

Examining Bodhisattvas

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Bodhisattvas are at the very core of the sect of Buddhism more commonly known as Mahayana Buddhism, or the Greater Vehicle. In the earliest form of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, bodhisattva was a term that was used to refer to the Buddha before he had attained full enlightenment. In the latter form of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, the term bodhisattva took on a different meaning though.¹ To further understand the term bodhisattva one must contemplate the meaning of the term according to Mahayana Buddhism, look at the practices performed by bodhisattva, and further explore some historical figures considered bodhisattvas.

Mahayana Buddhism branched off from Theravada Buddhism around the first to second century common era, and Mahayana Buddhism embraced the bodhisattva differently than their predecessors.² The term bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism does not just refer to the Buddha himself before he reached nirvana; instead, a bodhisattva is a person who does not seek release for himself in the endless cycle of birth and death as soon as possible, but instead a bodhisattva is reborn again in order to help all others attain nirvana. One does not have to be a devotee monk in order to be a bodhisattva. One can be a layman but still be bestowed with the title of bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is not only concerned with their release from samsara, but they are concerned with the plight of all individuals in the reaching of nirvana.³ Bodhisattvas did not hold themselves apart from society; instead, they led a active life that challenged the ills of society and strived to help all others gain release from the endless cycle of samsara.⁴

¹ "Bodhisattva," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition* (2011), EBSCOhost, accessed March 1, 2012.

² Jonathan Swift, *What, If Anything, Is Mahayana Buddhism?*, EBSCOhost, accessed March 1, 2012.

³ "Bodhisattva," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*.

⁴ Daisaku Ikeda, *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, trans. Burton Watson (California: Middleway Press, 2009), 33.

Bodhisattvas are concerned with the enlightenment of all beings and not just themselves. “The aspiration to care for and to awaken all beings” is known as *bodhichitta* in Sanskrit.⁵ To accomplish this tasks bodhisattvas take certain vows to help others. The vows of bodhisattvas revolve around six *paramitas* or “perfections”. The first of which is *dana* or charity. The most important aspect of *dana* is unconditional love. People should give because they truly care about the welfare of others. The second *paramita* is *sila* or morality. The thing most stressed in *sila* is that a person should not harm another living being through thoughts or actions. People should act properly so that they do not cause harm another. The third “perfection” is *ksanti* or forbearance. People must be patient and be able to face the obstacles that are thrown their way in life without losing themselves. The fourth *paramita* is *virya* or diligence. People must constantly follow *dharma* and pursue *nirvana* for the good of all beings. People must work hard for the benefits of others, and not just themselves, and not expect anything in return. The fifth practice is *dhyana* or meditation. Because people’s minds can be distracted quite easily the mind must be focused so that people are aware of everything that they do. The last “perfection” is *prajna* or wisdom. True wisdom is free from any sense of limitation that is perceived and is the highest form of wisdom. With this wisdom people see how things truly are. The bodhisattvas practice these measures in order to help others attain nirvana in the hope that they will stay behind and help others as well. The vows are intended to get the bodhisattvas to actively participate in the helping of others.⁶

One of the most important bodhisattvas is Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. The bodhisattva is also known as Guanyin and is believed to have

⁵ Taigen Dan Leighton, *Faces of Compassion* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 32.

⁶ “The Six Paramitas,” Source Point Global Outreach, accessed March 1, 2012,

thirty-three different manifestations, and is commonly portrayed to have a thousand hands. Among them are Guanyin Viewing Waterfalls, Guanyin of Oneness, and Child-Providing Guanyin. According to the where the Buddhists lives decides if Guanyin is male or female; for example in China Guanyin is portrayed mainly with feminine attributes. One meaning of Avalokiteshvara is “Regarder of the World’s Cries or Sounds”. The name suggests that to be compassionate a person must listen without the need to react. A person must listen to the problems of others in able to be helpful to them. Incarnations of Avalokiteshvara include the Dalai Lama, Albert Schweitzer, Bodhidharma, and Mother Teresa.⁷

Another important bodhisattva is Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Manjushri knows the true nature of all things that are in existence. The bodhisattva is often portrayed riding a lion and wielding a sword in one hand, with which he cuts through delusion with, and a scroll in his other hand. Most often Manjushri is portrayed as a young prince. Manjushri means “noble, gentle one”, and the bodhisattva can see through all the illusions that are present in this world and see the true relationship of things. Manjushri is believed be well spoken and very knowledgeable. Manjushri is known by several other names including “Sweet-Sounding One” and “Melodious-Voiced One”. In China there is a massive following of Manjushri at Mount Wutai and people make pilgrimages to the site. Incarnations of Manjushri are commonly master scholars including the Tibetan Tsongkhapa and the Japanese Prince Shotoku.⁸

The only prior knowledge that I had about bodhisattvas was from our class discussions. I knew that a bodhisattva’s goal was to help others to attain enlightenment

<http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/pdf/SixParamitas.htm>.

⁷ Dan Leighton, *Faces of Compassion*, 167-209.

while not doing so themselves immediately. Through my research I gained a great appreciation for bodhisattvas and those striving to become one. They are not only concerned with the well-being of themselves, but instead the whole world. It is a great sacrifice to post-pone one's enlightenment just to help others gain theirs. Any person who does this has my fullest respect. Instead of ending the endless cycle of birth and death they stay back just to help others do what they chose not to. This is very admirable to me. The vows that a bodhisattva takes are very strict. They must focus on helping others without expecting anything in return. If more individuals were concerned about the welfare of the community, and not just themselves, then I think the world would be a better place. Also, I did not realize how many different views there are regarding specific bodhisattvas. The research I performed on Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri displayed the many different viewpoints on the figures. Overall, I now have a greater appreciation for bodhisattvas and the work they perform.

Bodhisattvas are major figures in Mahayana Buddhism. Instead of reaching nirvana they delay enlightenment to help others. They are concerned with the well-being of all that are around them. Through closer examining the term bodhisattva, looking at their practices, and studying of certain bodhisattvas I have garnered much knowledge that I previously lacked on the subject. More importantly, I now have a greater appreciation for bodhisattvas and their practices.

⁸ Dan Leighton, *Faces of Compassion*, 109-134.

Bibliography

"Bodhisattva." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6Th Edition* (November 2011): 1.

MAS Ultra - School Edition. EBSCOhost (accessed March 11, 2012).

The entry in the encyclopedia is just a brief overview and their practices. I used the entry for the basics about bodhisattvas.

Dan Leighton, Taigen. *Faces of Compassion*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

The book more deeply examines several bodhisattvas and I used it for research on two specific bodhisattvas.

Ikeda, Daisaku. *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*. Translated by Burton Watson. California: Middleway Press, 2009.

The book delves into the subject of Buddhism in China, but I only used it for some basics about bodhisattvas.

Silk, Jonathan. *What, If Anything, Is Mahayana Buddhism?* EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2012).

The book looks closely at the history of Mahayana Buddhism and how it differs from other forms. I used the book just for the history of Mahayana Buddhism.

Source Point Global Outreach. "The Six Paramitas." Accessed March 1, 2012.

<http://www.naljorprisondharmaservice.org/pdf/SixParamitas.htm>.

The website gives a detailed account of the six paramitas or perfections of a bodhisattva, and I used a fair share of the information found on the site.