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The Meaning of the Bodhisatta Doctrine in Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

The doctrine of the Bodhisatta (Pāḷi, Saṃskṛta: *Bodhisattva*) holds an important place in Buddhist thought. It is particularly emphasized in the Theravāda tradition, where it refers to a person who aspires to attain Buddhahood for the purpose of liberating and saving all sentient beings. Rather than being solely focused on personal liberation, a Bodhisatta is someone motivated by profound compassion and wisdom, who takes a solemn vow to attain enlightenment in order to guide others toward the same goal.

The Theravāda canon provides a definition of a Bodhisatta as an enlightened individual who is still on the path to full Buddhahood. This status is characterized by an unwavering commitment to attain liberation (*vimutti*) through the cultivation of morality, meditative discipline, and the accumulation of wisdom over countless lifetimes. Notably, even the penultimate life of a Bodhisattaoccurring just before the attainment of Buddhahoodis subject to the law of impermanence (*anicca*), underscoring the universality of conditioned existence.

Canonical accounts emphasize the spiritual significance of the Bodhisatta's final rebirth by describing miraculous phenomena that occur around the time of birth. These phenomena signal the exceptional nature of the Bodhisatta's final life, which culminates in the attainment of Buddhahood. This is exemplified by SiddhatthaGotama, who, having perfected all the perfections (Pāḷi: *pāramīs*, Saṃskṛta: *pāramitās*), ultimately attained Buddhahood.

This teaching holds great significance, as the Pāḷi Canon acknowledges that all previous Buddhas were once Bodhisattas in their earlier lives before achieving enlightenment. This supports the understanding that enlightenment is a gradual process, requiring extensive practice and numerous rebirths within *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth).

A distinction is made between a Bodhisatta and an Arahant (Pāḷi, Saṃskṛta: *arhat*). The ultimate goal of a Bodhisatta is to become a fully enlightened Buddha and to assist countless sentient beings, whereas an Arahant follows the path of a Buddha primarily to achieve personal liberation and escape from *saṃsāra*.

Keywords: Bodhisatta, Bodhisattva, pāramī, pāramitā, Bodhisatta doctrine, Theravāda

INTRODUCTION

In life, we encounter many people who commit unjust acts for their own benefit. At the same time, we also come across individuals who help others- sometimes even with self-interest in mind. If we

ever find ourselves in trouble and someone comes to our aid, or if we ourselves have done a good deed for someone, what thoughts arise in our minds? We are likely to feel deep gratitude toward the person who helped us. Similarly, we may hope that the person we have helped remembers our kindness.

However, for those with a Bodhisatta (Bodhisattva) mindset, the situation is different. Such individuals are content simply knowing that their actions bring benefit to others, without any desire for recognition or reciprocation. In the work *Bodhisatta's Conduct*, there is a thought-provoking statement:

"People always praise those who are grateful and know how to repay gratitude. So, what should we say about a Bodhisatta who always gives kindness without being asked?" (Śāntideva, 2011, p. 4)

Though this question is brief, it invites deeper reflection on the nature of a Bodhisatta and the vows they undertake.

In *The Buddha and His Teaching* by Narada (2010), it is written:

"He who aspires to attain sammá-sambuddhahood is called a Bodhisatta. This Bodhisatta ideal is the most refined and the most beautiful that could ever, in this ego-centric world, be conceivedfor what is nobler than a life of service and purity?" (p. 333)

Sharing this perspective, *Buddhism and Life* by Yin Shun (2007) states:

"A Bodhisatta without compassion cannot be called a Bodhisatta… The focus of a Bodhisatta is to save sentient beings. Seeing the suffering of sentient beings as one's own suffering, from there the mind to save sentient beings arises" (p. 241).

These positive reflections on the Bodhisatta ideal by revered scholars have helped bring the Bodhisatta teachings closer to everyday life. However, there are also many misunderstandings surrounding the Bodhisatta path. Some misinterpretations, often due to superficial or uninformed explanations, have led to distorted views of this noble doctrine. As Master Yin Shun (2007) remarked:

"Many people do not understand the meaning and merit of Bodhisatta, so their interpretations are personal and arbitrary" (p. 239).

This statement has deeply inspired the author to contemplate and explore the subject further, leading to the research topic:"The Meaning of the Bodhisatta Doctrine in Theravāda Buddhism"aimed at gaining a clearer and more authentic understanding of this profound teaching.

The doctrine of the Bodhisattva (Pāḷi, Saṃskṛta: *Bodhisattva*) holds a significant place in Buddhist thought. It is particularly emphasized in the Theravāda tradition, where it refers to a person who aspires to attain Buddhahood for the purpose of liberating and saving all sentient beings. Rather than seeking personal liberation alone, a Bodhisatta is motivated by profound compassion and wisdom, making a solemn vow to achieve enlightenment in order to guide others toward the same goal.

In the Theravāda canon, the Bodhisatta is defined as an enlightened individual who is still on the path to full Buddhahood. This status is marked by an unwavering commitment to liberation (*vimutti*), achieved through the cultivation of morality, meditative discipline, and the accumulation of wisdom over countless lifetimes. Notably, even the penultimate life of a Bodhisattaoccurring just before attaining Buddhahoodis subject to the law of impermanence (*anicca*), underscoring the universality of conditioned existence.

Canonical accounts highlight the spiritual importance of the Bodhisatta's final rebirth by describing miraculous phenomena that occur at the time of birth. These signs herald the significance of the life that will culminate in Buddhahood. The life of SiddhatthaGotama serves as a prime example: having perfected all the *pāramīs*, he ultimately attained Buddhahood.

This is of great significance because the Pāḷi Canon acknowledges that all previous Buddhas were once Bodhisattas in earlier lifetimes before reaching enlightenment. This supports the understanding that enlightenment is a gradual process requiring extensive spiritual development and numerous rebirths in *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth).

A distinction is made between a Bodhisatta and an Arahant. The Bodhisatta aspires to become a fully enlightened Buddha in order to benefit countless beings, whereas an Arahant follows the Buddha's path with the goal of attaining personal liberation from *saṃsāra*.

Based on the two definitions from the documents above, we derive the first meaning: a sentient being who aspires to seek and practice the path toward enlightenment, and who is destined to become a Buddha in the future, is called a Bodhisatta. According to ViênTrí (2011), there is an additional interpretation of this meaning: "A sentient being whose mind has become steadfast in enlightenment" (p. 54) is referred to as a Bodhisatta.

The second meaning, also according to the book *The Concept of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*, states: "The word Bodhisattva in the Pāḷi canon seems to mean [an enlightened being]" (ViênTrí, 2011, p. 59). In this sense, a Bodhisattva is someone who has awakened to the reality of suffering: birth, aging, sickness, and deathbut has not yet attained full enlightenment. If one has already attained enlightenment and realized the ultimate truth, they are called a Buddha. Thus, a Bodhisattva in this context is an awakened beingone who, upon recognizing the suffering inherent in existence, aspires toward enlightenment and directs their mind and practice accordingly.

The third meaning, also from *The Concept of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva*, explains: "The word Bodhisatta in the PāḷiCanon seems to mean 'an enlightened being,' but 'satta' here does not mean an ordinary being; rather, it signifies 'a strong or brave person, a hero, or a warrior'" (ViênTrí, 2011, p. 60). This interpretation suggests that a Bodhisattva is a spiritual warrioran individual who courageously and diligently strives for enlightenment.

With these three interpretations in mind, we will now examine the deeper meaning of the Bodhisattva doctrine as found in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna scriptures. This will help us discover the practical value of the Bodhisatta teachings and explore how they can be applied in our own practice, thereby advancing along the spiritual path.

The Meaning of Bodhisatta in the Theravāda Scriptures

When a word is used in everyday life, it must carry a meaning that resonates with daily experience. For example, when we say "the weather is warm," the statement feels close and relatable because we can directly observe and feel the warmth. Similarly, the term *Bodhisatta* is mentioned numerous times across the five Nikāyas, making it a familiar concept in the lives of the Buddha and the Saṅgha during that time.

Why does the term *Bodhisatta* appear in the Nikāyas? Among the five Pāḷi scriptures, the *MajjhimaNikāya*, *AṅguttaraNikāya*, and *SaṃyuttaNikāya*present a consistent and significant understanding of the Bodhisatta. In contrast, the concept of Bodhisatta found in the *DīghaNikāya* differs from that in the *MajjhimaNikāya,AṅguttaraNikāya*, and *SaṃyuttaNikāyas*. The *KhuddakaNikāya* also presents a distinct understanding of the Bodhisatta. Within these texts, the Bodhisatta appears in three main contexts:

Firstly, Bodhisattas appear in various forms and among different species. In the *Jātaka* tales of the *KhuddakaNikāya*, Bodhisattas are portrayed as humans, householders, laypeople, kings, and even animals. This suggests that Bodhisattas can manifest in any form and in any walk of life. The character of the Bodhisatta in these tales specifically refers to the previous lives of Gotama Buddha.

Secondly, in the *KhuddakaNikāya*, *SaṃyuttaNikāya*, and *AṅguttaraNikāya*, the Bodhisatta is often described as an ordinary being. This usage refers to the final existence of the Bodhisattastarting from conception in the mother's womb, progressing through the path of spiritual practice, attaining enlightenment, and finally entering *Nibbāna* (Pāḷi, Saṃskṛta: *Nirvāṇa*).

Thirdly, in the *DīghaNikāya*, the Bodhisatta is described as being born in the Tusita heaven. This represents the penultimate life of the Buddha before his final rebirth as Prince Siddhattha, who would go on to attain enlightenment. Notably, the *MajjhimaNikāya* also refers to this penultimate existence, indicating that it is not a concept exclusive to the *DīghaNikāya*.

In Theravāda Buddhism, *Bodhisatta* is not considered a spiritual attainment or fruit (*phala*), but rather a designation used to refer to the Buddha before he attained enlightenment. The term is commonly used when describing the Buddha's earlier lives, particularly in the *Jātaka*takes. Since the time he made his vow to pursue enlightenment, the Bodhisatta- like all other sentient beings- continued to wander through the "three realms" and "six paths" (or "three worlds" and "six realms"). However, wherever he was born, and in whichever realm he appeared, his presence always brought benefit to the sentient beings around him.

In other words, the Buddha's previous lives were those of ordinary sentient beings, but ones who were committed to the path of awakening. Though still subject to the cycles of *saṃsāra* like others, the Bodhisatta lived with a mind inclined toward enlightenment and consistently worked for the welfare of countless beings wherever he existed. His life, even before attaining Buddhahood, was marked by altruism, wisdom, and an unwavering commitment to liberation—for himself and for others.

A Bodhisatta is a Being Who is Realized and Longs to Seek Liberation

In order to correctly understand the doctrine of the *Bodhisatta* in the Theravāda scriptures, we must first clarify the distinction between *realization* and *enlightenment*. Within the scope of this article, we define *realization* as the awareness or understanding of the suffering inherent in birth, aging, sickness, and deathof the painful cycle of *saṃsāra*. A being who recognizes this suffering develops the intention to practice the path and begins to cultivate the means to attain enlightenment.

However, realization and enlightenment are not the same. *Enlightenment* refers to the actual attainment of liberation after deeply realizing the truth of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*), and then applying the appropriate practices to overcome them. Realization is the

first step—an intellectual or intuitive understanding of the nature of sufferingwhereas enlightenment is the culmination of that realization through dedicated practice, resulting in complete liberation.

In the Pāḷi Canon, the *Bodhisatta* is described as an ordinary sentient being who has developed such realization. That is, the Bodhisatta is aware of the reality of impermanence and the suffering of cyclic existence but has not yet attained full enlightenment. This being, however, has made a firm resolution to pursue the path to Buddhahood and practices accordingly. Without a clear understanding of the term *enlightenment*, one might mistakenly assume that the Bodhisatta is already enlightened. But in truth, one who is fully enlightened is called a *Buddha*the "Enlightened One."

Enlightenment is complete and final, whereas realization is only the beginning. To illustrate, consider those who leave behind worldly life after learning—through scriptures and the teachings of monksabout the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. If they develop the aspiration to practice for liberation, they have achieved realization, not enlightenment. This level of understanding stems from hearing and reflecting upon the Dhamma, but it does not yet constitute true awakening.

Enlightenment requires the actual application of meditative and ethical practices until one fully awakens to the truth. Only then can it be said that the practitioner has accomplished the "task that needs to be done." Therefore, in the context of the Bodhisatta doctrine, realization should not be equated with liberation. It is the beginning of the journey, marked by aspiration and practice, not the end.

In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (*The Noble Search*), the Buddha referred to himself as a *Bodhisatta*a being in pursuit of awakeningprior to his enlightenment. He states:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too, being myself subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, sought what was also subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement. Then I considered thus: 'Why, being myself subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement, do I seek what is also subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement; having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilement; I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna."(*MajjhimaNikāya*26, 2015, p. 256)

In this passage, the Buddha affirms that before attaining supreme enlightenment, he was an ordinary sentient being, subject to the same conditions of *saṃsāra*birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, and defilementas all other beings. However, he distinguished himself by recognizing the inherent danger in these impermanent and conditioned states. Rather than continuing to seek meaning in things subject to suffering, he aspired toward the *unborn*, the *unconditioned*, the ultimate security from bondage,*Nibbāna*.

This recognition and aspiration toward liberation set him apart and defined him as a *Bodhisatta*. Thus, in the Theravāda understanding, the term *Bodhisatta* is used to describe a being who, although still unenlightened, has developed deep insight into the nature of suffering and is firmly committed to realizing liberation.

The Bodhisatta's Penultimate Life is Still Governed by the Law of Impermanence

When discussing the Bodhisatta's penultimate life- his existence in the Tusita heaven- it is important to understand that he remained a sentient being still governed by the law of impermanence.

Like all beings in *saṃsāra*, he resided there only until the natural end of his celestial life-span. Upon the completion of this life-span, he passed away and was reborn in the human realm, entering the womb of Queen Mahāmāyā, the wife of King Suddhodana. This process of descending from the Tusita heaven into the mother's womb constitutes a rebirth, indicating that he was still subject to the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), like any other sentient being.

This understanding is clearly illustrated in the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta* (*The Wonderful and Marvellous*), as narrated by Venerable Ānanda:

"I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'For the whole of his life-span the Bodhisatta remained in the Tusita heaven.' I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: Mindful and fully aware, the Bodhisatta passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb."(*MajjhimaNikāya*123, 2015, p. 980)

Particular attention should be paid to the phrase *"the whole of his life-span"*, which signifies that the Bodhisatta lived out his full term in the Tusita heaven and died at its conclusion. There is no suggestion in this passage that he retained a life-span in Tusita and simultaneously manifested himself in the human realm. Rather, it affirms that he died and was reborn- just like other sentient beings - thus reinforcing the notion that his penultimate life was also subject to the law of impermanence.

This Theravāda perspective, rooted in the Pāḷi Canon, differs notably from the Mahāyāna view. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is often believed that the Bodhisattva voluntarily manifests his birth on Earth out of compassion, guided by his vows rather than the force of *karma* (Saṃskṛta, Pāḷi:*kamma*). In contrast, the Theravāda tradition emphasizes that even the Bodhisatta is reborn due to the force of *kamma*, not purely by choice. The phrase *"the whole of his life-span"* underscores this point: the Bodhisatta, after enjoying the full span of his celestial existence, dies and is then reborn- his final rebirth before attaining Buddhahood.

Strange Events at the Bodhisatta's Birth

When speaking of his own birth, the Buddha again referred to himself as the *Bodhisatta*. However, the accounts of his birth include several extraordinary and miraculous events that occurred from the moment he entered his mother's womb until the time he was born. These remarkable features are clearly illustrated in the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta* (*The Wonderful and Marvellous*), where Venerable Ānanda recounts the Blessed One's words:

"I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'As soon as the Bodhisatta was born, he stood firmly with his feet on the ground; then he took seven steps facing north, and with a white parasol held over him, he surveyed each quarter and uttered the words of the Leader of the Herd: *"I am the highest in the world; I am the best in the world; I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being for me.*"(*MajjhimaNikāya*123, 2015, p. 980)

These events are highly unusual. Unlike ordinary beings who cry at birth, the Bodhisatta did not cry. Instead, he immediately walked seven steps and made a profound declarationsomething no ordinary infant could do. His birth, therefore, marked the arrival of an extraordinary being. Such phenomena are unprecedented and underscore his exceptional nature.

Interestingly, there are three occasions in the Pāḷi Canon when the Bodhisatta is said to have spoken immediately after birth:

- In the *Mahā-UmmaggaJātaka* (No. 546)
- In the *VessantaraJātaka* (No. 547)
- In his final life, as recorded in the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta*(*MajjhimaNikāya*123)

Despite these miraculous events, the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta* still affirms the Theravāda view that the Bodhisatta was reborn into this world after countless *kalpas* (aeons) of *saṃsāra*. His statement- *"This is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being for me"*- highlights that this was his final rebirth before attaining Supreme Enlightenment. He was not yet a Buddha at birth but was a *Bodhisatta* destined for enlightenment in that very life. He was still subject to impermanence and the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*) until he realized *Nibbāna*.

This understanding stands in contrast to the Mahāyāna interpretation, which often holds that Bodhisattvas have already attained Buddhahood in countless past aeons and only appear in this world out of compassion, voluntarily manifesting as Bodhisattvas to guide sentient beings. However, according to the Pāḷi Canon, particularly the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta*, the Bodhisatta was not already a Buddha in previous aeons. Rather, he was a being progressing through *saṃsāra*, and it was only in this final life that he achieved perfect enlightenment and liberation from rebirth.

The Final Life of the Bodhisattva Who Became a Buddha

As discussed earlier, during his final existence as a living being, the Bodhisattva was, in many respects, like all other sentient beings—still subject to the laws of impermanence. However, unlike others, he became deeply aware of impermanence and suffering and directed his mind toward liberation. This aspiration and renunciation are clearly articulated in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, where the Buddha recounts:

"Here, Aggivessana, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I thought: 'Household life is crowded and dusty; life gone forth is wide open. It is not easy, while living in a home, to lead the holy life utterly perfect and pure as a polished shell."(*MajjhimaNikāya*36, 2015,*The Greater Discourse to Saccaka*, p. 335)

In another discourse, the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* (*The Noble Search*), the Buddha describes his renunciation:

"Later, while still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces, I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the yellow robe, and went forth from the home life into homelessness."(*MajjhimaNikāya*26, 2015, p. 256)

Understanding the limitations and suffering inherent in household life, the Bodhisatta chose the path of renunciation. He abandoned worldly pleasures and took to the forests and mountains, engaging in severe ascetic practices and deep meditation in pursuit of the path to enlightenment. His ultimate realization came while meditating under the pippala (bodhi) tree at Uruvelā, where he attained *Supreme Enlightenment*.

In that moment of awakening, as recorded again in the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, the Buddha proclaimed:

"Then, bhikkhus, being myself subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, defilement; having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow, defilement; seeking the unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondageNibbānaI attained the unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondage- Nibbāna. The knowledge and vision arose in me: 'My deliverance is unshakeable; this is my last birth; now there is no renewal of being."(*MajjhimaNikāya*26, 2015,pp. 259–260)

This passage clearly affirms that after attaining *Nibbāna*, the Buddha was freed from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. He explicitly declared that this was his **last birth**, marking a definitive break from the cycle of rebirth and suffering.

This Theravāda perspective, preserved in the Southern (Pāli) Canon, contrasts with the Northern or Mahāyāna view, which often holds that the Buddha attained enlightenment countless aeons ago and merely manifests in various forms out of compassion to liberate beings. In contrast, the Southern tradition maintains that the Buddha's awakening in this life was his **first and only** enlightenment, and his final liberation marked the end of his journey through *saṃsāra* (Thich Chon Thien, 2009, p. 10).

The Buddhas of the Past Who Had Not Yet Attained Enlightenment Were Also Called Bodhisattvas

Like Gotama Buddha, the Buddhas of the past were also referred to as *Bodhisattas* (Pāli) or *Bodhisattvas*(Saṃskṛta) before their enlightenment. This is affirmed in several early Buddhist texts, including the *DīghaNikāya*. In the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*, which discusses the lineage of past Buddhas, it is stated:

"The BodhisattaVipassī descended from the Tusita heaven, mindful and clearly aware, into his mother's womb. This is the rule. When a Bodhisatta descends from the Tusita heaven into his mother's womb, there appears in this world- among devas, māras and Brahmās, ascetics and Brahmins, princes and peoplean immeasurable, splendid light surpassing the glory of the most powerful devas...It is the rule that when a Bodhisatta has entered his mother's womb, four devas come to protect him from the four quarters, saying: 'Let no man, no non-human being, nothing whatever harm this Bodhisatta or this Bodhisatta's mother!'"- (DN 14, 1995, *Mahāpadāna Sutta: The Great Discourse on the Lineage*, p. 203)

In addition to Vipassī, the text mentions six other Buddhas: Sikhī, Vessabhū, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa, and Gotama. All were designated as *Bodhisattas* before attaining full enlightenment, affirming that the title of Bodhisattva refers to beings destined for Buddhahood who are cultivating the perfections (*pāramitā*) necessary to achieve it.

This tradition is elaborated further in the *Buddhavaṃsa* (Chronicle of Buddhas), a text from the Pāḷi Canon, which narrates the lives and deeds of twenty-four previous Buddhas, beginning with Dīpaṅkara and ending with Kassapa. These accounts were recited by Gotama Buddha himself, who recalled the events from the time he was still a Bodhisatta and had received the prophecy (*vyākaraṇa*) of his future Buddhahood from Dīpaṅkara Buddha. The text records how each Buddha turned the wheel of Dhamma (Pāli, Saṃskṛta:*Dharma*) and fulfilled their mission before entering *Parinibbāna*.

According to the source *Bodhisatta and Emptiness in the Pāḷi Canon*, Gotama Buddha encountered twenty-eight Buddhas during his long journey through *saṃsāra*. However, he received no prophecy from the first three; it was only when he met the fourth, Dīpaṅkara, that he was recognized and prophesied as a future Buddha. This would make Gotama the twenty-eighth Buddha, counting all those he encountered. As such, from the time of receiving the prophecy until his final birth and enlightenment, he passed through the eras of twenty-four other Buddhas. Regardless of the precise number- twenty-five or twenty-eight-all were considered Bodhisattas before attaining Buddhahood (Dutt, 1999, p. 17).

This understanding reflects the Theravāda view that every Buddha must first be a Bodhisatta and develop the necessary qualities through countless lives. Later, Mahāyāna Buddhism expanded and enriched this concept by introducing numerous cosmic and mythological Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Samantabhadra, each representing distinct virtues and aspects of the Bodhisattva path. In Mahāyāna thought, the Bodhisattva ideal became central: to become a Buddha, one must first walk the Bodhisattva path, guided by compassion and the vow to liberate all beings before attaining personal liberation.

Bodhisattvas Must Undergo Countless Lifetimes of Practice

From the moment of receiving the prophecy (*vyākaraṇa*) from Dīpankara Buddha, Gotama Buddha underwent innumerable lifetimes of rebirth and spiritual cultivation along the Bodhisatta path until he attained supreme and perfect enlightenment (*anuttara-sammāsambodhi*). During these cycles of birth and death (*saṃsāra*), the Bodhisatta lived as an ordinary sentient being, subject to the universal law of impermanence *(anicca*). Through the force of *kamma* (*karma*), he was reborn across the three worlds and six realms- sometimes as a Universal Monarch (Pāḷi: *cakkavatti*;Saṃskṛta: *cakravartin*), sometimes as a human, and at other times even as an animal.

The previous lives of the Bodhisatta are extensively narrated in the *Jātaka* (Birth Stories), comprising 547 tales of various lengths, expressed in a mixture of prose and verse, and divided into 22 chapters. Although the *Jātaka* tales were incorporated later into the Theravāda tradition and were not originally part of the *Tipiṭaka*, they played a crucial role in popularizing Buddhism by inspiring faith among the laity. These tales serve to illustrate the merit and virtues accumulated by the Bodhisatta throughout countless lifetimes. As noted by NalinakshaDutt (1999), these tales can be classified into four categories:

1. *Paccuppanna-Vatthu*: present tales relating to the Buddha's past *kamma*,
2. *Atītavatthu*: past tales related to present characters,
3. *Veyyākaraṇa*: explanations of verses or terminology related to past events, and
4. *Samodhāna*: synthesis of past and present, identifying links and characters between the two (p. 17).

Although the *Jātaka* tales may not contain profound doctrinal exposition, they offer highly educational narratives, illustrating the Bodhisatta's virtues in accessible and often allegorical forms. In these tales, the Bodhisatta appears in diverse guises-including as devas, hermits, Brahmins, kings, princes, merchants, farmers, or even animals such as fish, birds, cows, and deer. Despite the changing forms, the Bodhisatta consistently exhibits compassion, wisdom, altruism, patience, and moral excellence.

Particularly noteworthy are the *Jātaka*tales in which the Bodhisatta is born as an animal. These tales were likely intended to appeal to younger audiences by using relatable and endearing characters while conveying the moral and ethical ideals of Buddhism. Through such representations, the *Jātaka* emphasizes that a Bodhisatta's virtues remain constant regardless of their form or realm of rebirth.

According to canonical sources, a Bodhisatta must practice over countless lifetimes to attain Buddhahood. This includes the perfection (pāramī) of ten key virtues:

1. *Dānapāramī*: generosity,
2. *Sīlapāramī*: morality,
3. *Nekkhammapāramī*: renunciation,
4. *Paññāpāramī*: wisdom,
5. *Viriyapāramī*: energy,
6. *Khantipāramī*: patience,
7. *Saccapāramī*: truthfulness,
8. *Adhiṭṭhānapāramī*: determination,
9. *Mettāpāramī*: loving-kindness,
10. *Upekkhāpāramī*: equanimity (*Cariyāpiṭaka*, 2005, pp. 251–327).

The *SaddharmapuṇḍarīkaSūtra* (Lotus Sūtra) also illustrates this principle. In the Devadatta chapter (Chapter XII), Prajñākūṭa Bodhisattva proclaims:

"I see the TathāgataŚākyamuni who has been incessantly carrying out difficult and severe practices for immeasurable kalpas, accumulating merit and virtue while seeking the Bodhisattva path. Looking into the great manifold cosmos, there is not a single place even the size of a mustard seed where this Bodhisattva has not abandoned his life for the sake of sentient beings." (*SaddharmapuṇḍarīkaSūtra*, 2007, p. 183)

While Theravāda Buddhism acknowledges the Bodhisatta path, it does not emphasize the Bodhisatta doctrine to the same extent as Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Mahāyāna, the concept of the Bodhisattva is extensively developed and elevated into a central doctrinal ideal. Mahāyāna scriptures build upon the deeds recorded in the *Jātaka*, idealizing the Bodhisattva and giving rise to countless celestial Bodhisattvas, such as Mañjuśrī (symbolizing wisdom), Samantabhadra (universal virtue), Avalokiteśvara (great compassion), Mahāsthāmaprāpta (power), Kṣitigarbha (earth treasury), and Sadāparibhūta (never-disparaging).

Mahāyāna classifies Bodhisattvas into two types:

1. *Terrestrial Bodhisattvas*: those still living in the world, practicing compassion and aiding sentient beings toward liberation.
2. *Transcendent Bodhisattvas*: those who have completed the *pāramitās* and attained Buddhahood but remain in saṃsāra out of compassion, manifesting in various forms to guide sentient beings.

Due to the influence of nāga worship and Brahmanical polytheism, Mahāyāna Buddhism enriched its pantheon with many transcendent Bodhisattvas who are believed to have attained omniscience and operate beyond the confines of ordinary rebirth. Consequently, while these Bodhisattvas are venerated as divine beings or saints, the role of the Arhat is often downplayed or even criticized in some Mahāyāna texts.

Bodhisattva and Arhat

A significant divergence exists between the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, leading to a misunderstanding among later Buddhists regarding the relative status of Bodhisattvas and Arhats. In Mahāyāna scriptures, Arhats are often criticized for only achieving self-liberation and not aiding others, with some even referring to them as "a lost race." However, the Pāḷi Canon also affirms that the Buddha himself was both an Arahant (Arhat) and a *Samyaksambuddha* (Saṃskṛta, Pāḷi: *sammāsaṃbuddha*), a perfectly enlightened being. This argument is exemplified in the *SaṃyuttaNikāya* (2000), which states:

"The Tathāgata, bhikkhus, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, is the originator of the path unarisen before, the producer of the path unproduced before, the declarer of the path undeclared before. He is the knower of the path, the discoverer of the path, the one skilled in the path. And his disciples now dwell following that path and become possessed of it afterwards. This, bhikkhus, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, and a bhikkhu liberated by wisdom." (Part III, I:22, Division II, I, 58; *The Perfectly Enlightened One*, p. 901)

This passage makes it clear that the Buddha regarded himself as both an Arahant and the originator of the path to enlightenment. His disciples followed the path he discovered and taught. Given this, it raises the question: Is the Bodhisattva superior to the Arhat? If the Bodhisattva holds a higher status, why did the Buddha identify himself as an Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One?

In Theravāda thought, Arhatship represents the ultimate goal for practitioners. Some argue that the Bodhisattva is oriented towards both personal salvation and the salvation of others, while the Arhat is concerned only with self-liberation. However, this view is misleading. If Arhats were truly indifferent to the welfare of others, we would need to reconsider the following passage from the *SaṃyuttaNikāya* (2000), where the Buddha, after having enlightened 60 Arahant bhikkhus, instructs them to spread the Dhamma for the benefit of all beings:

"Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way. Teach the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing. Reveal the completely complete and purified holy life. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma. I too will go to Senānigama in Uruvelā in order to teach the Dhamma." (Part I, IV:4, I, 4; *Māra's Snare*, p. 198)

Thus, after attaining enlightenment, the Arahants actively went forth to teach the Dhamma. From a Buddhist perspective, teaching the Dhamma is the highest form of benefit, as it leads others toward enlightenment. Therefore, it is illogical to argue that Arhats do not benefit others. Arhats continue to propagate the Dhamma, often in different places, enabling sentient beings to practice the path.

In contrast, the Bodhisattva's vow to save all sentient beings, as expressed in Śāntideva's*Bodhicaryāvatāra* (2011, p. 23), underscores a commitment to liberating others even before achieving personal enlightenment. However, according to this view, one cannot liberate others unless one has first attained liberation oneself.

In Theravāda scriptures, the term "Arahant" refers to the state of spiritual attainment, while "Bodhisatta" (Bodhisattva) is typically used in reference to the Buddha's previous lives, where he practiced over countless lifetimes to benefit others. There is no distinction suggesting that a Bodhisattva is superior to an Arhat, as the Bodhisattva is not a final fruit of attainment, unlike Arhatship. The Buddha himself praised the Venerable Sāriputta as follows:

"There is no deed of yours, Sāriputta, either bodily or verbal, that I censure. For you, Sāriputta, are wise, one of great wisdom, of wide wisdom, of joyous wisdom, of swift wisdom, of sharp wisdom, of penetrative wisdom. Just as the eldest son of a wheel-turning monarch properly keeps in motion the wheel [of sovereignty] set in motion by his father, so do you, Sāriputta, properly keep in motion the Wheel of Dhamma set in motion by me." (*SaṃyuttaNikāya*, 2000, Part I, Chapter VIII: 8, Vaṅgīsasaṃyutta, 7. Pavāraṇā, p. 287)

The Buddha also praised other monks such as MahāMoggallāna, PuṇṇaMantānīputta, Kaccāyana, and Subhūti for their full liberation and status as fields of merit for sentient beings. Therefore, there is no inherent superiority between the Bodhisattva and the Arhat; any comparison based on this notion stems from flawed and illogical reasoning.

In Theravāda Buddhism, no hierarchy is established between the Bodhisattva path and Arhatship. However, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Arhats came to be viewed as inferior during the period of Sectarian Buddhism. The disagreements over the "Ten Points of Dispute" and Mahādeva's"Five Points of an Arahant" at the Second Buddhist Council led to the division of the Saṅgha into two main schools: the Theravāda school and the Mahāsāṃghika (Great Saṅgha) school, which eventually gave rise to 18 smaller sects. Each of these sects developed their own interpretations based on the Abhidhamma.

The first work on Abhidhamma, *ŚāriputraAbhidhamma*, attributed to Sāriputta, laid the foundation for the Theravāda tradition's seven treatises. These include *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (Enumeration of Factors), *Vibhaṅga* (Analysis of the Dhamma), *Dhātukathā* (Discourse on Elements), *Puggalapaññatti* (Description of Individuals), *Kathāvatthu* (Points of Controversy), *Yamaka* (Book of Pairs), and *Paṭṭhāna* (Foundational Conditions or Relations) (Dhamma Wiki, 2009). Similarly, the Sarvāstivāda school developed its own treatises, such as *Dharmaskandha* (Aggregation of Dharmas) and *Saṅgītiparyāya* (Discourses on Gathering Together) (Bhikkhu KL Dhammjoti, 2009, p. 83).

As the Sectarian ideology focused solely on theoretical disputes while neglecting the welfare of living beings, Buddhism began to lose its vigor. The emergence of Mahāyāna Buddhism reinvigorated the Buddha's teachings by emphasizing the spirit of early Buddhism, while adapting to the changing times. Mahāyāna opposed the Sectarian views, particularly the ideal of the Arhat. The Mahāyāna tradition criticized figures like Sāriputta, whose Abhidhamma became central to the Sarvāstivāda school's teachings. This critique led to the elevation of figures such as Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, embodying the wisdom ideal in Mahāyāna.

Mahāyāna Buddhism contends that Bodhisattvas are superior to Śrāvakas (Saṃskṛta, Pāḷi: *sāvaka*; English: hearer), as expressed in the *Mahā-Ratnakūta-Sūtra*: "Kāsyapa! Just as a small lapis lazuli pearl is more valuable than a large crystal block like Mount Sumeru, so too is a Bodhisattva, who, from the moment of his aspiration, is superior to Sravakas and Pratyekabuddhas" (Thich Duc Niem, Trans., 1987, p. 142). However, from the perspective of the *FoGuang Dictionary*, Śrāvakas and

Pratyekabuddhas can also be considered Bodhisattvas as they are on the path to Buddhahood. Thus, Mahāyāna distinguishes those seeking the supreme Bodhi as "Mahasattvas" (Thich Quang Do, Trans., 2000, p. 668).

From this viewpoint, Śrāvakas in general are still on the path to enlightenment, while Arhats have already attained liberation. If we consider the definition of Bodhisattvas in the *FoGuang Dictionary*, Arhats can indeed be called Bodhisattvas, as they are fully enlightened beings dedicated to teaching the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings.

Conclusion

The Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism represents different yet complementary aspects of the spiritual journey, each with its unique emphasis. In Mahāyāna, the Bodhisattva is elevated as a holy being who embodies the compassion and selflessness necessary to guide all sentient beings to liberation. The Mahāyāna Bodhisattva's vow to relieve the suffering of others and attain enlightenment for the benefit of all is central to its path: "The suffering of sentient beings is my suffering, and the liberation of sentient beings is my liberation" (Śāntideva, 2011, p. xi). This view inspires a vision of the Bodhisattva as both a compassionate savior and a model for practitioners to emulate.

In contrast, the TheravādaBodhisatta is depicted as someone striving for self-liberation through following the path laid by the Buddha, and by employing skillful means to assist others in their liberation as well. The TheravādaBodhisatta is not worshiped as a deity, but serves as an example for practitioners to follow in their own pursuit of enlightenment. The Bodhisatta in this tradition works tirelessly in saṃsāra, constantly reborn to help others, yet maintains the goal of attaining enlightenment for oneself. This dual focus on self-liberation and the liberation of others underscores the TheravādaBodhisatta's commitment to the welfare of sentient beings while striving to overcome the cycle of birth and death.

For practitioners following the Bodhisattva path, whether in Mahāyāna or Theravāda, the cultivation of *Bodhicitta* (the mind of enlightenment) is central. As Śāntideva (2011) writes, "Like a banana tree, all other merits disappear after it has produced fruit. But Bodhicitta is a tree of merit that always grows, continues to flower and bear fruit, and never withers" (p. 2). The Bodhisattva's path involves the continuous nurturing of this altruistic aspiration, cultivating compassion and wisdom while simultaneously working toward personal liberation. Bodhisattvas are thus deeply committed to benefiting others, but they also understand the importance of self-discipline, meditation, and the cultivation of virtues to reach Buddhahood.

The example of the Buddha's previous lives in the Jātakas provides an inspiring illustration of the Bodhisattva ideal, demonstrating virtues such as patience, generosity, and wisdom, and highlighting the importance of vows and aspirations in the Bodhisattva's practice. The Bodhisattva path is not merely a theological doctrine but a way of life that integrates wisdom, compassion, and moral discipline to reach enlightenment.

In summary, the Bodhisattva path is more than a concept of spiritual aspiration; it serves as a practical guide to living a life of wisdom, compassion, and purpose. It embodies the key principles of Buddhism, offering both a goal and a means for practitioners to engage in the world, cultivate virtues,

and attain liberation for themselves and others. The Bodhisattva's dedication to the welfare of all sentient beings and their own self-liberation presents a model of the highest spiritual ideals in Buddhism.

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