

The Bodhisattva

The Buddha

- 1) In Buddhism, a Buddha is one who has attained total awakening—an enlightened being
- 2) By attaining enlightenment, one has no karma; by having no karma, one has no rebirth
- 3) Thus, a Buddha ends *samsara*, the cycle of birth, life, death, etc.

The Bodhisattva in Theravada Buddhism

- 1) In earlier schools of Buddhism (Theravada), the end goal of meditation practice is enlightenment, or Buddhahood.
- 2) In Theravada Buddhism, the term ‘bodhisatta’ refers to anyone who is unenlightened, but seeking enlightenment; thus, in the Buddha’s stories about his past lives (The Jataka Tales), *bodhisatta* refers to the Buddha in previous lives and even as a young man

The Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism

- 1) As Buddhism spread and developed throughout India and Asia, the notion of the Bodhisattva arose
- 2) The path of the Bodhisattva is the focus in most Mahayana schools, and is derived from scriptures written after the Buddha’s death
 - i) One of the central scriptures to the bodhisattva is “Bodhicaryavatara,” or “A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life,” written by Shantideva in the 8th century
- 3) Some of these scriptures are esoteric, and are said to have been taught to only those who could understand their meaning, which is why these texts’ validity is so conflicted; also, it seems to go against the Buddha’s own claim that his teachings are not “like a closed fist”

The Goal of a Bodhisattva

- 4) In Mahayana schools, the goal of enlightenment is not to cease being reborn (Buddhahood), but instead to attain enlightenment so you can free others from rebirth and suffering.
 - i) This wish is known as *bodhicitta*, or “the wish to attain complete enlightenment in order to be of benefit to all sentient beings trapped in samsāra who have not yet reached Buddhahood.”
- 5) A Bodhisattva, after attaining enlightenment, returns to the world to free others still caught within it—they are compassionate Buddhas who care more for others suffering than total liberation from their own.
- 6) In many cases, the bodhisattva also fulfills a role similar to a saint: there are mythological/heavenly bodhisattvas who are said to hear the prayers and pleas of the suffering, and come to aid them.
 - i) Like Catholic Saints, these bodhisattvas are often broken up into different traits: Manjusri is the bodhisattva of wisdom, while Avolokitsevara is the bodhisattva of understanding, etc.
 - ii) Have you ever wondered why the Dalai Lama is so important in Tibetan Buddhism? In Tibet, Avolokitsevara is called *Chenrezig*, and is manifested in the Dalai Lamas. Thus, the Tibetans believe that their religious and state leader is an incarnation of a bodhisattva.

7) Often times, bodhisattvas are artistically depicted as multi-armed and multi-headed deities—although pretty cool, and at times even fierce looking, it's important to understand the symbolic meaning of these traits:

i) Avolikitsevara is often depicted with multiple arms (sometimes thousands) and eleven heads. The story goes that when he vowed to free all beings, he became so overwhelmed by the plight of all beings that his head exploded, and that in attempting to reach out to all beings, his arms also broke from the strain. He was then given eleven heads to hear and see the plight of all sentient beings, and the fragments of his arms became arms to aid all beings.

(Note: I think this says a lot of about perseverance and bodhicitta: Avol. was overwhelmed with defeat, but from this defeat sprung the means to aid all beings)

ii) Avolk. is sometimes depicted as being both male *and* female, or is embodied in both male and female form; this shows his/her ability to communicate to all beings, in any form.

iii) Manjusri seems pretty bad-ass, as he carries a flaming sword and a flower (it takes a *real* man to enjoy pretty botany while carrying a flaming-sword!) and sometimes is depicted as riding on a lion!...but, like Avol., all this stuff is symbolic. The sword represents cutting through delusions and ignorance with pure, clean reality; the lion represents our own wild-minds, which is tamed; the lotus represents the blossoming of wisdom.

8) So, when we meditate on a bodhisattva, we are not really worried about them as a figure or a myth, but as a representation and embodiment of desired ideal

Bodhisattvas in Scripture—about as exciting as Buddhism's going to get.

Personally, I've always liked the scriptures about bodhisattvas—they are incredibly inspiring! I'm taking a page out of Ron's book, and will give you some samples of Bodhisattva texts and prayers:

As you noticed from the story of Avolk., the bodhisattva's stories are pretty dramatic, and often involve the bodhisattva sacrificing their own body for others. The point of these stories is *NOT* to encourage us to actually harm ourselves in helping others, but rather to be willing to make a sacrifice of what we find most precious to others—ourselves. It's like Adeesha said while teaching *metta* meditation—you love yourself more than anyone else!

Here are some samples from texts/prayers about bodhisattvas:

“For as long as space endures
and for as long as living beings remain
until then may I too abide
to dispel the misery of the world”

[Santideva; A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life]

*This is one of the earliest scriptures written about bodhisattvas; this is a line often used in Tibetan Buddhism to cultivate bodhicitta

“I take upon myself the burden of all suffering. I am resolved to do so. I will endure it. I do not turn or run away, do not tremble, am not terrified, nor afraid, do not turn back or despond... I walk so that the kingdom of enlightenment is built up for all.

“I alone should be in pain than that all these beings should fall into woe. I must give myself away as a pawn through which the whole world is redeemed from the terrors of the hells, of animal birth, of the world of yama [a deity of death]

“With this body I must experience, for all beings, the whole mass of all pain. I give surety for all beings, and in doing so, speak truthfully, am trustworthy, and do not go back on my word.

“I must not abandon all beings.”

*This is from the Vajradhvaja Sutra—I especially like how “I will not go back on my word” is followed by the vow of a bodhisattva.

“Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them;
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to extinguish them;
There Dharma is vast, I vow to master it;
The Buddha-Way is unattainable, I vow to attain it.”

[The Bodhisattva’s Bow]

*This prayer is often said by Mahayana Buddhists who seriously try to cultivate bodhicitta—notice how it vows to do the impossible. That shows the tenacity of the bodhisattva!

The Bodhisattva as a lifestyle

- 1) Like Buddhahood, bodhisattva is not something we just sit back and think “Wow, that’s great those guys could do that”—NO! Bodhisattvahood is something we too can work towards
- 2) We do this by first aiding ourselves, and then by aiding others.
 - i) Like in *tong-len* meditation, we must first focus on our meditation for two reasons: 1) So we are healthy enough to help others without harming ourselves, and 2) By better understanding our own mind and suffering, we can understand others!
- 3) Adopting the lifestyle of a bodhisattva does not have to be exceedingly difficult—we don’t have to go overseas and spend our lives destitute, constantly in charity to others (although, that’s great if you can do it!).
 - i) Instead, acting like a bodhisattva comes from caring for all around you, and being willing to help them. Ask others how their day is going, and truly *listen* to them; offer to help however you can.
- 4) Sometimes this will call us to leave our comfort zone; sometimes we will have to sacrifice our time, or maybe even our belongings. So long as we are not being taken advantage of, we should help others.