

The Concept of *Bōdhisattva* Path in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism

(Exploring the ideology and application of
Bodhisattva Path in Mahāyāna Buddhism)



By Venerable Ahangama Rathanasiri
M.A., PUNDIT.

Formation of Buddhist Traditions

The *Mahāyāna* School of Buddhism that emerged from the original dispensation

established by the Gauthama Buddha is believed to have originated from the *Mahāsāṃghika* Sect. Until three months after the demise of the Buddha there was no division among the *Sangha* community. However there arose a necessity of resolving certain prevalent issues and a decision was made to call a *Sangha* Council under the leadership of *Arahant* Maha Kashyapa. This *Sangha* Council was held at the entrance to the *Saptaparni* Caves in the Indian city of Rajagaha (now Rajgir) in the presence of 500 *Arahants* circa 400 B.C.E. Questions relating to monastic discipline (*Vinaya*) were dealt with by *Arahant* Upali and those relating to the doctrine (*Dhamma*) were handled by *Arahant* Ananda. In addition a systematic process was created for the oral transmission of the scriptures of the Monastic Discipline and the Doctrine so that they will be bequeathed to the future generations in perpetuity.

About 100 years after the First Council, the Second Council was convened

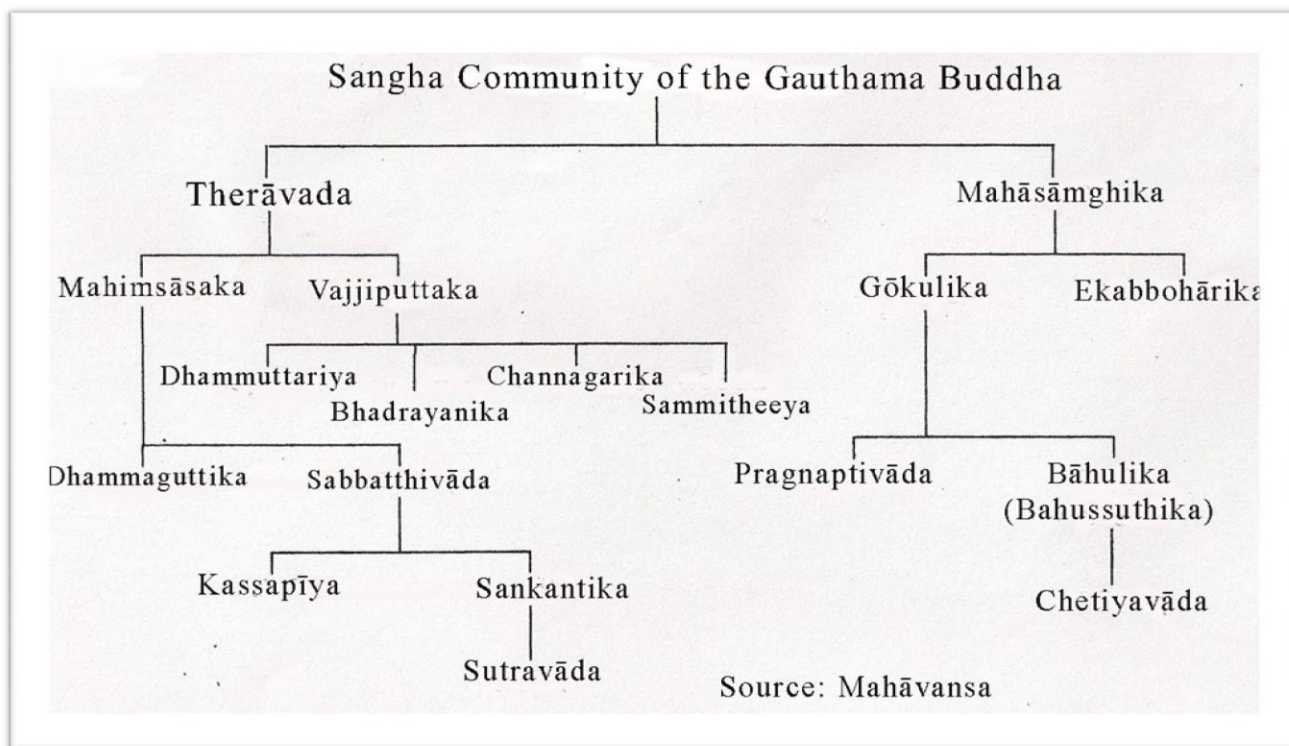


Figure 1 – Formation of Ancient Buddhist Traditions

in the city of Vaishali (in Bihar Province, India), with the attendance of seven hundred *Arahants* under the leadership of *Arahant* Sabbakami, mainly to consider the dispute caused by the ten monastic discipline reformative points adopted by a group of monks known as Vajjiputtaka. The noble Sangha Community of the Gauthama Buddha that remained united up till now began its schism¹ after the Second Council. According to Deepavansa², the popular belief is that a new sect called *Mahāsāṃghika* was created by the break-away monks of the Vajjiputtaka group who called another Council of their own, in response to the censure of the “Ten Points” by the Second Council. In a Chinese version of the *Mahāsāṃghika* Disciplinary scripture, however, it is stated that the *Mahāsāṃghika* sect acknowledged the violation of its discipline by the above “Ten Points”. In the documents belonging to *Sammitheeya*³ Sect, it has been recorded that during the period between Second and Third Councils, 5 attributes of an *Arahant* have been submitted by a monk by the name of Bhadra. At a separate Sangha Council conducted under the sponsorship of the King of Patali Puththa, those monks who accepted these five attributes as valid, formed the *Mahāsāṃghika* group. Those 5 attributes of an *Arahant* are:

1. An *Arahant* may have lust.
2. An *Arahant* may have delusion.
3. An *Arahant* may be skeptical.

4. An *Arahant* must be enlightened by another person.
5. An *Arahant* may achieve enlightenment by pronouncing a certain word.

The negative attributes stated above have degraded the enlightened disposition of an *Arahant* who has in reality extinguished all attachments to the world and terminated the cycle of birth and death by self perseverance. A discussion on this matter can be found in the “*Parihāni Kathā*” chapter in “*Kathāvaththu Pakaranaya*”, an *Abhidhamma* book belonging to *Theravāda* School. It can be assumed that the concepts depicted in these beliefs may have formed the foundation on which the *Mahāyāna* Tradition was built and its beginning can be seen in the *Mahāsāṃghika* ideology. Its basic principles consist of denigrated position of an *Arahant*, amplified image of the *Bodhisattva* and the exaggerated super-mundane qualities of the Buddha.

With the separation of the *Mahāsāṃghika* monks from the main stream of the *Sangha* Community, the remaining monks came to be known as the *Theravada* or the doctrine of the Elders. With time, various other sects were born in total 18, as a result of disputes caused by differences in opinions with regards to the nature of the Dhamma, super-mundane status of the Buddha, concept of non-soul, theory of self etc. Birth of a large number of sects during this period has been seen as a favorable sign of a vibrant doctrine. Professor M. B. Baruwa of the University of Calcutta, India has stated that the appearance of conceptual differences and diverse sectarian groups was

¹ See Figure 1 – Page 1.

² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dipavamsa>

³ See Figure 1 – Page 1

a sign of progressive development. The Buddhist Doctrine did not stagnate nor did it stay dormant, but was alive to the changing social and physical environments and retained its tenacity in continuously expanding its horizon.

Emergence of Mahāyāna School and the concept of Bodhisattva

The word “Mahāyāna” has not appeared in any Buddhist literature prior to the Fourth Council which was conducted during the period of King Kanishka (c 1 century AD). For the first time it appears in the *Mahāyāna Shraddothpāda Sutta (Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna)* authored by Poet Ashvagosha (c 1 century AD). *Mahayanists* do not believe in 3 vehicles⁴; the only path that leads to the realization of the Truth is by being a *Bodhisattva* and then attaining enlightenment. Accordingly all human beings should be *Bodhisattvas*. The vehicle of *Bodhisattva* or *BuddhaYānaya* is the one and only route leading to liberation. Because this vehicle is the singular path to emancipation for the living beings, it is known as “Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*)”.

Quoting from the Commentaries of the *Theravada* School “*Bodhi vuccati catūsu maggesu ñāṇam*” (See *Sāriputtasuttaniddesa, Mahāniddesa, Aṭṭhakavagga*), “*bodhi*” means the knowledge of the four-fold path or the realization of *Nirvāna*. In general sense of the *Theravāda* Tradition,

⁴ According to *Theravada* Tradition, the enlightenment can be achieved in three ways i.e as an *Arahant*, as a *Pacceka Buddha* or as a *Sammā Sambuddha*. They are referred to as vehicles (*Yanas*)

Bōdhisatta means a noble person who has received a firm prediction of becoming a future Buddha (*niyatha vivarana*) from another Buddha. His first and foremost goal is to strive for the full enlightenment by fulfilling ten perfections⁵ which may take unimaginable length of time and unimaginable number of births. Analyzing the word, “*satta*” which is derived from Pāli root “*sañja*”, means “attached”. Subjecting it to Pāli declension, “*sattō*” “*āsaththō*”, “*visattō*” respectively mean “one who is attached”, “one who is mildly attached” and “one who is extraordinarily attached”. However, the true quality of a *Bodhisattva* does not become apparent by assigning “attachment” to the meaning of “*satta*”. Therefore the *Mahāyāna* Tradition adopted the word *Bodhisattva*⁶ to connote a being who is destined to attain full enlightenment. Similar to a seed that contains an embryo for germination at a later stage, *Bodhisattva* possesses all qualities required for subsequent enlightenment. It would be more appropriate to describe such a person as one who is endeavoring to attain full enlightenment or one who has made it his sole aspiration. The *Sanskrit* word *satva* can be interpreted as “human values”. According to P.T.S Dictionary, *Bodhisatta* is defined as “bodhi-being i.e. a being who is destined to attain fullest enlightenment or Buddhahood. A *Bodhisatta* passes through many

⁵ Ten Perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, good will, and equanimity

⁶ Note the spelling difference in the two words: *Bodhisattva (Mahāyāna)* and *Bōdhisatta (Theravāda)*

existences and many stages of progress before the last birth in which he fulfills his great destiny”.

The primary purpose of a *Bodhisattva* is to show a way for the beings to escape from the tentacles of *Samsāra*. Referring to the famous *Mahāyāna* Buddhist Text, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*⁷ (*A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*), the *Bōdhicitta* is the singular wish of a *Bodhisattva* integrated with boundless compassion and wisdom, with a strong determination to realize the Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is also the one and only path to the Buddhahood. Foremost characteristic of *Bodhisattva* is compassion and wisdom. At the instant of generating a *Bōdhicitta* to become a *Bodhisattva*, he makes a vow to himself thus:

“I will delay my awakening until all sentient beings living in every realm of the universe, whether they be egg-born, womb-born, water-born or spontaneously born; whether they are far or near, slim or obese, gross or subtle, large or small, are liberated from the *Samsāra*.”

In order to give a sensible meaning to the infinitely boundless compassion that would be radiated to all the sentient beings in the three realms of the universe, that compassion should invariably be devoid of the perception of self. In other words the compassion should be extended with

wisdom built on the understanding of the real nature of the conditional phenomena, seeing all tangible as well as abstract forms such as personality, beings, self, aggregates, fundamental elements, sense-bases etc. as void or illusions. Further all phenomena should not be considered as independent, or unconditioned. In terms of *Madhyamaka*⁸ philosophy all phenomena are interdependent and inter-related thus giving rise to the emptiness of substance as a result of the absence of inherent existence; herein all beings as well as phenomena are without self-essence. According to traditions of asceticism, wisdom is considered as the ability to see all beings, life, self, phenomena etc. as illusions of the mind. The propagation of boundless, altruistic compassion over all living beings without any exclusion is possible only through selfless perception of the vacuous and illusory nature of the world. According to *Mahāyāna* Philosophy if a person is embodied with the perceptions of personality, self, being, life etc., that person is not a *Bodhisattva*; a *Bodhisattva* should be in full realization of the true nature world as it is and that insight is known as wisdom. Discernment of the true nature of the phenomena alone can achieve the infinite compassion over all the living beings. If a *Bodhisattva* has not eliminated the notion of the existence of an entity, he may be subject to defilements of attachments and clinging; he should also be devoid of the perception of

⁷ Also known as *Bodhisattvacharyāvatāra* was authored by a Buddhist monk named Śhāntideva of The Nālandā Monastic University of India in c. 700 A.D.

⁸ *Mahāyāna* school of philosophy founded by Nagarjuna. According to *Madhyamaka* all phenomena (*dharmas*) are empty (*śūnya*).

himself. Failure in this respect is a failure of his own goals. On the other hand he should also eliminate the perception of the existence of other beings; if not he fails in the deliverance of others. In short *Bodhisattva* is one who is engrossed with two fundamental functions: liberation of himself and the liberation of others.

Mahāyāna School believes that the *Bodhisattvas* who have eliminated the five hindrances and fully developed the compassion and wisdom are competent enough to guide other living beings from the fetters of *Samsāra*. They are in a state that would make it possible for them to attain *Nirvāna* at any time they desire. There is no requirement for them to be isolated in a forest and develop meditation under a tree or in an empty location to realize enlightenment; since they have already seen the reality of all phenomena (emptiness), it makes no difference whether it is a noisy crowded place, empty place or a forest.

The *Bōdhicitta* (awakening mind) and the *Bodhisattva* are two fundamental factors in the *Mahāyāna* doctrine. *Mahāyāna* scriptures indicate that the *citta* (mind) can be analyzed in three categories as follows:

- (i) Worldly Mind
- (ii) *Bodhisattva* Mind
- (iii) *Bōdhicitta* (awakening mind)

- Worldly mind is constantly polluted by the defilements caused by the egoistic nature of the human beings. Therefore it eternally wanders in *Samsāra* being subject to birth, aging, disease and death.

- In contrast the *Bodhisattva Mind* having understood the drawbacks of the worldly mind strives to attain a sublime state of enlightenment, by eradicating defilements, fulfilling perfections and accruing wholesome virtues.
- The ultimate mind of an exalted being who is devoid of all forms of defilements and who has realized the supreme state of Buddhahood having totally eradicated the suffering is the *Bōdhicitta*. The *Bōdhicitta* is strictly a quality of a Self Enlightened Buddha (*Sammā Sambuddha*). The *Bōdhicitta* as well as its mental functions transcend the human world.

According to the doctrine of *Mahāyāna*, the seeds of *Bōdhicitta* reside in all sentient beings impending to be awakened. It becomes fully blossomed only in the Buddhas. While it is in a dormant state, there are four ways it can be stimulated:

1. Contemplating on the Fully Enlightened Buddhas
2. Contemplating on the suffering in *Samsāra*.
3. Contemplating on the various causes of suffering that afflict the beings.
4. Contemplating on the qualities of the Fully Enlightened Buddhas

When a being develops *Bōdhicitta* he also develops, along with it, the compassion and wisdom. From that instant he becomes a *Bodhisattva*. In the state of *Bodhisattva* he gains a special feature of the associated mental functions that causes him to make a

vow to himself that he will delay the attainment of *Nirvāna* until all beings living in the three realms: realm of sensual pleasure (*kāma lōka*), realm of form (*rūpa lōka*) and formless realm (*arūpa lōka*), are absolved from the grips of the *Samsāra*. The vow *Bodhisattva* makes thus is a unique characteristic of the *Bōdhicitta*.

Concept of Bōdhisatta in the Theravāda Tradition

Turning back to the teachings of the *Theravāda* school, the objective of a *Bōdhisatta* who is aspiring to be a Fully Enlightened Buddha is to seek emancipation for himself first and then show others the path to do it. The sage Sumedha who had already developed all necessary requisites to attain *arahantship*, received a pronouncement from the Dipankara Buddha that he will become a fully enlightened Buddha in the future by the name of Gauthama. The sage Sumedha then thought thus:

“*Kimme aññātavesena, dhammaṃ sacchikatenidha;
Sabbaññutaṃ pāpunitvā, buddho hessaṃ sadevake.*” (*Sumedhapatthanākathā, Buddhavaṃsa, Khuddakanikaya*)

Meaning:

What use it will be if I realize the Dhamma while remaining unknown.

Having become omniscient I will liberate whole world including heavenly beings as a Buddha.

The being who receives a pronouncement from a Buddha that he will become a

Buddha at a future time will commence perfecting Ten Perfections forthwith. Such a being is known as a *Bōdhisatta* in the *Theravāda* Tradition.

Ten Stages (Bhūmis) in Mahāyāna Tradition

Corresponding to the Ten Perfections mentioned above in the *Theravāda* Tradition, *Mahāyāna* specifies Ten Stages (*Bhūmi*) as the path to awakening; but they are not similar in performance. All *Bodhisattvas* should perfect the Ten Stages (*Bhūmi*) to attain full enlightenment. The *Mahāyāna* Tradition also has Perfections, six in number, that come after accomplishing the seventh Stage (*Bhūmi*) known as *Dūrangama*.

Different sources in *Mahāyāna* School present diverse interpretations of the concept of the Ten *Bhūmis*. The *Mahāvastu*, a Text of the early Buddhism, differs considerably from the descriptions given for the Ten *Bhūmis* in the *Dasha Bhūmi Sutra* and *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. Another entirely different explanation appears in the *Bōdhisatta* Text in which only seven *Bhūmis* are enumerated. In the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* an additional *Bhūmi*, namely *tathāgata Bhūmi*, has been added making it eleven *Bhūmis*. In a Text known as “*Dharmasangrahaya*” its author, Har Dayal has referred to two additional *Bhūmis* known as *Hirupamā* and *Gnānawathi*. Though such varying interpretations are present in *Mahāyāna* literature, it is generally accepted that *Mahāyāna* School acknowledges only Ten *Bhūmis* as given in the *Dasha Bhūmi Sutra*.

The Ten *Bodhisattva Bhūmi* are the ten stages on the *Mahāyāna Bodhisattva's* path of awakening. The Sanskrit term *Bhūmi* literally means "ground" or "foundation". Each stage represents a level of attainment, and serves as a basis for the next one. Each level marks a definite advancement in one's training that is accompanied by progressively greater power and wisdom.

The *bhūmis* are subcategories of the Five Paths (*pañcamārga*)

1. **The path of accumulation** (*sambhāra-mārga*). Persons on this Path:
 1. Possess a strong desire to overcome suffering, either their own or others;
 2. Renounce the worldly life.
2. **The path of preparation or application** (*prayoga-mārga*). Persons on this Path:
 1. Start practicing meditation;
 2. Have analytical knowledge of emptiness.
3. **The path of seeing** (*darsana-mārga*). Persons on this Path:
 1. Practice profound concentration meditation on the nature of reality;
 2. Realize the emptiness of reality.
4. **The path of meditation** (*bhāvanā-mārga*). Persons on this path purify themselves and accumulate wisdom.

5. **The path of no more learning or consummation** (*aśaikṣā-mārga*). Persons on this Path have completely purified themselves.

The Ten Stages (*bhūmis*)

The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* refers to the following ten *bhūmis*:

1. **The first bhūmi, the Very Joyous.** (*sudurjayā*) in which one rejoices at realizing a partial aspect of the truth;
2. **The second bhūmi, the Stainless.** (*vimalā*) in which one is free from all defilement;
3. **The third bhūmi, the Light-Maker.** (*prabhākarī*) in which one radiates the light of wisdom;
4. **The fourth bhūmi, the Radiant Intellect.** (*arciṣmatī*) in which the radiant flame of wisdom burns away earthly desires;
5. **The fifth bhūmi, the Difficult to Master.** (*sudurjayā*) in which one surmounts the illusions of darkness, or ignorance as the Middle Way;
6. **The sixth bhūmi, the Manifest.** (*abhimukhī*) in which supreme wisdom begins to manifest;
7. **The seventh bhūmi, the Gone Afar.** (*dūraṃgamā*) in which one rises above the states of the Two vehicles;
8. **The eighth bhūmi, the Immovable.** (*acalā*) in which one dwells firmly

in the truth of the Middle Way and cannot be perturbed by anything;

9. **The ninth bhūmi, the Good Intelligence.** (*sādhumatī*) in which one preaches the Law freely and without restriction;
10. **The tenth bhūmi, the Cloud of Doctrine.**, (*dharmameghā*) in which one benefits all sentient beings with the Law (Dharma), just as a cloud sends down rain impartially on all things.

In the progressive path to liberation, the first *bhūmi* initiates search for the truth. Thereafter he advances freeing himself from defilements and gaining wisdom with which he destroys all earthly desires. The wisdom so gained leads to removal of the illusions one carried so far and the supreme wisdom of perceiving the absence of inherent existence, manifests forthwith. In the seventh *bhūmi* one engages in the development of high levels of mental absorptions passing beyond mundane and super mundane states. The eighth *bhūmi* is an extremely decisive stage in that the completion of this level makes the progression of the *Bodhisattva* irreversible and he is destined to eventual full enlightenment. It is during this stage that the *Bodhisattva* accomplishes the six Perfections:

1. Perfection of Generosity
2. Perfection of Morality
3. Perfection of Patience
4. Perfection of Energy
5. Perfection of Meditation
6. Perfection of Wisdom

The ninth *bhūmi* is expanding *Bodhisattva*'s already developed intelligence in order to master all aspects of the doctrine enabling him to teach it to the humans. In the final stage of tenth *bhūmi* the *Bodhisattva* completely eradicates the subtlest traces of afflictions and devotes himself to the propagation of the Dharma like a cloud that pours rain on the earth.

Conclusion

From the foregoing account of the ideal of a *Bodhisattva*, it is shown that his one only desire is to bring the rest of the beings to enlightenment. Until such time that his aspiration is fulfilled he too will sojourn in the *Samsāra* even though he has attained enlightenment. He has developed all the necessary qualities and tools to guide the sentient beings out of the bonds of *Samsāra* and he will pass through life after life for this purpose.

Mahāyāna doctrine basically differs from that of *Theravāda* in the way the final goal is reached. The *Mahāyāna* *Bodhisattva*'s immediate desire is to guide the rest of the beings to liberation before he himself attains *Nirvāna* because of the infinite compassion he developed towards others. Unlike the *Theravāda* doctrine, *Mahāyāna* rejects the ideal of release from the suffering in *Samsāra* through individual effort and promotes the idea of universal liberation of all beings by a *Bodhisattva*.