



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Importance Of The Bodhisattva Ideal In Buddhism

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Abstract

Studying the significance of the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism is essential for applying the Buddha's teachings to cultivating and benefiting our society and community. In addition, it dispels misunderstandings regarding the Bodhisattva ideal, it also illustrates the Bodhisattva ideal for readers and practitioners of Buddhist teaching. This study focuses on the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism and Buddhist traditions, including Theravāda and Mahāyāna. This study employed a qualitative approach that combined the reading of Buddhist scriptures with textual documents to examine and analyze the Bodhisattva ideal. This Bodhisattva ideal was acknowledged by both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions. When considering the characteristics and commitments of a Bodhisattva, the practice of pāramī is extremely significant. One who practices the virtues or conducts of pāramī is called a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva must go through ten stages (daśabhūmi) of practice and attainment to reach the stage of Buddhas' wisdom in three times (past, present, and future). The great Bodhisattvas' wisdom is likewise represented by these ten stages. All deeds of giving, kind speech, beneficial actions, or working together must not be separated from the thoughts of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. When we put these qualities into practice, practicing Bodhisattva virtues not only helps us achieve accomplishment, advancement, and tranquility on the spiritual path, but they also improve and benefit our community and society.

Keywords: Bodhisattva, compassion, wisdom, pāramī, bhūmi.

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent is where Buddhism originated and flourished about the beginning of the fifth century BC.¹ After a period of formation and development, Buddhism has now spread to all countries in the world, bringing spiritual, cultural, ethical values, etc., to humanity and the social community. After the Buddha

¹ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7-8.

entered Nirvāṇa, the Buddha's elderly disciples (Theras) organized the First Buddhist Council at the Sattapanni Cave in Rājagaha in the rainy season by chanting over Buddha's discourses, including the Dhamma and Vinaya "atha kho therā bhikkhū rājagahaṃ agamaṃsu, dhammañ ca vinayañ ca Saṃgāyitum."² The purpose of this Buddhist Council was to prevent the spread of incorrect teachings of the Buddha abroad and to preserve the Dharma and Vinaya that the Buddha had preached, especially the time after the Buddha entered Nirvāṇa. One hundred years later, the Second Buddhist Council was held in Vaiśālī to further preserve the Buddha's teachings. At the time of the Second Buddhist Council, A non-theravāda perspective also emerged from a group of ones who were referred to as the Mahāsāṃghika,³ and after a period of development, it became known as Mahāyāna.⁴ Until the Third Buddhist Council was convened under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in Pāṭaliputra. It was also during this time that Thera Mahinda brought the Buddha's teachings to Sri Lanka and gradually spread to other countries.

The Bodhisattva ideal is one of the important and deeply influential ideals in the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. The Bodhisattva path is presented in many Buddhist scriptures, not only in the Sanskrit-Chinese Buddhist scriptures, but also in the Pāli canon. Therefore, it is very important to examine the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism in general and Buddhist traditions in particular. This has practical value in practicing the Buddha's teachings and is also important for understanding Buddhism's contribution and influence in the present period.

Literature Review

The word Bodhisattva is a combination of bodhi and sattva, bodhi means "awakening" or "enlightening," sattva means "sentient being," so Bodhisattva means "enlightening sentient being" (覺有情). A Bodhisattva is one who is practicing on the path towards Buddhahood, along with his compassionate vow and deed to awaken sentient beings, to benefit self and others on the spiritual path.

According to Linnart Mäll, he explains that according to *the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the concept of Bodhisattva has two meanings, a broader meaning and a narrower meaning. First, a Bodhisattva is one who tries to change his mind.⁵ According to *the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, there are three main possibilities or means that can change one's mind, which are: Śrāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddhayāna, and Mahāyāna.⁶ This is the first meaning of a Bodhisattva. The second meaning of the concept of a Bodhisattva, that is one who has chosen the Mahāyāna path in their practice.⁷ That one follows the path of a Bodhisattva

² Hermann Oldenberg (ed.), *The Vinaya Pitakam: One of the Principal Buddhist Holy Scriptures in the Pāli Language, Vol. II, Cullavagga* (London: Williams And Norgate, 1880), XI. 1.5, 285-286. Cf. Cullavagga, Khandaka 11, Chapter 1, Wisdomlib.org, accessed 10/08/2024.

<https://www.wisdomlib.org/buddhism/book/vinaya-3-the-cullavagga/d/doc370339.html>

³ T.W. Rhys Davids (ed.), *Journal of the Pāli Text Society* (London: Pali Text Society, 1889), 35.

⁴ Shanta Ratnayaka, "The Bodhisattva Ideal of the Theravāda", in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1985, vol. 8, no.2, 86.

⁵ Linnart Mäll, *Studies in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā and other Essays* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005), 54.

⁶ Linnart Mäll, *Studies in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 54.

⁷ Linnart Mäll, *Studies in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 56.

by employing “great vehicles” or “skillful means” to cultivate and help oneself and others—to fulfill his vows and deeds. Bodhisattvas are characterized by qualities like giving, patience, loving-kindness, virtues, and so on.

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, Bodhisattvas are great beings who are supreme (parama) when their state of being is at its highest because of practicing distinguished qualities such as generosity, morality, patience, etc.⁸ Those qualities and vows are condensed to form the spirit and determination of a Bodhisattva on the path toward enlightenment. When a person practices the Bodhisattva path, it means that he will practice with effort and diligence on the path of those qualities. According to the Mahāpadānasutta, Dīgha Nikāya, the path of practice before reaching Buddhahood of a being in countless manifestations of different forms is called Bodhisattva.⁹

Research Methodology

Examining and studying the Buddhist Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism, this research study used a qualitative approach that combined textual document analysis and careful reading of Buddhist scriptures. A variety of literary works by authors were examined and analyzed in order to illustrate the concept of Bodhisattva and the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism as well. The literary method was used in the study because it provides a framework for analyzing the different interpretations of the findings and making conclusions about the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism in general and in Buddhist traditions in particular. As an effort to avoid misunderstanding about the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism, the analysis and study of the Bodhisattva ideal also helps to clarify the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhist traditions. It also highlights how significant the Bodhisattva ideal is in these challenging times.

Results and Discussion

The Bodhisattva ideal is presented not only in the Chinese-Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures but also in the Pāli scriptures. Therefore, it plays an important role in the Buddhist doctrinal system. Both Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions acknowledged this Bodhisattva ideal.¹⁰ Although there are certain differences in the practices and contents that depend on the different capacities and conditions of each sentient being. However, they all aim at the goal of liberation and enlightenment. As the Buddha taught in the Eighth Chapter of Aṅguttara Nikāya: “Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so too this Dhamma and discipline has but one taste, the taste of liberation.”¹¹

The practice of pāramī holds great significance in terms of the qualities and vows of a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is one who is practicing deeds or qualities of pāramī. The Pāli word Pāramī comes from the word

⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *A Treatise on the Pāramīs: From the Commentary to the Cariyāpiṭaka* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996), 9.

⁹ Maurice Walshe (trans.), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 199-221.

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *A Treatise on the Pāramīs: From the Commentary to the Cariyāpiṭaka* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996), 4.

¹¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 1144.

“parama,” which signifies “supreme.” The Sanskrit word pāramitā means “gone to the beyond,” which denotes the transcendental path of a Bodhisattva's attributes.¹² For Theravāda, there are ten pāramīs, which include: dānapāramī (generosity), sīlapāramī (virtue), nekkhammapāramī (renunciation), paññāpāramī (wisdom), vīriyapāramī (energy), khantipāramī (patience), saccapāramī (truth), adhiṭṭhānapāramī (strong determination), mettāpāramī (loving-friendliness), upekkhāpāramī (equanimity).¹³ As for the Mahāyāna, there are six pāramitās which include: Giving, virtue, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom, later four more pāramitās were added including resolution, skillful means, power, and knowledge.¹⁴ The doctrine of pāramī, therefore, is presented by both the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions of Buddhism and serves as the cornerstone for the moral and spiritual practices of both Buddhists and Bodhisattvas. By cultivating the pāramī qualities, we can train our minds to gradually eliminate greed, anger, and illusion, live virtuous and happy lives, progress on the path of awakening, and make positive contributions to society and the community.

According to *the Avatamsaka Sutra*, there are ten stages (daśabhūmi) of a Bodhisattva's practice and attainment to enter into the stage of the Buddhas' wisdom of the three times - past, present, and future.¹⁵ These ten stages also represent the wisdom of the great Bodhisattvas. The ten stages of a Bodhisattva consist of Extreme Joy (歡喜地, Pramuditā-bhūmi), Purity (離垢地, Vimalā-bhūmi), Refulgence (發光地, Prabhākārī-bhūmi), Blazing (焰慧地, Arciṣmatī-bhūmi), Difficult to Conquer (難勝地, Sudurjayā-bhūmi), Presence (現前地, Abhimukhī-bhūmi), Far-going (遠行地, Dūraṅgamā-bhūmi), Immovable (不動地, Acalā-bhūmi), Good Mind (善慧地, Sādhumatī-bhūmi), and Cloud of Teaching (法雲地, Dharmameghā-bhūmi).¹⁶ The ten stages are a Bodhisattva's path of practice and accomplishment. When one practices these ten stages, it also corresponds to the practice of the ten pāramitās. For instance, in the first stage - Extreme Joy, one practices the conduct of giving (dāna pāramitā). However, one may also practice the nine corresponding conducts, depending on his circumstances and level of ability. In this first stage, although practicing the conduct of giving, the practitioner must always keep thoughts of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, so that the conduct of giving will be beneficial. This means that the conduct of giving must always be in line with wisdom, teachings, and harmony. All acts of giving, kind speech, beneficial actions, or working together must not be separated from the thoughts of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Bodhisattva ideal is also described in the Theravāda school, particularly in the Jātakas and the Cariyāpiṭaka, two collections from the Pāli canon's Khuddaka Nikāya (Minor Collection). The Jātakas consist

¹² Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *A Treatise on the Pāramīs: From the Commentary to the Cariyāpiṭaka* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996), 5.

¹³ Bhikkhu Mahinda (Anāgārika Mahendra) (transl.), *Cariyāpiṭakapāli - Book of Basket of Conduct* (USA: Dhamma Publishers, 2022), 71-72.

¹⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *A Treatise on the Pāramīs: From the Commentary to the Cariyāpiṭaka*, (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996), 5.

¹⁵ Thomas Cleary (trans.), *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of The Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1993), 697.

¹⁶ Thomas Cleary (trans.), *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, 697-698.

of five hundred and fifty stories about the Buddha's previous lives.¹⁷ These are the stages when the Buddha was still practicing on the Bodhisattva path towards Buddhahood, liberation, and enlightenment. Sometimes he transformed himself into a Bodhisattva like an elephant, deer, horse, or fish, etc., to convert and save sentient beings according to their certain conditions and circumstances. These are the vows of a Bodhisattva, practicing the perfections (pāramīs), the qualities and conducts of a Bodhisattva. The Cariyāpiṭaka is a collection that narrated thirty-five stories about the Buddha's previous lives as he was practicing on the Bodhisattva path with the practice of the ten perfections.

On the path of Buddhist practice, one attempts to transform his defilements and taints and then to attain his awakening and salvation. So, what must one practice? In the Bhāvanānuyutta suttaṃ, the Buddha taught that it is the practice of the thirty-seven qualities conducive to Enlightenment (sattatiṃsa bodhipakkhiyā dhammā). Bhāvanā means contemplation, cultivation, development of the mind, meditation, or devotion. Bodhipakkhiyā dhammā are the qualities or methods of practice that support, and are conducive to enlightenment. Bodhipakkhiyā dhammā is divided into seven sets, including thirty-seven qualities that support the practice leading to liberation and enlightenment. Bodhipakkhiyā dhammā or qualities leading to awakening includes four establishments of mindfulness (cattāro satipaṭṭhānā), four right exertions (cattāro sammappadhānā), four bases of psychic potency (cattāro iddhipādā), five faculties (pañca indriya), five strengths (pañca bala), seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅgā), noble eightfold path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga).¹⁸ These qualities as described in the Bhāvanānuyutta suttaṃ, the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

“Bhāvanam anuyuttassa bhikkhave, bhikkhuno viharato kiñcāpi na evaṃ icchā uppajjeyya: aho vata me anupādāya āsavehi cittaṃ vimucceyyāti, atha khvassa anupādāya āsavehi cittaṃ vimuccati. Taṃ kissa hetu: bhāvitattātissa vacanīyam. Kissa bhāvitattā: catunnam satipaṭṭhānānam, catunnam sammappadhānānam, catunnam iddhipādānam, pañcannam indriyānam, pañcannam balānam, sattannam bojjhaṅgānam, ariyassa aṭṭhaṅgikassa maggassa.”¹⁹

“Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu is intent on development, even though he does not form the wish: ‘May my mind be liberated from the taints by non-clinging!’ yet his mind is liberated from the taints by non-clinging. For what reason? Because of his development. Development of what? (1) Of the four establishments of mindfulness, (2) the four right strivings, (3) the four bases for psychic potency, (4) the five spiritual faculties, (5) the five powers, (6) the seven factors of enlightenment, and (7) the noble eightfold path.”²⁰

So, it is evident that Bodhisattvas are practicing toward enlightenment, which also implies that they are cultivating the thirty-seven qualities that are conducive to enlightenment. Furthermore, this practice is a righteous cultivation on the path leading to enlightenment and awakening. In Buddhism, development by means of thought, or cultivation is defined as Bhāvanā, and practicing these thirty-seven qualities that lead to

¹⁷ Shanta Ratnayaka, “The Bodhisattva Ideal of the Theravāda”, in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1985, vol. 8, no.2, 89.

¹⁸ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2012), 1089.

¹⁹ “AN IV”, edited by Access to Insight. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, accessed 27/08/2024. http://www.accesstinsight.org/tipitaka/sltip/AN_IV_utf8.html.

²⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2012), 1089.

enlightenment depends on each sentient being's capacity and condition. However, one should not deviate from these qualities. In the four bases of psychic potency (*cattāro iddhipādā*), the first factor is *Chanda*, which can be defined as intention, will, impulse, or desire. But unlike *Taṇhā* or *Kāma*, *Chanda* in this context refers to the intention to escape from the *samsara* world or the circle of birth and death follow the right and noble path and to uphold moral principles or wholesome conduct. On the other hand, *Taṇhā* that is thirst, greed, or desire brings pain and suffering to humans in the *samsara* world. Each practice of the thirty-seven qualities on the Buddhist path that leads to enlightenment has a profound and significant meaning.

Conclusion

Thus, through the analysis and research on the importance of the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism, we can see that the Bodhisattva ideal is essential and profound on the path to enlightenment and liberation of the practitioner. The Bodhisattva ideal is presented in both the Mahāyāna tradition and the Theravāda tradition. The qualities of a Bodhisattva not only help us achieve peace and progress on the path of spiritual development but also help society and the community become better and more beneficial.

Compassion, generosity, diligence, morality, and so forth, or the Bodhisattva spirit, are qualities that will help us in dealing with and solving issues in the modern world and promoting harmony and peace to humanity. Bodhisattva's vows and deeds that are engaged in our daily life will be necessary as long as this life is still suffering. These vows and deeds are to provide moral direction and benefit to sentient beings.

The path to Buddhahood follows the stages of a Bodhisattva's practice, which the practitioner goes through. To achieve the accomplishment of these stages, a practitioner on this Bodhisattva path develops the *bodhicitta* and benefits sentient beings. That is also the aspiration of a Buddhist practitioner on the path towards the path of enlightenment and liberation, bringing practical benefits to life, as well as of a practitioner on the Bodhisattva path, the aspiration for the well-being and happiness of sentient beings. As described in the Mahāpadāna Sutta, The Dīgha Nikāya:

“I allow you, monks, to wander abroad for the good of the many, for the welfare and happiness of devas and humans. Do not go two together, monks, but teach the Dhamma that is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, and lovely in its ending, both in the letter and in the spirit, and display the holy life fully complete and perfect.”²¹

²¹ Maurice Walshe (trans.,) *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 218.

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