

MEANING OF BODHISATTA

By Ven. Dr. M. Vajiranana

Some schools of Buddhist thought lay great emphasis on the concept of Bodhisatva or "Potential Buddhas". While the Buddha clearly and repeatedly stated that each man must seek perfection by his own will and effort, the concept of a superior human being who could help the weak was appealing to many, hence the development of the Bodhisatva cult in many countries. By identifying certain gods in pre-Buddhist cultures as Bodhisatva, it was possible for Buddhism to accommodate already existing beliefs and thus retain the uniqueness of each culture that Buddhism met as it spread across Asia.

Venerable Vajiranana is a Sri Lankan Bhikkhu, who has been a missionary monk for over sixteen years in the West, stationed in London. He is the Director of the British Buddhist Association which organises courses on Buddhism for interested Westerners, and presently he is the Principal of the Bhikkhu Teachers' Training College in Mt Lavinia, Sri Lanka.

- Ed

In the teachings of the Buddha there are three modes of enlightenment - bodhi – which an aspirant may choose. According to his skill, he may choose the mode of *Savaka Bodhi*, the *Pacceka Bodhi* or the *Samma Sambodhi*.

The *Savaka-bodhi* is the enlightenment of a disciple, and this is known as the arahant ideal. An arahant usually seeks the guidance of a superior enlightened teacher. When he reaches enlightenment he devotes the remainder of his life to serving others. This he does by example and by teaching. He has personal experience of the truth, and so is perfectly able to lead others to it.

A *Pacceka-Buddha* is a solitary Buddha; he achieves his enlightenment by his own efforts. Solitary Buddhas, arise only during those periods when the Teaching of Samma Sambuddha does not exist. We, however, are living in a Buddha cycle, as the Teaching exists in its original purity.

Samma Sambodhi is the supreme enlightenment of a most developed and most compassionate and loving perfect being. One who attains this bodhi is called Samma Sambuddha. By his own efforts he comprehends the Dhamma. He

expounds it to seekers of truth to purify them and release them from the recurring cycle of birth, suffering and death.

The word “Bodhisatta” is made up of the Pali word “Bodhi” which means the wisdom by which enlightenment is attained, and ‘Satta’, which means devoted to, determined upon. So, a Bodhisatta is one who is determined upon attaining the wisdom of enlightenment. But a Bodhisatta, (Bodhisatva in Sanskrit), not only has the will to enlightenment, he is also endowed with essence of compassion, radiant, unshakeable. And so he vows not to enter upon Nibbana until all living beings do so, and continues to be reborn.

All of us, all living beings, have Buddha-nature. That is, all living beings have the potential to become perfect Buddhas. There are very few who realize this to the full, but all can develop the aspiration, and those who do so are called Bodhisattas or Bodhisatvas- those intent upon Buddhahood. This is why in the tales of Gotama Buddha’s previous lives – the Jataka Stories- he is known as Bodhisatta. He had developed the aspiration to become a Buddha. Further, he had been recognized as a future Buddha by Dipankara Buddha, countless ages ago.

A Bodhisatta’s career is said to commence with the production of the thought of bodhicitta. He thinks of becoming a Buddha for the welfare and liberation of all creatures. He makes certain great vows and his future greatness is predicted by a living Buddha. But the thought of bodhi does not arise in the ordinary person who has no knowledge of the Dhamma and does not follow it. One must have an innate tendency of superiority in the faculties, due to favourable deeds in previous existences. One must acquire the tendency for the thought to arise through efforts to eliminate the roots of evil, greed, hatred and delusion.

One in whom the thought of bodhi is to arise has certain characteristics. He attaches the greatest importance to cultivating virtues and thinks of the future life. He is severe critic of his own actions, and he fears and avoids the least sin. He helps others and shuns strife and discord. He exhorts others to abstain from improper actions. He is always merciful. He loves the truth. He speaks pleasantly to others. He is forbearing and patient even to those injure him.

He is by nature energetic and courageous, strong-willed and confident. He finds happiness in the thought of renunciation and loves the solitude and silence of the woods. His nature is not very prone to passion or vice and his mind is not disturbed by evil thoughts.

A bodhisatta must be on his guard against certain dangers and obstacles. He should be aware of passions and vices of all kinds and shun bad friends and companions. He must properly understand the teaching and advice of his good friends and follow it with zeal and energy.

These excellent virtues protect a bodhisatta against the worst consequences of his evil deeds, even if he should lapse into sin. He may be born into a state of woe but is soon released from it. He does not endure terrible anguish like an ordinary man. He also learns to feel pity for other suffering creatures.

Such are the characteristics, dangers and privileges of the first stage of a bodhisatta. It is by nature associated with bright virtues and is thus auspicious and sublime. It is a necessary and indispensable condition for the attainment of the supreme state of Buddhahood.

When once the thought of bodhi has arisen and has been accepted the bodhisatta does not deviate from the right path or abandon the career. He must reflect that he has given a sacred promise to all creatures, whose welfare and liberation depended on him. He is alert and vigilant from the very first day and never gives up his thought of bodhi even if any kind of evil forces, internal or external, try to weaken his resolve with temptations or the most dreadful menaces and threats.

A bodhisatta must practise the paramitas. These are usually called in English the “perfections”, but we can add “Complete attainment” and “Transcendental virtue” to convey the full meaning. There are ten paramitas described in the Buddhist literature. Generosity (dana), virtuous conduct (sila), renunciation (nekkhamma), wisdom (panna), energy (viriya), forbearance (khanti), truthfulness (sacca), determination (adhittahana), loving-kindness (metta) and equanimity (upekkha).