

# Bodhisattva

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Anybody who aspires to attain *bodhi* or enlightenment is called a *Bodhisatta* (*Bodhisattva* in Sanskrit). The word *Bodhisatta* is made up of two words *bodhi* and *satta* (*sattva* in Skt.). *Bodhi* means ‘enlightenment’ and *satta* means ‘being’. Therefore, *Bodhisatta* means a being with the seed of *bodhi* or enlightenment in him. The seed of *bodhi* is there in everybody. But it can germinate only when it is regularly watered with the water of *sīla* and *pāramitā*. If one does not observe moral precepts like abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, etc., his *bodhi* cannot germinate and grow into a big tree which would give him shade and fruits. In the same way, if he does not fulfill *pāramitās* like *dāna pāramita*, *virīya paramita*, etc., his *bodhi* cannot grow.

The idea that everybody has the seed of enlightenment in him makes Buddha-Dhamma humanitarian because it sees great potential in a human being who by dint of his efforts can end his suffering—the existential problem of mankind. Man can break the cycle of birth and death and become liberated forever. He is not born again and does not have to suffer from birth, old age, disease and death.

The two qualities that a *Bodhisattva* must have are *paṇidhi* (aspiration) and *abhinīhara* (resolution). One who is bent on becoming a Buddha must develop these two qualities. He must be born innumerable times as a *Bodhisattva* and fulfill all the ten *pāramitās* to attain enlightenment and become the Buddha.

It is said that before Siddhārtha Gotama attained enlightenment and became Gotama the Buddha—the Perfectly Enlightened One—he was a *Bodhisattva*. This is proved by what he himself says in the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya that, “before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened *Bodhisatta*, I too, being myself a subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, I sought what was also a subject to ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement.”

He then, seeing danger in what is subject to birth, determines to seek the unborn i.e., *nibbāna*. For this he leaves home, makes a great renunciation, learns *rūpāvacara dhyana* (meditation on the fine material sphere) and finding it not helpful to liberate him from suffering, undertakes the practice of

austerities for six long years and finding them also of no use, he rediscovers *vipassana* meditation and attains *bodhi*. One can practice *vipassana* by following the middle path, by steering clear of the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism. Thus, the *Bodhisattva* becomes the Buddha (the perfectly Enlightened One).

A *Bodhisattva* starts his career by making a strong resolution, known as *abhinīhara*, in the presence of a Buddha. Gotama the Buddha, in his previous life as Brahman Sumedha, made this strong resolution before Dīpaṅkara Buddha to become a Buddha in the future for the welfare and liberation of all beings.

In order that the *abhinīhara* of a *Bodhisattva* becomes effective, he should fulfill eight conditions. What are they? He must be born a human being, he should be a male, he should be spiritually sufficiently advanced and developed to become an *arahant* in that very birth when he makes a strong resolution, he must be a recluse at the time of making the declaration to become the Buddha, he should declare his resolve before a Buddha, he should possess attainments like *jhānas*, he should be prepared to make sacrifices, he should even be ready to sacrifice his life and, lastly, his resolution must be firm and unshakeable.

A *Bodhisattva* must know the qualities he should acquire for becoming a Buddha. In other words, he must know the Dhammas that make one a Buddha (*Buddhakāradhamma*).

The Dhammas that a *Bodhisattva* has to perfect in order to become a Buddha are the following ten *pāramitas*: *dāna* (liberality), *sīla* (morality), *nekkhamma* (renunciation), *paññā* (wisdom), *virīya* (energy), *khanti* (forbearance), *sacca* (truthfulness), *adhiṭṭhāna* (resolution), *mettā* (loving kindness) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). It takes several lives to perfect a *pāramita*. Every *pāramitā* has three degrees or every *pāramitā* is of three kinds: *pāramī*, *upapāramī* and *paramatthapāramī*. *Dāna upapāramī* is giving one's external possessions such as wealth. This is easy. Giving *dāna* means giving one's limbs, which is difficult but *dāna paramatthapāramī* is giving one's life to save the life of others which is most difficult.

Practicing *pāramitās* means driving out defilements from the mind and achieving its purity. For example, when one gives *dāna*, he gets rid of stinginess and miserliness; when he observes the moral precepts, he gets rid of anger, jealousy, greed, sexual and sensual desires and fear; when he practices

*nekkhamma*, he sees the dangers of living a household life and renounces home seeing advantages in renunciation. While practicing *paññā pāramitā*, one gets rid of ignorance, one gets to know the three characteristics of reality, develops non-attachment which enables him to attain *nibbāna*. While practicing *virīya pāramitā*, he gets rid of sloth and laziness; practicing *khanti pāramita*, he gets rid of impatience, develops patience and forbearance; practicing *sacca paramita*, he gets rid of telling a lie, develops boldness to speak the truth, gets rid of fear and greed; practicing *adhithana*, he gets rid of being in two minds, develops strong determination; practicing *metta paramita*, he gets rid of ill-will and hatred and while practicing *upekkha paramita*, he gets rid of attachment and both love and hatred.

A *Bodhisatta* does not only perfect 30 *pāramitas*, but he makes great sacrifices such as giving up wife, children, kingdom, life and limb.

Gotama Buddha made such a great sacrifice when he was born as *Vessantara*.

There are eighteen inauspicious states (*abhabbaṭṭhānāni*) in which a *Bodhisatta* is never born. He is not born blind, deaf, insane or crippled. He is also not born as a savage. He is not conceived by a slave woman and he is never born as a heretic. He does not change his sex. He is never guilty of committing heinous *kammās* such as killing his father, mother, an *arahant*, shedding the blood of the Buddha or causing schism in the *Bhikkhu Saṅgha*. He is also not born as a leper. If born as an animal, his size is not greater than the size of an elephant nor smaller than the size of a quail.

He is also not born as a departed spirit (*peta*), nor is he born in hell (*avīci*), nor as a *Māra*, nor as an unconscious being (*asaññīsatta*), nor in any other *Cakkavāla*.

It takes an incalculably long time to perfect all *pāramitās* and become a Buddha. Those who have great *paññā* take four *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas*; those who have great *saddhā* take eight *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas*; those who have great energy take at least sixteen *asaṅkheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kappas* to perfect all the *pāramitas*. Therefore, it is clear that it is never easy to attain Buddhahood.

There are many other characteristics said about *Bodhisatta* which smack of prejudices. Why should a *Bodhisattva*, who thinks of the welfare of all beings and takes upon himself to make great sacrifices, think of taking birth only in

the Majjhimadesa of Jambudipa and only in the *Brahmin* or *Kṣatriya* caste. Why should a Buddha, who embodies the best and the most sublime qualities, who understands one's *kamma* as the yardstick of greatness and smallness, think of being born in only the aforementioned two castes? Can the Buddha be a casteist?

To me it seems that these are characteristics imposed later upon the *Bodhisattva* by the people of the priestly class who believed in the superiority of *Brahmins* and *Kṣatriyas* because they were kings and gave them a lot in *daksina*.

In the penultimate life, a *Bodhisattva* is born in *Tusitaloka* as a *deva* where he has an incalculably long life but he does not stay there for so long a period. He is born soon in this world.

The story of his birth is also narrated in such a way which goes against biology. Only when the sperm of a male and the egg of a female combine, there is conception. However, for the *Bodhisattva*, it is said that his mother, Maya Devi, saw a dream in which a white elephant appeared and entered through her right thigh into her womb. This is fantastic. All such things are said about the birth of the *Bodhisattva* in order to show that he was not ordinary.

Once the *Bodhisattva* was born as the leader of a large shoal of fish. A crane who pretended to be of pious nature and who seemed to practice meditation in order to dupe the fish was warned by the *Bodhisattva* fish and thus all fish were saved.

Once the *Bodhisattva* was born as a monkey. He was living on the bank of a river. A female crocodile wanted to eat his heart. She spoke about it to her husband who persuaded the monkey to ride on his back to look for wild fruits. When the crocodile was in the middle of the stream, he revealed its purpose. The monkey was so intelligent that he did not lose his cool and replied to him that the monkeys hung their hearts on trees lest they are torn to pieces. The foolish crocodile believed his words. The crocodile took him to the tree where he said he had hung his heart. The monkey jumped to the tree and saved his life.

In the Sasa Jātaka, the *Bodhisattva*, born as a hare offered his life to a *Brahmin*. He asked the *Brahmin* to make a fire and jumped into it so that the

Brahmin could eat its flesh without killing him. It was the *paramatthapāramī* of *dāna*. However, the fire did not do any harm to him as the *Brahmin* was Sakka himself who had come to test him.

He perfected *dāna pāramitā* when he was born as Akitti, Saṅkha, Mahāsudassana, Mahāgovinda, Sivi and Vessantara; *sīla pāramitā* when he was born as Sīlava, Bhūridatta, Chaddantanāgarāja and Alīnasattukumāra. In this way, he perfected other *pāramitās* in several lives as narrated in the Jātaka stories.

Questions:

- 1 Who is a *Bodhisattva*? What does the word *Bodhisattva* mean?
- 2 The seed of *bodhi* can germinate only when it is regularly watered with the water of *sīla*. Explain.
- 3 Explain *pāramitā*. How many *pāramitās* are there?
- 4 What are the three degrees of *pāramitā*? Explain in detail.
- 5 Bring out the meaning of *paṇidhi* and *abhinīhara* and show their importance in attaining *bodhi*.
- 6 Explain the word Jātaka. Write in short, a Jātaka story showing the intelligence of the *Bodhisattva*.
- 7 Write in brief the story of the Sasa Jātaka.
- 8 What are the inauspicious states in which a *Bodhisattva* is not born?
- 9 Write in brief the story of the Vessantara Jātaka.
- 10 There are many other characteristics said about the *Bodhisatta* which smack of prejudices. Discuss.