn from the *Śrāvakayāna* to the *Mahāyāna*. In relation to the reason for this, the *sūtra* uses a clever simile, as follows. Once there was a person who was very poor. He visited a wealthy friend, and after the poor man had become drunk from the alcohol, the friend hid an invaluable gem in the poor man's tattered clothes. After this meeting, the poor man continued to wander around, living a life of poverty. One day, he met the wealthy friend again, and his friend asked him, "You have an invaluable gem on you; why do you still live in such poverty?" After this was pointed out to him, the poor man immediately turned from rags to riches. This invaluable gem represents the bodhi vow.

Śāriputra and the other *śrāvaka* disciples had made the bodhi vow in the past. It was only because they were shrouded by defilements and had experienced many lifetimes of birth and death that they had forgotten they possessed this great gem. As a result, they eventually sought the *Śrāvakayāna* instead. However, when the Buddha pointed out that they had made the bodhi vow, they could recall their original intentions and immediately turned to the *Mahāyāna*. Moreover, other Buddhist texts say that sentient

beings who have made the bodhi vow—even those who have forgotten about it for a long time and have adopted unwholesome practices, created all sorts of bad karma and fallen into the evil realms—are in a much better position than others who suffer in those same realms. First, the suffering they endure is relatively mild.¹ Second, the duration of their suffering is relatively short, and it is easier for them to gain release from those realms.² Bodhi mind is like a diamond: it is valuable when it is complete and unblemished, but even when broken into small pieces, each piece will retain its value. Therefore, *Mahāyāna* Buddhist practitioners fear only the absence of the bodhi vow—that is, if the bodhi vow is not made, all the merits of the *Mahāyāna* have no basis for establishment.

Mahāyāna Buddhists often assume that by offering incense, prostrating before the buddhas, reciting *sūtras*, making offerings, and practicing meditation and wisdom, et cetera, they are practicing the *Mahāyāna*—that is, undertaking the bodhisattva

¹ See:

- *Daśabhūmi-vibhāṣā*, Fascicle 6, Chapter 11: Analysis of Merit 《十住毘婆沙論》卷6 〈11 分別功德品〉（大正 26, 48c12–15）
- *Sūtra on [Concentration of] the Seal of Tathāgata's Wisdom* says, “The Buddha told Maitreya, “for all bodhisattvas who deeply aspire to *anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi*, if they have committed offences they will suffer [the karmic] retribution in the evil destinies, but that retribution will be lenient.””
《如來智印經》中說：「佛告彌勒：『諸菩薩深心愛樂阿耨多羅三藐三菩提者，有罪應在惡道受報，是罪輕微。』」

² See:

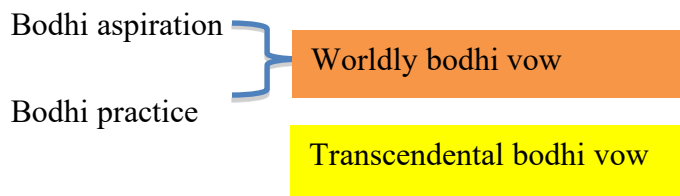
Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra, Fascicle 35, Chapter on Lineage [of Bodhisattvas] says, “Although a bodhisattva may be reborn in the evil destinies, because of the power of their [bodhisattva] nature, one should know there is a big difference between them and the other beings in that evil destiny. That is, the bodhisattvas who remain in the cycle of life and death for a long time may intermittently take rebirth in the evil destinies. Even though they temporarily are reborn [in the evil destinies] they can quickly gain release. In addition, when they are in the evil destinies, they do not endure the severe suffering like the other beings in that destiny. Though the suffering [that bodhisattvas] endure is mild, they can still arouse the progressive mind to leave [this world] while having compassion for the beings suffering in the evil destiny. All these matters are made possible by the bodhisattva lineage, which is caused by great compassion that leads to Buddhahood. Therefore, it should be known that even if one who belongs to the bodhisattva lineage is reborn in the evil destinies, there is a big difference between them and the other beings there.”

《瑜伽師地論》卷35 〈1 種姓品〉（大正 30, 480a18–27）：「菩薩雖生諸惡趣中，由種姓力應知與餘生惡趣者有大差別，謂彼菩薩久處生死，或時時間生諸惡趣，雖暫生彼速能解脫；雖在惡趣而不受於猛利苦受，如餘有情生惡趣者；雖觸微苦而能發生增上厭離，於生惡趣受苦有情深起悲心。如是等事皆由種姓，佛大悲因之所熏發，是故當知種姓菩薩雖生惡趣，然與其餘生惡趣者有大差別。」

practice.³ What they do not realize is that meditation and wisdom are also common to worldly practice and the *Śrāvakayāna* practice [respectively]. For example, some non-Buddhist practitioners practice meditation and attain the four absorptions and eight concentrations while *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners rely on meditation to develop wisdom and end their cycle of birth and death. Meditation is a practice undertaken by practitioners of the five vehicles, whereas wisdom is developed by all three-vehicle practitioners. By practicing just meditation or just wisdom, one can attain a heavenly rebirth or end cyclic existence, respectively, but not attain Buddhahood. If one aims to attain Buddhahood, one must make the bodhi vow. With the bodhi vow as the foundation, the practice of meditation becomes the *Mahāyāna* meditation, and the practice of wisdom becomes the *Mahāyāna* wisdom. In other words, everything becomes requisite for the path to Buddhahood. In essence, the bodhi vow is the seed of the *Mahāyāna*. As soon as we plant the seed—that is, make the bodhi vow—from that day on, we are a bodhisattva (of course, we cannot yet be considered a great bodhisattva). Without this seed—even if we undertake [various wholesome] practices over many lifetimes and eons and traverse many worlds [to benefit sentient beings]—we are still not a bodhisattva, who is a vessel for the fulfillment of the *Mahāyāna*.

The Types of Bodhi Vow

On the subject of the bodhi vow, according to the *Mahāyāna* texts, there are different levels. Generally, these levels can be grouped into the following [types of bodhi vow], based on a practitioner’s progress.



³ The practices of offering incense, prostrating before the buddhas, reciting *sūtras*, and making offerings are common to all Buddhist schools. However, within the core bodhisattva practice of the six *pāramitās*, there are the practices of meditation and *prajñā* (wisdom), and hence the following focuses only on these two practices.

When making the bodhi vow, at first one must have confidence in one's ability to make a great vow toward the attainment of Buddhahood and the subsequent ability to truly deliver sentient beings from suffering. Having seen the vices and dissatisfactions of this world as well as the suffering of sentient beings, one truly hopes and believes that a perfect and ultimate Buddhahood is attainable. Moreover, it is only through the attainment of Buddhahood that one has the ability to purify the world and rescue all sentient beings. Because of this understanding, one makes the great vow to seek Buddhahood and rescue sentient beings from now and into the future, without end. Given that this mind is based on confidence and aspiration, it is called "the bodhi aspiration" or "the bodhi of confidence and aspiration." As well as possessing confidence and aspiration, one must also be able to put them into action; subsequently, there is the bodhi practice. This bodhi practice namely refers to upholding the bodhisattva precepts. The bodhisattva precepts, also known as the basis of a bodhisattva's training, include the splendid practices of benefiting others and oneself. Bodhisattvas rely on these countless items of precept training to undertake the bodhisattva practices. These two types of bodhi vow—aspiration and practice—are yet to go beyond the worldly realm; that is, the bodhisattva's mental and physical actions can still contain defilements. Therefore, they are jointly referred to as the "worldly bodhi vow." After the worldly bodhi vow, there is a further level called the "transcendental bodhi vow," which is when a *Mahāyāna* practitioner attains a deep understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination—that is, he or she awakens to the true nature of all phenomena. The true nature that real wisdom realizes is described as free from the concepts of time and space, colors, and beyond the activities of consciousness. The *sūtras* often describe true nature as nonarising and noncessation, no existence and no nonexistence, no relativity, beyond description and comprehension, et cetera. The worldly bodhi vow emphasizes aspiration with compassion, while the transcendental bodhi vow is the realization of wisdom through the combination of aspiration and compassion. In other words, the bodhi aspiration emphasizes developing one's confidence, whereas making the vow and bodhi practice emphasize benefiting others through actual deeds. As for the transcendental bodhi vow, it emphasizes awakening to the truth through *prajñā*. In this sense, the bodhi vow encompasses confidence and aspiration, great compassion, and *prajñā*. Undoubtedly, the bodhi vow embodies the essence of the *Mahāyāna*.

The Foundation of the Bodhi Vow Lies in Compassion

Making the bodhi vow is based on a firm confidence in, and aspirations to fulfill, the important work of seeking Buddhahood and delivering sentient beings from suffering. Therefore, the main elements are confidence and aspiration, while great compassion and *prajñā* are the supporting elements. Nevertheless, such great confidence and such a great vow primarily arise from great compassion. Therefore, the *sūtras* say, “great compassion is the foundation,”⁴ “great compassion is foremost,”⁵ “bodhisattvas only arise from great compassion and not from any other virtues.”⁶ The foundation of the bodhi vow lies in great compassion, and its key function is to relieve suffering. Hence, it is said that the unique quality of the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattva path is the relieving of sentient beings from their suffering.

The [types of] suffering endured by sentient beings are countless, yet ultimately, they are all the result of oneself. Take this world, for example. Between different countries, we could use virtuous diplomatic relations to mutually help each other and respect each other. In this way, we could live together harmoniously with mutual benefit, and there would be no need for conflicts, which cause people to make meaningless sacrifices. Yet this is not the reality we face, as it seems everyone must beat others down. Are we not creating afflictions for ourselves? The larger picture of this world is as such; so, too, is the smaller picture between families and between friends and even within us. When we investigate [life] from this perspective, the conclusion is obvious; that is, within this world, there is always suffering. Take our present situation as an example. Those who are poor and have no way out [of their poverty] are, of course, experiencing suffering. However, even among wealthy people who can improve their lives, many also experience countless suffering. If we consider the broader perspective, this human realm is not perfect, and neither are the heavens above—let alone the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. Therefore, a bodhisattva’s aim to benefit sentient beings is

⁴ *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, Fascicle 11, Chapter 6: Manifesting Illness
《大般涅槃經》卷 11 〈6 現病品〉（大正 12, 429c8–10）。

⁵ *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, Fascicle 48, Chapter 13: *Mahāsattvas*
《大般若波羅蜜多經》卷 48 〈13 摩訶薩品〉（大正 5, 273a13-17）。
Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, Fascicle 20, Chapter 1: Preface
《大智度論》卷 20 〈1 序品〉（大正 25, 211b21–24）。

⁶ *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, Fascicle 59, Chapter 34: Entry into the Realm of Reality
《大方廣佛華嚴經》卷 59 〈34 入法界品〉（大正 9, 779c14–16）。

focused on relieving suffering—that is, to bear compassion in mind. It is recorded that there was a bodhisattva known as Sadāprarudita, who constantly felt sorrow for all sentient beings because he saw their immense suffering. This reflects the depth of the bodhisattva’s mind of compassion and sympathy and reveals the foundation of the *Mahāyāna* practice.

Loving kindness is the gift of happiness, and compassion is the relief of suffering. With regard to this world that is full of different types of suffering, it is clear that relieving suffering is the more urgently needed of the two. As with a piece of land that is overgrown with weeds and has become wild, one must first remove all the weeds, such as the thorny undergrowth, and then plant the good seeds. This is conducive to productivity. Sentient beings have countless afflictions. If we do not tackle the cause of these afflictions (which are also the cause of suffering) and remove it, then all efforts to bestow happiness become useless. This is akin to a young man who has bad habits, who always mixes with the wrong crowd, wasting away the days and causing mischief. As a result, he gets into financial trouble and then engages in illegal activities to sustain himself. If we want to save this young man, it is not enough to just give him money and material items. Although this may provide him with temporary relief, it may lead to the situation becoming even worse! This is because the underlying problem would not have been removed, and thus, no matter what aid he is given the outcome will not yield true benefits for this youth. This also applies to the whole world. If we do not remove all unwholesome deeds and suffering, then although some fortune and joy exist, they will all be temporary and not truly ultimate. Hence, Buddhism emphasizes [the matter of] suffering and focuses on relieving suffering. This may seem pessimistic, but in fact, Buddhism recognizes the true cause and therefore grasps this problem. Only then can Buddhism offer a thorough solution that purifies this world, fulfills all sentient beings, and yields true peace and happiness.

The Requisites for Making the Bodhi Vow

On this issue of making the bodhi vow, we must progress from the initial stages to the advanced stages. From the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha, there is a common method, a certain process used by the great bodhisattvas to complete their development of the bodhi vow. This cultivation process has seven stages: regarding all beings as our mother,

recollecting their kindness, wishing to repay our mother's kindness, loving kindness, compassion, eagerness to help, and the bodhi vow. Prior to this phase, one must possess two attitudes: impartiality and affection for all sentient beings.

Impartiality

Toward all sentient beings, we should maintain an attitude of impartiality and nondiscrimination. This impartiality is not just from the perspective of "all beings have buddha potential." Even with the present manifestations of male or female, old or young, wise or stupid, kind or malevolent, friend or foe, different colored skin, and so on, we should understand that no one is better or worse and there really is no true difference between each other. In the present, we manifest these differences merely because of the diversity in current causes and conditions. If we take a broader view that encompasses past lives over countless eons, is there any being that has never been our parent, sibling, relative, or friend? Is there any being that has never been our enemy? Thus, in terms of kindness, everyone has shown us much kindness. Similarly, in terms of grudges, we have created grudges against everyone. Therefore, is there really a basis to distinguish between kindness and grudges, family and foes? Furthermore, from the wise versus stupid and kind versus malevolent point of view, everyone has instances of cleverness and stupidity. Someone who is smart can sometimes do stupid things and vice versa. Even the most evil person will have carried out many good deeds in the past. Moreover, that person will not be evil forever. Similarly, a good person will have done many bad deeds in the past, and it is uncertain if they will remain good in the future. If one contemplates in such a manner repeatedly, then all concepts of such differences as enemy versus family, wise versus stupid, and kind versus malevolent will naturally and gradually subside until they completely disappear. Do note this does not mean one becomes confused and cannot distinguish the good from the bad. Rather, the aim is to change our personal discriminative views that have accrued from beginningless time and change them to an attitude of impartiality, which treats all beings equally and favorably. Once there was a monk who ridiculed a certain confused heretic. The Buddha then warned the monk, "You should not belittle that heretic since you have not attained the level of nonregression,⁷ and your own heretical nature remains. In the

⁷ The level of non-regression in the *Mahāyāna* refers to the seventh or eighth *bhūmi* (stage) in the final ten stages of a bodhisattva's practice.

future, you may end up the same as that heretic!” This is why the Buddha says, “One should not look down on those less practiced or those who have violated the precepts.” Beginners on the path can start with what is easy and then progress higher and gradually become well practiced. Even if they make a mistake, they can make amends and improve to such an extent that they are better than the average person. Thus, we should not look down on them. In this sense, we should understand that wise ones and stupid people do not really differ from each other, and everyone—whether family or foe—is, in fact, equal. There is no need to be arrogant or to feel inferior. Nor is there a need in the present to develop a strong attachment or hatred toward those who show us kindness or ill will, respectively. When we can maintain an equal and calm mental state, then in Buddhist terms, it is called “impartiality.” Once impartiality is firmly established, the biased concept of family and foe will no longer exist, and consequently, one no longer has or develops obsessive love or deep hatred toward any person.

To ordinary people, love may not seem like a bad thing, but this is not necessarily so when understanding love from the Buddha-dharma’s perspective. The reason is that so-called love, even when it can bring some benefit to others, is narrow and selfish. If we take into account all sentient beings, this narrow and selfish love may even bring harm and no benefits. Everybody knows that when there is love, there is also hatred. Love and hatred seem like extreme opposite emotions, but in fact, they are just the different faces of the same defiled affliction of human beings. Accordingly, it is a common occurrence that because there is love, there is also hatred, and due to love, sorrowful tragedies occur. The impartial great compassion in Buddhism requires, first, the abandonment of this defiled clinging love, and then we can be universally empathetic and offer relief to all beings. As for biased love, it is an innate capacity possessed by all humans, so there is no need to cultivate such love since it is already there and everyone possesses it. For example, the love between family members and the love between partners: Who does not have these? Strictly speaking, it is because everyone possesses this love that people in the world continue to suffer from cruel animosity and conflicts. If everyone were to abandon this type of biased love and hold all beings with equality, then the sufferings of human beings would be sure to gradually disappear forever.

Having Affection for All Beings

When developing the bodhi vow, the most basic prerequisite is that we must first break through our ingrained discrimination so that we are able to view ourselves and sentient beings in the same way—without hatred, without [biased] love—and yet we must not view things as completely unrelated to us. In other words, not only must we behold sentient beings without discrimination, but we must also develop a deep and favorable impression of all beings, an affection that is harmonious and amiable. Do note that this is not the same as selfish love but rather a joyous attitude without attachment. In Buddhism, it is called “joy.” Possessing only impartiality—beholding the view of equality—is not enough to accomplish great compassion and develop the bodhi vow. To elucidate, this would be like walking down a main street where there are many males and females, elderly people and youths, poor and rich people, beautiful and ugly people, and yet when we pass by them we pay no attention at all but just consider all equally, without any emotions of liking or disliking. Of course, this may be regarded as a kind of equality without discrimination, but this type of indifferent equality cannot exert any positive influence on the cultivation of great compassion, the reason being that this is to completely ignore everything and to have no concern for sentient beings. That is why when developing the bodhi vow, we must view all sentient beings equally and nurture a mental capacity to treat all equally and favorably while also having concern for all beings, and [we must] let our hearts nurture a sense of harmony with all, which is full of vitality. While relying on equality as our foundation, it is extremely important that we must develop a sincere sense of concern for all and be in mutual harmony with others. Only then will there be the accomplishment of the *Mahāyāna*’s great compassion and the bodhi vow.

The Reliances for the Development of Bodhi Mind: Filial Piety, Gratitude, and Repaying Gratitude

Now we discuss the seven stages of regarding all beings as our mother and so on. From a mindset that holds a deep concern for all beings while also treating them equally, a special thought arises. This thought is to clearly know that, at some time in the past, all beings have been one’s own mother. In this cycle of birth and death, there is no doubt that all beings would have, at one time or another, been our close relatives. It is said in

a *sūtra* that from beginningless time the total amount of mother's milk consumed by each person far exceeds the waters of the four great oceans!⁸ Inherently, both parents shower their children with immense kindness, and children should cherish both equally. However, here the emphasis is on regarding all beings as our mother, recollecting the kindness of our mothers. This is because, from the perspective of ordinary emotions, it seems that a mother's kindness is somewhat stronger. For example, the ten months of pregnancy and three years of breastfeeding demonstrate that most of the nurturing responsibility falls on the mother.⁹ Therefore, the bond between mother and child is regarded as the strongest. When a child sees their mother endure suffering, they should feel as if they have been stabbed to their core. If a person does not care about their mother's well-being, that person is considered disobedient and not filial. Such behavior is untenable, according to both the law and public sentiments. In Buddhism, all sentient beings are regarded as our parents, and the purpose of this is to broadly extend the natural, deep concern for one's parents to all sentient beings.

This [deep concern for one's parents] is not only found in Buddhism; the Chinese philosophies of Confucianism and Mohism as well as the western religions of Christianity and so on all base their virtuous practice on this principle. For example, of the many virtuous deeds expounded in Confucianism, filial piety is the main. Therefore, filial piety is ranked as the utmost good deed, and not being filial is regarded as the greatest evil. Regarding the state of mind associated with this virtuous deed, it primarily lies in benevolence. Here the primary meaning of benevolence is love and respect for one's parents, and the meaning is then broadly extended to others. Thus, there is the saying, "Is not filial piety and respect for elders fundamental to benevolence!" In Confucianism, benevolence must begin with being filial toward and obedient to one's parents. If one is unable to fulfill this duty, then effectively, there is no benevolence to be found. The Indian religion of Brahmanism and the Western Christian religions do not initially focus on filial piety to one's parents, but they do regard the deva [Brahma] or God as the universal father. That is, everything in this world is said to be created by God, and thus, he is the original forefather of all human beings. Therefore, everyone should love God and believe in God. This is the same as the parent-child relationship.

⁸ *Samyuktāgama, Sūtra 939* or *Samyuttanikāya 15.4*

⁹ Note that ten months of pregnancy, three years of breastfeeding, and so on, are based on Chinese cultural practices.

Not only should one love their parent, in this case it is God, but they should also sympathize with God's intention and love all humans, which is the same as the love shown to our siblings. However, the relationship between humans and deities (God) is established under an ambiguous legend, which is not as clear as the kindness and affection of a parent to their child that is promoted by Chinese Confucianism. However, Confucianism focuses on the present life only and neglects past and future lives. As a result, many Confucians emphasize benevolence and obedience to their own family only, and thus the spirit of this teaching is not broad enough. The Buddhist teachings on virtues are also founded on the parent-child relationship, but they expand it to embrace the three cycles of life [past, present, and future] so as to view all sentient beings as our parents. Therefore, one's compassion and sympathy are both broad and real, unlike the ambiguity in theistic religions or the narrow emphasis in Confucianism.

Some people say that the Buddhist teaching of viewing all beings as if they were our parents and to have loving kindness and compassion for them equally is unreasonable. This response reflects the traditional Chinese Confucian view. Confucius promoted a benevolence that must first begin with our parents. That is to say, we must first love our family, relatives, and friends, and then expand our love to other people. If one's filial piety and love for one's parents and the love and respect for one's siblings were the same as what one shows to other humans, then that person would be scolded for confusing the hierarchy or inverting the importance of things. At the extreme, that person may even be criticized for going against the grain of humanity. This [Confucian position] is different from other religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Mohism. When Mozi promoted a universal love that was all-embracing, Mencius rebuked his position as no different from the state of a beast.¹⁰ The Confucian idea is basically good, but it is too narrow and cannot move beyond the confines of the [present] family.

The essence of virtue in Mohism's universal love for all people and in Buddhism's compassion for all sentient beings is clearly different from the Confucian stance centered on the family. In fact, virtues will manifest depending on the situations that arise and do not necessarily follow a hierarchical order. Just as Mencius once said, "The

¹⁰ The background to this sentence comes from Mencius's book, which says, "墨氏兼愛，是無父也。無父無君，是禽獸也。" This means that Mozi's principle is "to love all equally," which does not acknowledge the particular affection received from one's father. To not acknowledge the king or father is to have the same state as that of a beast.

feeling of empathy belongs to everyone.” Everyone experiences empathy—that is, the emotion of not being able to bear seeing [certain situations of suffering, et cetera], which arises depending on the conditions that arise and has no order of hierarchy. Mencius also once said that when one passes by and sees an unrelated child falling into a well, one’s first thought is how to go about saving the child. This first thought is not about whether the child is their own. Moreover, when one sees a cow about to be slaughtered, one cannot bear to see it suffering, yet one cannot have the same feeling toward other unseen animals, such as a sheep.¹¹ Therefore, the virtuous nature of benevolent love should not be restricted by order of hierarchy, yet Confucians still cannot see this point.

From the standpoint of our current worldly situation, some people are not necessarily filial toward their family members. Yet toward their friends, they are extremely loyal, devoted, and very willing to help, and they would even risk life and limb for their friends. This love for friends cannot be regarded as irrational since such affection and behavior are still within the scope of virtue. Nevertheless, from the traditional Confucian perspective, one’s family should come first (close) and friends second (distant), yet the aforementioned situation is exactly the opposite. We cannot deny the value of such friendship simply because it leads to a violation of the [Confucian] hierarchy of close to distant. Through the eyes of Buddhism, the most basic virtue of human beings is loving kindness and compassion, which is effectively the Confucian [virtue] of having a conscience that is grounded in benevolence. These basic virtues are what everyone possesses, and [essentially] these virtues can become extensive and perfect. However, for some people, these virtues only function in relation to their families or a certain circle of beings, while toward others, these virtues do not manifest. There are two reasons for this limitation. One is due to poor rationality that is restrictive and yet to be broadened. The other is the complexity of karmic relations among all beings since beginningless time. For example, the reason some beings become mother and child may be due to a past loving relationship or due to a past antagonistic

¹¹ The story behind this matter of a cow and a sheep comes from the book *Mencius*, which records a conversation between Mencius and a king. During that conversation, the king sees a cow being led away to slaughter for ceremonial purposes. Having seen the animal’s fear, he orders it to be released and replaced by a sheep (which has not seen with his own eyes) for the ceremonial sacrifice. This example highlights how one’s emotional expressions of empathy can arise based on what one encounters, without any hierarchy on the basis of relationships.

relationship. Moreover, in this present life, one may be close to or distant from their parents based on whether their personality and habits accord with or differ from their parents', respectively. This is why some people can fulfill the duty of filial piety and care for their parents while lacking in sympathy toward others. Some people are fairly indifferent to their parents and siblings, but toward their friends and strangers, they are very kind. It is certainly not the case that these people lack affection for their own family and accordingly are unable to care about others. The spirit of loving kindness and compassion, or benevolent love, essentially is to treat others equally, without bias. One's inability to treat all equally is due to one's benevolent love being affected by obstructions and discriminations. This is similar to a light that can illuminate both near and far, but when covered with something, it cannot illuminate even those things that are close. Yet when the cover is removed, the light can illuminate even those things that are far away. Hence, in this world, there are people who are filial toward their parents but lack affection for strangers, while others care not for their parents and siblings (close) but do care for friends (distant). In short, as long as one is able to have loving kindness and compassion toward people, that person deserves our praise. Of course, it would be best to equally and universally care for all. If one insists that people must first be kind to their families before they can be benevolent toward other people, then this not only contradicts worldly affairs but it also prevents people from practicing what is wholesome.

Parents care for their children, and the children should therefore reciprocate with filial piety—that is, recollecting kindness and seeking to repay kindness. Such is the key factor underlying the idea of ethics in this world. From both a time and space aspect, Buddhism realizes the truth that all sentient beings are equal and looks upon all beings as our mother. This is really to extend and perfect the ethical notion of repaying kindness. Therefore, in reality, there is no difference between being filial toward our parents and having compassion for all sentient beings. Nonetheless, the mental state of ordinary beings is such that they are unable to recall the kindness and support shown to them by these countless parents of the past (that is, all sentient beings). Even though they understand the meaning that all beings have been our parents of the past, the effect is weak. Therefore, the only way to deepen our understanding that all beings have been our parents in the past and to recollect their kindness and to seek to repay that kindness is to start with our parents and close relatives in this life. Then we extend the objective

to those not so close to us and then further still to those unfamiliar to us. Finally, we repay kindness even to our enemies.

Thus, starting with close to distant, with relatives to enemies, we gradually broaden the scope and develop the outlook that affirms all beings are our mother, and we recollect the kindness of all beings and seek to repay all beings for the kindness they have shown us. This process is similar to the Confucian method of extending [benevolence], but this is not to say that the nature of virtues has a fixed sequential order that cannot be overridden. This sequential order is merely to help develop this way of thinking. In terms of application, such compassion arises depending on the conditions and the situation. Therefore, the virtuous Buddhist practices that provide relief to all equally cannot be said to be unreasonable, because it is not necessary to start from the narrow reference of the family.

It is naturally inevitable that from regarding beings as our mother and then recollecting kindness, we will then seek to repay that kindness. Given that we can realize that all beings are our mother and have shown us immense kindness over boundless time and space, we should seek to repay that kindness, especially when our mothers are experiencing suffering. Although the [Buddhist virtues of] loving kindness and compassion is to provide relief to all beings equally, when teaching ordinary humans who still have defilement to cultivate this virtue, the most effective method is to begin with repaying our mother's love and then to project that outlook further—the reason being that a mother loves her children most dearly. The amount of suffering she bears on behalf of her children is unfathomable! She breastfeeds them and is always concerned about whether her children are warm enough or cold. Even when her children are thirty or forty years old, they are still her little babies. When her children are disobedient, she gets upset, but her love for her children never dies. Our present-life mother (parent) is just as such, and we should know that our mothers from countless past lives loved us in the same way, too. Therefore, toward all beings [mothers from past lives], we must not forget this immense kindness we owe to them and do our best to repay that kindness. Thus, we can see that when Buddhism encourages people to make the bodhi vow, it stems from the distinct virtue of filial piety and begins with deep reflection on the kindness we owe to our mother. From this aspect, it aligns very well with the Confucian idea of ethics.

The Right Cultivation of the Bodhi Vow: Loving Kindness, Compassion, and Determination to Bestow Happiness

In the process of making the bodhi vow, after the development of intention—which includes regarding all beings as our mother, recollecting kindness, and seeking to repay kindness—we should progress to the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion. These two virtues are most intimately related to making the bodhi vow. The *sūtras* teach that the bodhi vow does not arise from meditative concentration, nor from wisdom; rather, it arises from a mind of great compassion. Loving kindness and compassion are commonly combined into a single term [great compassion], but the two are not the same. From the perspective of the development of a practitioner’s mind, they can be explained separately.

First is loving kindness, which is to bring happiness—that is, to utilize the many mundane and transcendental benefits in order to bring advantages to all beings so they can attain happiness and fortune. According to the Buddha-dharma, the cultivation of loving kindness yields the greatest merits. With the accomplishment of loving kindness, one is able to avoid all calamities, and even in times of war, all dangers will be resolved peacefully. At one time, Devadatta and King Ajātaśatru colluded to harm the Buddha. When the Buddha went on his alms round, they intentionally set a drunken elephant to charge at the Buddha in order to kill him. Little did they know that when the crazed elephant—which would have killed any being—saw the Buddha, it became so tame that it immediately knelt down by the Buddha’s side and allowed the Buddha to stroke it. The Buddha’s virtue of loving kindness is ultimate and perfect, and the Buddha was therefore able to tame the crazed elephant and could not be harmed by the elephant at all. There is an ancient Chinese saying: “Those who are benevolent have no enemies,” which has the same meaning as the story.

Second is compassion, which is to remove suffering—that is, to reduce or eradicate the suffering of sentient beings. One practices loving kindness in order to repay the kindness of all beings and to fulfill the wish that all beings attain happiness. However, one also feels that if the root cause of sentient beings’ suffering is not removed, then the aim of bestowing happiness will not be achieved; thus, compassion is accordingly aroused. Compassion is to remove suffering, and the ultimate relief is to cause all

sentient beings, in the same way as for us, to enter the nirvana without residue and to cease all suffering. This is true deliverance from suffering.

The development of loving kindness and compassion also has progressive stages. Our parents, siblings, and so forth are people with whom we have close relationships and are thus considered relatives. The average person with whom we have no connections is considered neutral. Those we call our foes and whom we dislike are considered enemies. We can begin with our relatives and then move on to those who are neutral and then on to our enemies. In this way, we will attain the level where we can show loving kindness and compassion toward all beings. Because our loving kindness and compassion becomes boundless, it is called “immeasurable compassion,” “great compassion,” and so on. If one is only able to arouse loving kindness and compassion toward a certain group of beings, then this does not accord with the Buddha-dharma. Rather, this kind of loving kindness and compassion is more akin to worldly benevolence and love that is aroused based on a hierarchy. Such a kind has limits and contains the seed of cruelty.

During the course of developing the bodhi vow, great compassion is very noble and rare. However, after this stage, one must progress still further to strengthen that great compassion. In other words, one should seek to initiate all sorts of deeds and actions that will free beings from their suffering. Such is the eagerness to help. Eagerness to help is an extremely strong and powerful aspiration, which is founded on compassion. In today’s modern language, it would be described as “zeal.” That is, one is zealous about the work that brings deliverance to sentient beings. When this zeal reaches its highest point, the issues of difficulty, time, distance, and the number of beings will not be a problem at all. One is able to sacrifice everything to do one’s very best to help sentient beings without any qualms. If bodhisattvas do not enter the hells, they cannot help the hell-beings; if bodhisattvas want to attain Buddhahood, they inevitably must come to this human world that is full of suffering and hardship. The buddhas and bodhisattvas are equipped with this strong and powerful aspiration—an eagerness to help—and, therefore, they are called “buddhas” and “bodhisattvas.” The noble sages of the *Śrāvakayāna* also possess a way of thinking that includes loving kindness and compassion. However, as their loving kindness and compassion are relatively weak and not associated with strong and powerful determination, they are unable to assume the

task of helping all sentient beings and instead merely attain self-liberation. In the *sūtras*, a simile is used to explain the significance of eagerness. An adorable little boy is born to a certain family. Everyone loves this little boy very much. One day, the little boy slips and falls into a sewerage ditch. His mother and sisters are so worried that they become stressed, and their minds keep thinking, “We must save him.” Yet none of them steps forward to enter the sewerage ditch. In the end, without having any regard for how deep or dirty the ditch is, the father comes along and jumps in with one purpose only—to save the boy. This story highlights that having compassion without eagerness to help is not sufficient. This is because compassion is just an emotion that arises from concern and sympathy. This emotion is not a strong and powerful determination that makes one willing to do things at any cost. Hence, *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners do have sympathy for beings who are suffering, and they do wish that beings could be free from suffering and could attain happiness. However, they are unable to relieve all sentient beings to be free from their suffering and attain happiness. To accomplish this, one must be like the bodhisattvas, who have loving kindness and compassion but also possess the eagerness to help. Hence bodhisattvas are able to set in motion many types of projects that yield true benefits for beings.

The Accomplishment of the Bodhi Vow

As one enters into the stage of eagerness to help from the stage of [great] compassion, one attains another higher level. At this stage, the practitioner’s way of thinking is such that when they see beings suffering, it is as though they themselves are the ones who suffer. They are no longer just an observer. At this stage, they can truly take the suffering or happiness of others as their own. After they thoroughly investigate and analyze all the worldly fields of study, religions, and all possible methods, they realize that none of these can completely resolve the suffering of beings, except the Buddha and the Buddha-dharma. Only the Buddha can truly relieve suffering, and the Buddha-dharma is the cure for suffering. Therefore, it is only by cultivating the bodhisattva practices and attaining the goal of bodhi [perfect wisdom of a buddha] that one is able to help sentient beings gain liberation from endless suffering. As such, for the sake of helping sentient beings, we make the vow to become buddhas and take the great practices of helping sentient beings as our requisites for attaining Buddhahood. This is to allow our great compassion and practice of vows to become intertwined with the

suffering of sentient beings and then to initiate the mind to learn the bodhisattva practices and seek the goal of Buddhahood. When this great vow and confidence becomes unshakable, it marks the accomplishment of the bodhi vow.

The Progressive Development of the Bodhi Vow

The above presents the seven stages in making the bodhi vow and the progressive causal relationships between them. This progressive path of cultivation was taught by Kamalaśīla and others based on the teachings in the *Abhidharma* and some other Buddhist texts. When we apply these seven stages of causal relationships to practice and fully complete the process, we accomplish the bodhi aspiration. This is the most important part of making the bodhi vow. During the process of making the bodhi vow, when we are fully equipped with aspiration and confidence in the *Mahāyāna*, we must further embark on the bodhisattva practices. Take Suddana in the *Flower Sūtra* as an example. It is said that he possessed deep aspiration and confidence in the *Mahāyāna* and vowed to become a buddha so that he could free sentient beings from suffering. Therefore, when he visited many great *Mahāyāna* teachers, he always stated that he had already made the bodhi vow but did not know how to undertake the bodhisattva practices. After making the vow, the actual cultivation of the bodhisattva practices, which are grounded in benefiting others, is no other than the bodhisattva precepts. Although the bodhisattva precepts also include the precepts of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and so on as severe transgressions, these are common across all the *saṃvaras*.¹² This aspect alone is insufficient to reveal the distinct quality of the *Mahāyāna* and unable to highlight the unique spirit of the bodhisattvas. [However,] bodhisattvas have three sets of precepts, which are the precepts regarding regulations, embracing goodness, and benefiting sentient beings. The main body [of these three sets of precepts] consists of the six perfections and four all-embracing virtues. For example, the bodhisattva precepts found in the *Yogācārabhūmi* are categorized according to the six perfections and four all-embracing virtues. For a bodhisattva, the primary precept is to not retreat from the bodhi vow. To cultivate the bodhi practice is to abandon all unwholesomeness, benefit sentient beings, and mature sentient beings with the Buddha-

¹² *Samvara* is a Sanskrit word and refers to the sets of rules or precepts established by the Buddha. There are different precepts for lay and monastic Buddhists, and within monastic disciples there are different sets of rules depending on the stage of their ordination.

dharma¹³ on the condition that a bodhisattva never departs from the bodhi vow. In the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, generosity, morality, tolerance, diligence, meditative tranquility, and insight are taught as the means to accomplish the bodhi vow. Such a bodhi vow in this context seems to be bodhi practice. During the process of making the bodhi vow, one extensively accumulates merits and wisdom as one's requisites. Gradually, one progresses to realize a deep understanding of the truth regarding nonorigination, which is to experience for oneself how all dharmas neither arise nor cease. Such a realization is called the "transcendental bodhi vow." This transcendental bodhi vow is a realization through wisdom, without lacking faith, confidence, loving kindness, or compassion. At that moment when one gives rise to a mind that falls into accord with this transcendental bodhi vow, one is identified as having partial attainment of Buddhahood. In this stage, one is able to manifest the attainment of Buddhahood within innumerable realms of buddha lands. Thus, it is said that, with the arising of the [transcendental] bodhi vow, one attains Buddhahood. This means that one is regarded as accomplishing Buddhahood because of the [transcendental] bodhi vow.

In short, at the very start, one develops one's aspiration and confidence and then progresses with the practice and attains realization. Even after realization is attained, all these remaining practices are still part of the cultivation of the bodhi vow. The bodhi vow is like a precious gem. It becomes more brilliant the more it is polished. Therefore, the more effort one devotes to it, the higher the level one attains; that is, the more obstacles/defilements that are abandoned, the more luminous and pure is our bodhi vow. According to the *Flower Sūtra*, the progressive realization in the final ten stages of the bodhisattva path is exactly the progressive purification of this precious bodhi vow; that is, it gradually becomes more and more perfect. When the whole practice is fully perfected, this is the perfect realization of *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*,¹⁴ which is the perfect accomplishment of Buddhahood.

¹³ To "mature sentient beings with the Buddha-dharma" means to impart the Buddha-dharma to sentient beings such that they too accomplish Buddhahood.

¹⁴ *Anuttarā* means "unsurpassed"; *samyak* means "correctly" or "completely"; *saṃbodhi* means "awakening." This is referring to the supreme and perfect enlightenment of buddhas.