



## Tibetan Buddhist Tradition: The Bodhisattva as a Central Figure of the Devotional Practices through the Mahāyāna Path

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### Abstract:

*In the Tibetan Book of the Dead, it is taught that at death there is an encounter with this true inner nature, sugatagarbha or Dharmatā, when the Veils of egocentricity briefly drop away, and shining, unobstructed awareness is disclosed. In line with Tibetan Nyingma doctrine, a Tibetan lama, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, equates this radiant essence with Buddha Nature. He writes: ... all sentient beings already possess an enlightened spirit, the sugatagarbha [i.e. the Buddha-nature]. This essence permeates anyone with a mind, just as oil thoroughly permeates any sesame seed ... The moment our ego-clinging falls apart, our innate wisdom, the luminosity of dharmatā, will vividly, nakedly appear. This ground luminosity is not just empty but also luminous-aware.*

**Keywords:** Tibetan, Buddhist, Tradition, Bodhisattva, Central Figure, Devotional, Practices, Mahāyāna, Path.

### Introduction:

An important Sanskrit treatise on the Buddha-nature, the Ratnagotravibhāga sees the Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha) as 'suchness' or 'thusness' - the abiding reality of all things - in a state of tarnished concealment within the being. The idea is that each being's ultimate consciousness is spotless and pure, but is surrounded by impure, negative tendencies. Professor Paul Williams comments that the impurity is not truly part of the Buddha nature but merely conceals the immanent true qualities of the Buddha mind (i.e., the Buddha nature) from manifesting openly: the impurities that taint the mind and entail the state of unenlightenment.

Enlightenment (samsāra) is completely adventitious ... On the other hand, from the view of the mind's pure, radiant, intrinsic nature, because it is like this [i.e. pure and Buddhist], it possesses all the many qualities of a Buddha's mind.

These do not need to be brought about; they merely need to be allowed to shine. Because they are intrinsic to the very nature of consciousness, they, and the same state of Buddhahood, will never cease.

**Objective:** To find out how the Bodhisattva is a Central Figure of the Devotional Practices through the Mahāyāna Path in Tibetan Buddhist Tradition.

**Methodology:** Historical and philosophical methodologies have been used to write this paper.

**Analysis:** The complete form of the term “bodhisattva” is bodhisattva mahāsattva. “Bodhisattva” means “a being (sattva) who seeks enlightenment (bodhi).” “Mahāsattva” means “a great person” and refers to a person who makes the great vow to become a Buddha and undertakes the strenuous practice required to attain that goal. A bodhisattva must believe he has the character or nature necessary to become a Buddha. In this respect, the Mahāyāna practitioner’s position differs from that of both the Hīnayānist and those people who praised the Buddha. The earliest extant example of the Mahāyāna usage of the term “bodhisattva” occurs in Aṣṭasāhasrikā PP\* (T224). The term is used in this sūtra to suggest that it had already been used with its Mahāyāna sense for a considerable time before the text was compiled. Thus, the advocates of perfection of wisdom built upon the theories of the bodhisattva and his six perfections, developed by those who praised the Buddha, and broadened the term “bodhisattva”.

Consequently, Mahāyāna was at first called “bodhisattvayāna”. Later, this usage was extended to the Three Vehicles as srāvakayāna, pratyekabuddhayāna, and bodhisattvayāna (or Buddhayāna).

The concepts of Three-vehicles practice and One-vehicle practice have been the subject of much debate among Buddhist scholars. Is the practice of the Three Vehicles an expedient path or the ultimate path? Does the One-Ele mean the practice of Mahāyāna (more excellent vehicle) in the Three Vehicles? Does the One-vehicle practice take us further than the Three-vehicle practice? It appears that the researchers have not reached any conclusions.

Dharmarakṣa, Dun Huang Bodhisattva, translated the Xiu Xing Dao Di Sūtra. This author has also translated the Lotus Sutra (SaddharmapuṇḍarikaSūtra). It is found that there is an ancient interpretation of the One-vehicle and the Three-vehicle practice. It is simple.

From the viewpoint of aspiration, some people are weary of life and death, while others possess the great Bodhicitta (Bodhi-mind). Thus, the former will enter Nirvāṇa, while the latter, Buddhahood. However, since the sentient beings’ spiritual foundations differ, the Buddha taught us many different paths. Consequently, there are paths for the three vehicles and the one vehicle. Some people practise the more excellent vehicle, then degrade to the smaller one, and vice versa.

### **The Srāvakas:**

There are two types of Srāvakas. The first type is people who practice the smaller vehicle’s path and never cultivate any bodhicitta. They learn and practise the Dharma from the Buddha for their salvation. They cannot tolerate a meaningless life without an end. Their only pressing problem is to be free from suffering. They do not bother about anyone else if they are at peace. This is the attitude they have towards others. When they hear the words of the three realms, they shiver and are scared.

Practitioners of this character are weary of being unable to attain freedom from rebirth and ultimate liberation. For these people, the Buddha condemned the suffering of rebirth and praised Nirvāṇa. He showed them the abode of the Enlightened Ones and guided them to understand the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha hoped that they could be free from suffering. Practitioners of this character believe that they have reached the ultimate path. They do not automatically progress to cultivate the path of the more excellent vehicle. The Buddha will have to wait when they are about to enter Nirvāṇa to show them the path of the more excellent vehicle. They will then realise they have not attained the ultimate practice and be encouraged to develop their bodhicitta.

The second type is those who have compassion but find it challenging to practice. They practise giving, the precepts, meditation, and wisdom, aiming to free themselves from rebirth. They vigorously meditate and contemplate so that they may attain eternal Nirvāṇa. However, they know that achieving arhantship is not the ultimate goal. Thus, they automatically want to follow the path of the Bodhisattva. They learn from the teachings of the Buddha and develop themselves to seek the more excellent path. They cultivate their great

loving-kindness, compassion, and the Six Perfections, progressing towards non-attachment and emptiness. They may even choose to be reborn to teach and save sentient beings.

### **Pratyeka-Buddhas:**

Pratyeka-Buddhas were those who once cultivated their bodhicitta but later gave up the practice. They had the bodhicitta but forgot it and lost their aim. They may also have practised the Six Perfections and meditated on the Buddha, but became attached to the physical phenomena of the manifestations.

For sentient beings with a spiritual foundation, the Buddha taught the path of the Three Vehicles. The fact that Buddha was born in the world means that these practitioners would lead a life as hermits, living in remote mountain caves or huts by themselves, and contemplating and observing the existence of myriad beings. They would realise that all existences are subject to causes and conditions and subsequently gain enlightenment.

The two types of practitioners above have similar characteristics. They have initiated their bodhicitta but have not progressed further into its deeper context. They attach themselves too much to the well-being of the physical manifestations of the Buddha. However, eventually, they may come back to seek a better path. When they have ended rebirth and entered Nirvana, the Buddha will show them “the path of Mahayana which integrates the Three-vehicle”, and they will detach themselves from the realms of existence and Nirvāṇa and progress along the path of the great vehicle.

### **The Path of the Bodhisattvas:**

Bodhisattvas are practitioners who have cultivated their bodhicitta. Apart from those who later degenerate to become pratyeka-buddhas, we can further divide such practitioners into two groups.

1. Some will follow a gradual and progressive path. They realise that the three realms of existence are illusions and all phenomena are void. They practice the Six Perfections vigorously and accumulate boundless merits. One step at a time, they go forward. Eventually, they possess skilful means and gain enlightenment via an expedient path. They attain the stage of no rebirth, and their position never recedes.
2. Then, some find instant attainment. They gain the stage of no rebirth and do not recede as soon as they cultivate their bodhicitta. They immediately understand the immaterial personality and voidness of all myriad beings. They realise that all manifestations are void, non-obtainable, and indistinguishable.

### **The Awakened Mind Clings to Nothing:**

Does mental defilement pollute and constrain our minds? Because of our ignorance, we attach to our ego and possessions. They constrain us. If we are free from attachments and do not cling to belongings, we will be free from suffering. This is the ancient patriarch’s teaching in guiding practitioners to the stage of no rebirth.

The learning continues, “The wise ones observe the three realms of existence. They realise that the Five Skandhas are illusions. When they realise that there is no external object to cling to, they attain the state of no rebirth.” There is no fast track nor shortcut to the path of Bodhi. When the mind understands that the source of all is void, it’s like suddenly seeing the light at the end of a tunnel. We do not feel in a state of gain or loss, past or present, when we attain this wisdom. The awakened mind clings to nothing. It understands the absolute truth and the void nature of all things.

It attains an understanding of voidness, equality, and great wisdom. It no longer attaches itself to the three realms of existence nor Nirvāṇa. Nor will it attach itself to the fact that it is ferrying the suffering sentient beings over to the other shore of Nirvāṇa. Neither will it attach itself to attaining Buddhahood. It will work vigorously to cultivate the Six Perfections. The awakened mind will utilise the expedient path to help all

beings. These are the ones who have the Bodhisattva spiritual foundation. (According to the Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva, this spiritual foundation can be divided into three levels.)

The aim of returning to one path allows us to concentrate on attaining the universal wisdom of understanding the truth of voidness. Generally speaking, cultivating the path of the more excellent vehicle is equivalent to practising the One-vehicle. But the teachings of Buddha-Dharma propagate according to the minds and the conditions of the time and space. The classification of the Three Vehicle or One Vehicle depends on the practitioner's mind and aspiration. It is common for practitioners to classify which sutra or teaching vehicle is better and which is smaller. This is not the right way of classification. Some people practice the Mahāyāna path but do not attain the Mahāyāna goal. Sometimes, they may even deteriorate in their ability to follow other beliefs. This commonly happens.

The point is that practitioners should always examine their motivation for practice — is it to free themselves from rebirth? Or to ferry all sentient beings to attain enlightenment? How do we practise the Dharma? Are we practising the path of relieving ourselves or the path of the Six Perfections? What do we realise? Do we attach ourselves to phenomena and existence? Have our minds realised voidness and thus attained the stage of no rebirth? Eventually, all sentient beings will become Buddhas and acknowledge the great wisdom of the One-vehicle. But before we come to that stage, we cannot classify ourselves as practitioners of One-vehicle simply because we are reading the One-vehicle Sutra or learning the One-vehicle Dharma!

### **The Four Great Vows:**

The fundamental vow of the bodhisattva is to delay their nirvāṇa until all beings have been liberated from suffering. This aspiration is expressed in the formal vow that, when taken, signifies one's entrance into the path of the bodhisattva:

### **The fourfold vow is indicated below:**

The Four Great Vows: I vow to liberate all beings; without number, I vow to uproot endless blind passions, penetrate dharma gates beyond measure, and attain the way of the Buddha. The First Vow: 'Living beings are numberless; I vow to help them all to cross over the sea of suffering, the sea of birth and death.'

According to the Principle of Impermanence, the existence of living beings is ever-changing. Some are born; some die. The absolute number at any given moment cannot be identified; therefore, it is considered numberless.

The Second Vow: 'Though afflictions are endless... afflictions such as difficult moods, aversion, greed, confusion... though these afflictions seem inexhaustible and endless, I vow to penetrate and to cut through them all.'

The Third Vow: 'Dhamma doors are measureless; I vow to cultivate them all.' The Fourth Vow: 'Though the Buddha Path is unsurpassed, I vow to realise it.' In addition to this formal bodhisattva vow, Mahāyāna texts enumerate dozens of other vows, and variations vary from country to country (most notably between Tibet and other countries). The ten most common and essential vows are as follows:

1. Not to harm any being
2. Not to take that which is not given
3. Not to engage in any form of sexual misconduct
4. Not to misuse speech
5. Not to take intoxicants

6. Not to gossip about the faults and misdeeds of others
7. Not to praise oneself or disparage others
8. Not to be stingy or abusive towards those in need
9. Not to harbour anger or resentment or encourage others to be angry
10. Not to criticise or slander the Three Jewels

In the Tibetan tradition, laypeople are often encouraged to take on the first five vows as a way of producing good karma and avoiding actions that produce negative results.”At any given time, one may swear to one or two up to all five precepts. In one typical tradition, one takes vows only for one day.

If someone wants to carry the practice to the next day, they will retake the vow the next morning... The daily taking of precepts is essential... one’s commitment to them needs to be renewed frequently to keep one’s intention and investment fresh.” The Buddha Path condition gives rise not only to peace but also to Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi. It means perfect, big, and full Enlightenment: the Enlightenment that not only knows how to let go and be peaceful but also knows how to ideally respond to conditions in a way that is a true blessing for all beings. Three men were walking through the desert. They were lost and about to die from thirst and hunger. They come to a very high wall, and the first one climbs up, shouts for joy and jumps over the wall, never to return. The next man climbs up the wall, and he, too, exclaims in ecstasy, jumps off the wall and never comes back. Now, the third man climbs up the wall. He reaches the top and sees a Garden of Eden with water and many fruit trees. He smiles, turns, and returns down the wall, returning to the desert to help others find their way to this paradise. He chooses to return to the world’s desert and help others find their way.

For a Bodhisattva, the eradication of one’s suffering is joined with the desire to aid in the eradication of all others’ suffering as well. The real Bodhisattva identifies the immeasurable distress of all sentient beings as his own. With this Immeasurable Compassion (Mahā-karuṇā), one can take the second vow: The desire to win Supreme Bodhi, convert and liberate sentient beings, aid in eradicating their distress, etc., should not be an impulse based on idle sentimentality or romantic notions of spiritual life. This noble aspiration can only be realised if a strong foundation of wisdom exists. One can spread the Dharma and assist living beings only with wisdom, not otherwise. This wisdom arises from a keen desire to learn and practice the Buddha-dharma. Therefore, the Buddha said, “All Buddhas in the three periods arise from learning and practice.” One who is not willing to learn will remain eternally foolish. What foolish man or woman ever completed the Bodhisattva Path, spread Dharma, and assisted sentient beings?

### **The Six (Pāramitās) Perfections:**

Pāramitā or Pāramī (Sanskrit and Pāli, respectively)<sup>1</sup>: “The word pāramī derives from parama, ‘supreme,’ and thus suggests the eminence of the qualities which must be fulfilled by a bodhisattva in the long course of his spiritual development. But the cognate pāramitā, the word preferred by the Mahāyāna texts and also used by Pāli writers, is sometimes explained as pāram + ita, ‘gone to the beyond,’ thereby indicating the transcendental direction of these qualities.” (Velthuis convention lettering replaced with Pali diacritics.) means “Perfect” or “Perfection”. In Buddhism, the Paramitas refer to the perfection or culmination of particular virtues. In Buddhism, these virtues are cultivated as a means of purification (karma) and to help the aspirant live an unobstructed life while reaching the goal of Bodhi.

### **The Pāramīs in Theravāda Buddhism:**

The Theravādin teachings on Pāramīs can be found in books (the Buddhavaṃsa, Jātakas, and Avadānas) and in later commentaries added to the Pāli Canon; thus, they are not original to the Theravādin teachings. Also,

the oldest parts of the Sutta Piṭaka (e.g., the MajjhimaNikāya, DīghaNikāya, Samyutta Nikāya, and AnguttaraNikāya) do not mention the pāramitās. Some scholars even refer to the teachings of the pāramitās as a semi-Mahāyāna teaching, which was added to the scriptures at a later time to appeal to the interests and needs of the lay community and to popularise their religion.

### **Canonical sources:**

In Theravāda Buddhism's Pali Canon Buddhavaṃsa, the Ten Perfections (dasapāramiyo) are (original terms in Pāli): Dāna pāramī: generosity, giving of oneself Silapāramī: virtue, morality, proper conduct Nekkhammapāramī: renunciation Paññāpāramī: transcendental wisdom, insight Viriya (also spelt vīriya) pāramī: energy, diligence, vigour, effort Khantipāramī: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance Sacca pāramī: truthfulness, honesty Adhitṭhānapāramī: determination, resolution Mettāpāramī: loving-kindness Upekkhā (also spelt upekhā) pāramī: equanimity, serenity Two.

Of the above virtues, Mettā and Upekkhā comprise two of the Four Immeasurables (Brahmavihāra).

### **The Pāramitās in Mahāyāna Buddhism:**

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapuṇḍarika) lists the Six Perfections as (original terms in Sanskrit):

1. Dāna pāramitā: generosity, giving of oneself
2. Silapāramitā: virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct
3. Kṣāntipāramitā (Kṣānti): patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
4. Vīryapāramitā: energy, diligence, vigour, effort
5. Dhyānapāramitā: one-pointed concentration, contemplation
6. Prajñāpāramitā: wisdom, insight. Note that this list is also mentioned by the Theravāda commentator Dhammapāla, who says it is equivalent to the ten listed above. In the DaśabhūmikaSūtra, four more pāramitās are listed:
7. Upāyapāramitā: skilful means
8. Pranidhāna (pranidhāna) pāramitā: vow, resolution, aspiration, determination
9. Bala pāramitā: spiritual power
10. Jñānapāramitā: knowledge

### **The Ten Stages of Bodhisattva :**

Bodhisattva(s)

The term bodhisattva (Pāli, Bodhisatta; Tibetan, byang chub seems pa; Chinese, pusa; Korean, postal, Japanese, bosatsu) refers to a sattva (person) on a Buddhist marga (Path) in pursuit of Bodhi (Awakening) or one whose nature is awakening. In the Mahāyāna tradition, a bodhisattva is a practitioner who, by habituating himself in the practice of the Pāramitā (Perfection), aspires to become a Buddha in the future by seeking Anuttarasamyaksambodhi (Complete, Perfect Awakening) through Prajñā (Wisdom) and by benefiting all sentient beings through Karuṇā (Compassion). A bodhisattva courageously seeks enlightenment through totally and fully benefiting others (parārtha) and himself (svārtha). A bodhisattva is also termed a mahā sattva or "Great Being" because he is a Mahāyāna practitioner who seeks

Anuttarasamyaksambodhi and who is equipped with the necessities for enlightenment—puñyasambhāra (accumulation of merits) and jñānasambhāra (accumulation of wisdom)—and the quality of upāya-kausalya (skilful means); that is, he knows how to act appropriately in any situation. According to the Bodhisattvabhūmi, the bodhisattvayāna (spiritual path of a bodhisattva) is considered to be superior to both the śrāvakayāna (spiritual path of the disciples) and the pratyekabuddhayāna (spiritual path of a self-awakened Buddha) because a bodhisattva is destined to attain enlightenment by removing the kleśajñeyāvaraṇa (emotional and intellectual afflictions). In contrast, those on the other two spiritual paths aspire for Nirvāṇa, that is, the extinction of emotional afflictions only. Different appellations know the bodhisattva; for example, in Mahāyāna-sūtralaṅkāra XIX: 73–74, the following fifteen names are given as synonyms for Bodhisattva: mahāsattva (great being); dhīmat (wise); uttamadyuti (most splendid); jinaputra (Buddha’s son); jinādharma (holding to the Buddha); vijetr (conqueror); jinān’kura (Buddha’s offspring); vikrānta (bold); paramāścarya (most marvellous); sārthavāha (caravan leader); mahāyaśas (of great glory); kṛpala (compassionate); mahāpuṇya (exceptionally meritorious); īśvara (lord); dhārmika (righteous).

Bodhisattvas are of the ten classes:

1. Gotrastha (one who has not reached purity yet)
2. Avatīrṇa (one who investigates the arising of the enlightened mind)
3. Aśuddhāśaya (one who has not reached a pure intention)
4. Śuddhāśaya (one who has reached a pure intention)
5. Aparipakva (one who has not matured in the highest state)
6. Papakha (one who has matured in the highest state)
7. Aniyatipatita (one who, although matured, has not yet entered contemplation)
8. Niyatipatita (one who has entered contemplation)
9. Ekajātipratibaddha (one who is about to enter the supreme enlightenment)
10. Caramabhavika (one who has entered supreme enlightenment in this life).

There are other classifications of bodhisattvas, such as those who enter enlightenment quickly and those who enter gradually; those who are householders and those who are not, each divided into nine classes; those who are highly compassionate, such as Avalokiteśvara; and those who are extremely wise, such as Mañjuśrī. Maitreya, the bodhisattva, is considered the future Buddha prophesied to appear in this world. Śākyamuni himself is understood to have been a bodhisattva in his past lives and is so-called in the accounts of his previous births (Jātaka). To distinguish him from the śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas, who benefit only themselves, a Mahāyāna bodhisattva is characterised as one who makes vows to benefit all sentient beings, as well as himself. In the Pure Land tradition, for example, according to the Larger SukhāvātīvyūhaSūtra, the Bodhisattva MahāsattvaDharmākara makes forty-eight vows and becomes the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life (Amitābha or Amitāyus), who resides in the Western Quarter and functions as a salvific Buddha. Among the well-known bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya are probably the most popular in East Asia. In the East Asian Buddhist tradition, Avalokiteśvara, better known by the Chinese name Guanyin, is worshipped by both clergy and laity as a mother figure, a saviour, and a mentor who responds to the pain and suffering of sentient beings. In Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, is considered a reincarnation of Avalokiteśvara. Maitreya (Pāli, Metteyya) bodhisattva, who is said to dwell in Tusīta heaven, is known as the “future Buddha” because he will appear in this world to reestablish Buddhism after all vestiges of the current dispensation of Śākyamuni Buddha have vanished.

Tradition holds that Asanga went to Tusīta to study under Maitreya, where he received five treatises from him that became the basis for establishing the Yogācāra School. Worship of Maitreya as the future Buddha has contributed to millenarianism and movements among several Buddhists.

Traditions. Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra are often depicted as bodhisattvas in a triad with the primordial Buddha Vairocana. Samantabhadra stands on Vairocana's right side and Mañjuśrī on his left. Samantabhadra is also usually depicted seated on the back of a white elephant, holding a wish-fulfilling jewel, a lotus flower, or a scripture, thereby exemplifying his role as the guardian of the Buddha's teaching and practice. Mañjuśrī, by contrast, represents wisdom and is depicted wielding a flaming sword that cuts through the veil of ignorance. Buddhist scholars and savants of India, such as Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, have been referred to as bodhisattvas; in China, Dao'an, for example, is known as Yinshoupusa. In more modern times, founders of new Buddhist movements in China, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States are considered by followers to be bodhisattvas and, in some cases, even Buddhas.

The bodhisattvas are distinct from the arhats in three ways: 1) their motivation seeks to aid all beings rather than themselves, 2) their goal is complete enlightenment for all instead of extinguishing merely one's suffering, and 3) they see śūnyata (emptiness) as the most profound truth.

As a result, the bodhisattva path is often presented as distinctive practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism that distinguish it from the Theravādin tradition. This doctrine provides a model of an engaged form of Buddhism that does not run away from the world's suffering but actively seeks to end it for all beings. Scholars remain unsure when or how bodhisattvas emerged as an essential force in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The concept of celestial bodhisattvas and the practices that constitute the bodhisattva vehicle (bodhisattva-yāna) were well established by the second century C.E., as evidenced in their prominence in the then-recent Mahāyānasūtras.

The bodhisattva archetype emerged from the past-life stories of the Buddha, which recount his life before he was fully enlightened. Mitchell relates the story of what was perhaps the most critical moment of the Buddha's past lives: In the Pāli texts, there is a story about a person named Sumedha, who lived aeons ago and, during his lifetime, met a Buddha named Dīpamkara.

Sumedha decided not to become a disciple of Dīpamkara and strive to be an arhat. Instead, he chose to follow the Path of the Bodhisattva to become a Buddha... Sumedha was successful and eventually became Gautama Buddha.

Most of these jātika stories were ascribed to the Buddha posthumously and seem to have originated in folk tradition rather than in canonical sources. Likewise, Western scholars believe that many celestial bodhisattvas may have roots in local religious movements that worshipped a particular divine being. In a practice typical of Mahāyāna Buddhism, these figures were incorporated into the pantheon as bodhisattvas.

The Pāli texts also speak of a future Buddha, Maitreya, who is presently a bodhisattva training for a future time when the world needs a fresh transmission of the dharma (Buddhist teachings). So, while Theravadins recognise the existence of the bodhisattva-yāna, they do not see it as an appropriate path for most people, who would be better suited to pursuing nirvāṇa.

### **Celestial Bodhisattvas:**

Mahāyāna Buddhists believe that celestial bodhisattvas are advanced beings who are no longer bound by the suffering of birth and death but are not yet fully enlightened Buddhas. The most popular ones are mahāsattva (great truth) bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, and Vajrasattva. These beings can be prayed to for particular needs, such as protection (Tārā), and are often portrayed as the attendants of Buddhas. Devotionalism directed towards bodhisattvas remains the most common form of practice in the Mahāyāna

tradition, and it is common for laity to offer incense, food, and prayers to these figures. Buddhists believe that bodhisattvas can help ordinary beings by transferring their good karma.

This act creates a feedback loop: giving selflessly of one's merit, in turn, creates more merit, enabling them to offer their aid continuously. While the worship of bodhisattvas may seem odd to some Westerners who see Buddhism as a religion of pure reason devoid of any "religious" features, it is extremely common. It is encouraged by the monastic community as a way for the laity to generate good karma and cultivate the qualities represented by the bodhisattvas. For instance, in praying to Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, this quality arises automatically in the devotee's mind, thereby helping to generate what, for Buddhists, is the most important trait.

This last feature is also significant in the meditative practices of Buddhist tantra, where bodhisattvas are visualised to bring their qualities into practitioners' minds. As Powers points out, "such bodhisattvas are not creating a delusional system to hide from the harsher aspects of reality. Rather, they are transforming reality, making it conform to an ideal archetype" Celestial bodhisattvas are also credited with starting various tantric lineages, appearing to advanced meditators in their sambhogakaya ("enjoyment body") form and initiating them into new practices (such as in the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism).

Mahāyāna Buddhists also believe these beings can create numerous emanation bodies, which may take any form they choose. Famous saints are often said to have been posthumously regarded as emanations. The most renowned example of this is the Dalai Lama, who is simultaneously the reincarnation of the first Dalai Lama, GendunDrup (1391-1474 C.E.), and a *nirmāṇakāya* of Avalokiteśvara.

### **The Bodhisattva Path:**

The bodhisattva path (often referred to by Vajrayāna practitioners as the "gradual path of perfections and stages") offers Mahāyāna Buddhists a systematic guide to their development through the use of special vows, the generation of the six *pāramitā* (perfections), and a map of personal growth through ten *bhūmi* (stages), all of which is said to culminate in full Buddhahood. This path is outlined in detail in Mahāyāna literature by authors such as Nāgārjuna (the Precious Garland), Chandrakīrti ("Entry into the Middle Way"), Asanga ("The Stages of a Bodhisattva"), Śāntideva (the Way of the bodhisattva), and Gampopa (the Jewel Ornament of Liberation).

### **The Ten Stages:**

The ten *bhūmi* (literally "ground") correspond directly to the *pāramitā* and provide a map for developing a bodhisattva on their journey to Buddhahood. They practice all paramitas during each stage, but one is emphasised in each *bhūmi*. The primary source for these stages is the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (Flower Garland Sūtra), and it is also outlined in texts such as Chandrakīrti's *Madhyamakavatāra* (Entry into the Middle Way).

1. *Pramuditā*: Great Joy: After accumulating enough merit, *bodhicitta* arises for the first time in the bodhisattva. This causes enormous generosity to occur, which in turn results in immense joy, as Chandrakīrti explains: "Even the happiness that comes from entering the peace [of nirvana] is unlike that happiness experienced by the son of the conquerors (buddhas) when he thinks about the word give. What can be said [about the joy that arises] from abandoning all [inner and outer possessions]?"

The 'stage of joy.' (*pramuditā*) This is the stage where the wisdom of the middle path first arises to benefit self and others, and where there is great happiness and joy at overcoming former difficulties and at now entering the path to Buddhahood.

2. *Vimalā*: Stainless: In accomplishing the second *bhūmi*, the bodhisattva is free from the stains of immorality. The emphasised virtue is moral discipline (*śīla*), which, at this stage, eliminates all harmful actions, even in the dreams of the bodhisattva.

3. Prabhākārī: Luminous: The third bhumi is named ‘Radiant’ because, for a bodhisattva who accomplishes this bhumi, the light of Dharma is said to radiate from the bodhisattva for others. This luminosity is said to shine forth from the fire of non-dualistic realisation that consumes the last traces of discursive thought. Without the chatter of the wandering mind, the bodhisattva can develop perfect patience.
4. Arciṣmati: Radiant: Through the bodhisattva’s vigour (virya), “a brilliance is produced which is superior to the shining of brass, and any [reified Concepts] associated with the philosophical view of a subjective self are entirely eradicated.”
5. Sudurjayā: Difficult to conquer: At this stage, the bodhisattva has developed extraordinary strength of meditation (dhyāna) so that they are challenging to disturb, even for “all the forces of Māra” (Ibid), which symbolises both inner and outer distractions. They also study in numerous fields (the arts, medicine, and the sciences) to benefit sentient beings.
6. Abhimukhī: the Directly Facing: At this stage, they are brought face-to-face with what Mahāyāna Buddhists teach to be the true nature of reality: emptiness. This is the perfection of wisdom (prajñā), and with this realisation, they could choose to pass into nirvana upon their death. Still, they continue to Buddhahood because of their non-attachment to nirvana and deep compassion.
7. Dūraṅgamā: the Far Advanced: Through the powerful skilful means (upāya) developed by the bodhisattva at this stage, they can see into the hearts and minds of beings and, therefore, know precisely how best to act to bring them closer to enlightenment. It is also said that at this point, to advance further, they will have to stop taking birth as human beings and instead manifest as celestial bodhisattvas, a choice they freely make at this stage, in which they overcome birth and death.
8. Acalā: the Immovable: In this bhumi, the bodhisattva’s aspiration becomes invincible, and they cannot falter on their path. Buddhahood becomes inevitable, and progression through the last stages becomes much more rapid than previous ones.
9. Sādhumatī: the Unerring Intellect: In this stage, the celestial bodhisattva attains several supernatural powers (bala) to aid them in their quest to liberate all beings. Examples include the ability to understand all languages.
10. Dharma-Megha: Cloud of dharma: The bodhisattva is almost indistinguishable from a Buddha at this stage. Their primordial wisdom (jñāna) is said to pour down effortlessly, like rain.

The bodhisattva is the central figure of the Mahāyāna path. They provide followers with an outlet for devotional practice and offer a model to guide practitioners toward enlightenment. They remain an essential part of Mahayana Buddhism today and an inspiration for monastics and laypeople alike. Finally, the bodhisattva doctrine provides a model for Mahāyāna Buddhists of an engaged form of Buddhism that does not run away from the world’s suffering but actively seeks to end it for all beings.

### **Conclusion:**

The term Buddha, literally “awakened one,” is one of many Indian epithets applied to the founder of Buddhism. A Buddha is defined, first and foremost, as one who has undergone the profoundly transformative experience known as Nirvāṇa and who, as a result, will never be subject to the cycle of birth and death again. Women and men who experienced this same awakening by following in the Buddha’s footsteps were referred to as Arhats, or “worthy ones,” an epithet also applied to the Buddha himself. These disciples, however, were not themselves referred to as Buddhas, for that term was reserved for those rare individuals who experienced Bodhi (Awakening) on their own in a world without knowledge of Buddhism. Moreover, to attain awakening without the help of a teacher was not in itself sufficient to be classified as a Buddha, for

those who did so but did not teach others how to replicate that experience were known instead as Pratyekabuddhas, a term variously explained as “individually enlightened” or “enlightened through (an understanding of) causation.” In addition to attaining nirvāṇa without assistance from others, the classical definition of a Buddha includes teaching others what one has found. A Buddha is, in sum, not only the discoverer of a timeless truth but the founder of a religious community. It is possible—though far from certain—that the earliest Buddhist tradition knew of only one such figure, the so-called historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as Śākyamuni (sage of the Śākya clan). But the notion that other Buddhas had preceded him appeared early and may have been assumed by Śākyamuni himself. Over the next four to five centuries, Buddhists believed that other such Buddhas would also appear in the distant future; some even claimed that Buddhas lived in the present, though in worlds unimaginably distant from our own. While all Buddhist schools accepted the belief in past and future Buddhas, the idea of the simultaneous existence of multiple Buddhas appears to have gained general currency only in Mahāyāna circles.

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