

# The Bodhisattva Vow

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*Taking the bodhisattva vow has tremendous power for the very reason that it is not something we do just for the pleasure of ego. It is beyond oneself. Taking the vow is like planting the seed of a fast-growing tree, whereas something done for the benefit of ego is like sowing a grain of sand. Planting such a seed as the bodhisattva vow undermines ego and leads to a tremendous expansion of perspective. Such heroism, or bigness of mind, fills all of space completely, utterly, absolutely.*

The bodhisattva vow is the commitment to put others before oneself. It is a statement of willingness to give up one's own well-being, even one's own enlightenment, for the sake of others. And a bodhisattva is simply a person who lives in the spirit of that vow, perfecting the qualities known as the six *paramitas*—generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and transcendental knowledge—in his effort to liberate beings.

Taking the bodhisattva vow implies that instead of holding onto our individual territory and defending it tooth and nail we become open to the world that we are living in. It means we are willing to take on greater responsibility, immense responsibility. In fact it means taking a big chance. But taking such a chance is not false heroism or personal eccentricity. It is a chance that has been taken in the past by millions of bodhisattvas, enlightened ones, and great teachers. So a tradition of responsibility and openness has been handed down from generation to generation; and now we too are participating in the sanity and dignity of this tradition.

There is an unbroken lineage of bodhisattvas, springing from the great bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara, Vajrapani, and Manjushri. It is

unbroken because no one in that lineage, through generations and centuries, has indulged himself in self-preservation. Instead these bodhisattvas have constantly tried to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. This heritage of friendship has continued unbroken up to the present day, not as a myth but as a living inspiration.

The sanity of this tradition is very powerful. What we are doing in taking the bodhisattva vow is magnificent and glorious. It is such a wholehearted and full tradition that those who have not joined it might feel somewhat wretched by comparison. They might be envious of such richness. But joining this tradition also makes tremendous demands on us. We no longer are intent on creating comfort for ourselves; we work with others. This implies working with *our* other as well as the *other* other. *Our* other is our projections and our sense of privacy and longing to make things comfortable for ourselves. The *other* other is the phenomenal world outside, which is filled with screaming kids, dirty dishes, confused spiritual practitioners, and assorted sentient beings.

So taking the bodhisattva vow is a real commitment based on the realization of the suffering and confusion of oneself and others. The only way to break the chain reaction of confusion and pain and to work our way outward into the awakened state of mind is to take responsibility ourselves. If we do not deal with this situation of confusion, if we do not do something about it ourselves, nothing will ever happen. We cannot count on others to do it for us. It is our responsibility, and we have the tremendous power to change the course of the world's karma. So in taking the bodhisattva vow, we are acknowledging that we are not going to be instigators of further chaos and misery in the world, but we are going to be liberators, bodhisattvas, inspired to work on ourselves as well as with other people.

There is tremendous inspiration in having decided to work with others. We no longer try to build up our own grandiosity. We simply

try to become human beings who are genuinely able to help others; that is, we develop precisely that quality of selflessness which is generally lacking in our world. Following the example of Gautama Buddha, who gave up his kingdom to dedicate his time to working with sentient beings, we are finally becoming useful to society.

We each might have discovered some little truth (such as the truth about poetry or the truth about photography or the truth about amoebas), which can be of help to others. But we tend to use such a truth simply to build up our own credentials. Working with our little truths, little by little, is a cowardly approach. In contrast, the work of a bodhisattva is without credentials. We could be beaten, kicked, or just unappreciated, but we remain kind and willing to work with others. It is a totally noncredit situation. It is truly genuine and very powerful.

Taking this mahayana approach of benevolence means giving up privacy and developing a sense of greater vision. Rather than focusing on our own little projects, we expand our vision immensely to embrace working with the rest of the world, the rest of the galaxies, the rest of the universes.

Putting such a broad vision into practice requires that we relate to situations very clearly and perfectly. In order to drop our self-centeredness, which both limits our view and clouds our actions, it is necessary for us to develop a sense of compassion. Traditionally this is done by first developing compassion toward oneself, then toward someone very close to us, and finally toward all sentient beings, including our enemies. Ultimately we regard all sentient beings with as much emotional involvement as if they were our own mothers. We may not require such a traditional approach at this point, but we can develop some sense of ongoing openness and gentleness. The point is that somebody has to make the first move.

Usually we are in a stalemate with our world: "Is he going to say he is sorry to me first, or am I going to apologize to him first?"

But in becoming a bodhisattva we break that barrier: we do not wait for the other person to make the first move; we have decided to do it ourselves. People have a lot of problems and they suffer a great deal, obviously. And we have only half a grain of sand's worth of awareness of the suffering happening in this country alone, let alone in the rest of the world. Millions of people in the world are suffering because of their lack of generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and transcendental knowledge. The point of making the first move by taking the bodhisattva vow is not to convert people to our particular view, necessarily; the idea is that we should contribute something to the world simply by our own way of relating, by our own gentleness.

In taking the bodhisattva vow, we acknowledge that the world around us is workable. From the bodhisattva's point of view it is not a hard-core, incorrigible world. It can be worked with within the inspiration of the buddhadharma, following the example of Lord Buddha and the great bodhisattvas. We can join their campaign to work with sentient beings properly, fully, and thoroughly—without grasping, without confusion, and without aggression. Such a campaign is a natural development of the practice of meditation because meditation brings a growing sense of egolessness.

By taking the bodhisattva vow, we open ourselves to many demands. If we are asked for help, we should not refuse; if we are invited to be someone's guest, we should not refuse; if we are invited to be a parent, we should not refuse. In other words, we have to have some kind of interest in taking care of people, some appreciation of the phenomenal world and its occupants. It is not an easy matter. It requires that we not be completely tired and put off by people's heavyhanded neurosis, ego-dirt, ego-puke, or ego-diarrhea; instead we are appreciative and willing to clean up for them. It is a sense of softness whereby we allow situations to take place in spite of little inconveniences; we allow situations to bother us, to overcrowd us.

Taking the bodhisattva vow means that we are inspired to put the teachings of Buddhism into practice in our everyday lives. In doing so we are mature enough not to hold anything back. Our talents are not rejected but are utilized as part of the learning process, part of the practice. A bodhisattva may teach the dharma in the form of intellectual understanding, artistic understanding, or even business understanding. So in committing ourselves to the bodhisattva path, we are resuming our talents in an enlightened way, not being threatened or confused by them. Earlier our talents may have been "trips," part of the texture of our confusion, but now we are bringing them back to life. Now they can blossom with the help of the teaching, the teacher, and our practice. This does not mean that we completely perfect our whole situation on the spot. There will still be confusion taking place, of course! But at the same time there is also a glimpse of openness and unlimited potentiality.

It is necessary at this point to take a leap in terms of trusting ourselves. We can actually correct any aggression or lack of compassion—anything antibodhisattva-like—as it happens; we can recognize our own neurosis and work with it rather than trying to cover it up or throw it out. In this way one's neurotic thought pattern, or "trip," slowly dissolves. Whenever we work with our neurosis in such a direct way, it becomes compassionate action.

The usual human instinct is to feed ourselves first and only make friends with others if they can feed us. This could be called "ape instinct." But in the case of the bodhisattva vow, we are talking about a kind of superhuman instinct which is much deeper and more full than that. Inspired by this instinct, we are willing to feel empty and deprived and confused. But something comes out of our willingness to feel that way, which is that we can help somebody else at the same time. So there is room for our confusion and chaos and egocenteredness: they become stepping-stones. Even the irritations that occur in the practice of the bodhisattva path become a way of confirming our commitment.

By taking the bodhisattva vow, we actually present ourselves as the property of sentient beings: depending on the situation, we are willing to be a highway, a boat, a floor, or a house. We allow other sentient beings to use us in whatever way they choose. As the earth sustains the atmosphere and outer space accommodates the stars, galaxies, and all the rest, we are willing to carry the burdens of the world. We are inspired by the physical example of the universe. We offer ourselves as wind, fire, air, earth, and water—all the elements.

But it is necessary and very important to avoid idiot compassion. If you handle fire wrongly, you get burned; if you ride a horse badly, you get thrown. There is a sense of earthy reality. Working with the world requires some kind of practical intelligence. We cannot just be “love-and-light” bodhisattvas. If we do not work intelligently with sentient beings, quite possibly our help will become addictive rather than beneficial. People will become addicted to our help in the same way they become addicted to sleeping pills. By trying to get more and more help they will become weaker and weaker. So for the benefit of sentient beings, we need to open ourselves with an attitude of fearlessness. Because of people’s natural tendency toward indulgence, sometimes it is best for us to be direct and cutting. The bodhisattva’s approach is to help others to help themselves. It is analogous to the elements: earth, water, air, and fire always reject us when we try to use them in a manner that is beyond what is suitable, but at the same time, they offer themselves generously to be worked with and used properly.

One of the obstacles to bodhisattva discipline is an absence of humor; we could take the whole thing too seriously. Approaching the benevolence of a bodhisattva in a militant fashion doesn’t quite work. Beginners are often overly concerned with their own practice and their own development, approaching mahayana in a very hinayana style. But that serious militancy is quite different from the lightheartedness and joy of the bodhisattva path. In the beginning you may

have to fake being open and joyous. But you should at least attempt to be open, cheerful, and, at the same time, brave. This requires that you continuously take some sort of leap. You may leap like a flea, a grasshopper, a frog, or finally, like a bird, but some sort of leap is always taking place on the bodhisattva path.

There is a tremendous sense of celebration and joy in finally being able to join the family of the buddhas. At last we have decided to claim our inheritance, which is enlightenment. From the perspective of doubt, whatever enlightened quality exists in us may seem small-scale. But from the perspective of actuality, a fully developed enlightened being exists in us already. Enlightenment is no longer a myth: it does exist, it is workable, and we are associated with it thoroughly and fully. So we have no doubts as to whether we are on the path or not. It is obvious that we have made a commitment and that we are going to develop this ambitious project of becoming a buddha.

Taking the bodhisattva vow is an expression of settling down and making ourselves at home in this world. We are not concerned that somebody is going to attack us or destroy us. We are constantly exposing ourselves for the benefit of sentient beings. In fact, we are even giving up our ambition to attain enlightenment in favor of relieving the suffering and difficulties of people. Nevertheless, helplessly, we attain enlightenment anyway. Bodhisattvas and great tathagatas in the past have taken this step, and we too can do so. It is simply up to us whether we are going to accept this richness or reject it and settle for a poverty-stricken mentality.

### Transplanting Bodhichitta

The bodhisattva vow is a leap in which we begin to let go of our egocentric approach to spiritual development. In the absolute sense, the bodhisattva vow is the complete transplantation of *bodhichitta*, awakened mind, into our hearts—a complete binding of ourselves with the gentleness and compassion of our inherent wakefulness.

But we do not become complete bodhisattvas at once; we simply put ourselves forward as candidates for bodhisattvahood. Because of this we speak of relative and absolute bodhichitta. Relative bodhichitta is like having the intention to take a journey and buying a ticket; absolute bodhichitta is like actually being a traveler. In the same way, we buy our ticket first and fly later.

The ceremony of taking the bodhisattva vow is also an acknowledgment of our potential for enlightenment. It inspires us to recognize that we have bodhichitta in us already. So in taking the bodhisattva vow we are expanding our vision infinitely, beyond this little square world of ours. In a sense, it is like a heart transplant. We are replacing our old heart, which is oriented toward ego and self-aggrandizement, with a new heart characterized by compassion and a larger vision.

The quality that makes this transplant possible is our own gentleness. So in a sense this new heart has been present all along. It is simply rediscovered within the old heart, as in peeling an onion. That discovery of bodhichitta is extremely powerful. Since we have basic generosity and compassion within ourselves, we do not have to borrow from anybody else. Based on that inherent quality of wakefulness, we can act directly, on the spot.

Often our sense of vulnerability, our feeling that we need to protect ourselves, acts as an obstacle to any sense of warmth. But on the bodhisattva path we take chances, extending ourselves without reservation for the sake of others. And it is the discovery of our own wakefulness, or bodhichitta, that creates the trust that allows us to take such chances. Such wakefulness, once acknowledged, develops constantly and cannot be destroyed. As long as such warmth and sympathy exist within us we are like food for flies; opportunities for expressing our warmth come upon us like swarms of flies. It is as though we magnetically attract such situations to ourselves. And this is our chance not to reject them but to work with them.

When we begin to give up personal territory, automatically there is some sense of awakeness, or gap in conceptualization, in our hearts. We begin to develop friendliness toward the world. At that point we can no longer blame society or the weather or the mosquitoes for anything. We have to take personal responsibility, blaming not the world but ourselves, rightly or wrongly. It is our duty to do so. There is no point in creating endless cosmic court cases as to who is right and who is wrong. Nobody wins, and such cases will only escalate into cosmic battles, a third world war. So somebody has to begin somewhere: the person taking the bodhisattva vow has to make the first move. Otherwise there is no beginning of generosity and no end of chaos and aggression. In fact, on the bodhisattva path, such nonaggression becomes one's total view of the world.

#### Giving Up Privacy

We cannot have personal pleasure once we launch onto the bodhisattva path. We cannot reserve a little area just for ourselves. Usually keeping something back for ourselves is very important. But in this case there is no personal privilege or pleasure. Of course we would still like to have a little corner to ourselves; we would like to shut the door and play a little music or read a novel or *Time* magazine or perhaps study Buddhism. But those days are gone. From the time we take the bodhisattva vow, there is no privacy. In fact a personal reference point of any kind is needless at this point. We have been sold to sentient beings, merchandised. Sentient beings can plow on us, shit on us, sow seeds on our back—use us like the earth. And it is very, very dangerous and irritating to no longer have any privacy.

It is interesting that we could be totally public persons, twenty-four hours a day. Even when we fall asleep we could still be doing something—we are completely dedicated. With such a commitment, we no longer ask for vacations. If we ask for a vacation, or a break from that public world, it is a little fishy: we are still trying to preserve the little corner that we personally control, which

is one of our biggest problems. In taking the bodhisattva vow, we are finally giving up privacy at the crude level, but we are also giving up privacy within ourselves. Our minds are usually somewhat schizophrenic: one aspect would like to keep itself hidden from the other aspects. But we are giving that up as well. So in whatever a bodhisattva does there is no privacy, no secrecy. In other words, we are not leading double lives any more; we are leading a single life dedicated to practice as well as to helping other beings. That does not mean that we become miniature gurus or masters controlling other people. Instead of being big currents in the ocean, we may be just little drops. If we become too ambitious, we may become too egotistical. So we should watch ourselves. Sitting meditation provides immense help in this regard. It shows us that we can simply be completely open and awake, realizing that the world we live in is not our personal world but a shared one.

#### Refugees and Bodhisattvas

Entering the bodhisattva path is very demanding—much more demanding than being a refugee. When we took the refuge vow, we committed ourselves to the path. We were inspired by the buddhadharma, and we knew that we were not going to cop out. Because we developed some understanding of our basic nature, we became strong, disciplined people, no longer nuisances to the rest of society. But, at the same time, the path of individual salvation, or individual commitment, was not completely fulfilling. Something was missing: we had not yet worked with other people, other sentient beings. Having taken the refuge vow, strong messages began to come to us that our commitment to sentient beings had not yet been fulfilled. Our whole approach seemed to become an ingrown toenail: we were eating ourselves up rather than expanding and working with others.

Having prepared the ground with the refuge vow, having given up everything, we begin to be inspired to relate with the world. We have put our own situation in order. If we had not already

developed some compassion and openness toward ourselves, we could make no headway at all. But having done that, we are still not completely free. In order to develop further, we need to be energized; we need to take another leap of some kind, which is the bodhisattva vow. But this does not mean we are already bodhisattvas. In fact, we are barely ready to take the vow. But since we have responsibilities to the world, we can no longer sit back and sulk about our own negativities and upheavals. At the same time that such things are happening with ourselves, we have to go out and work with other people. We may have a wound on our foot, but we can still try to support somebody else. That is the style of the bodhisattva path: our own inconvenience is not considered all that important. At the bodhisattva level, not only are we travelers on the path but we are also spokesmen for the enlightened attitude, which means giving up self-indulgence altogether.

#### Bodhisattva Activity

The bodhisattva's way of relating to others is expressed in the phrase "inviting all sentient beings as one's guests." By treating someone as a guest we view our relationship with him as important. We offer our guests specially cooked food with special hospitality. There is also a sense that our relationship to our guest is impermanent; our guest is going to leave. Therefore there is constant appreciation and a sense that this is a very opportune time. So the life of a bodhisattva is one of seeing everyone as one's guest, constantly. And that notion of inviting all sentient beings as guests is the starting point of compassion.

Compassion is the heart of the practice of meditation-in-action, or bodhisattva activity. It happens as a sudden glimpse—simultaneous awareness and warmth. Looking at it fully, it is a three-fold process: a sense of warmth in oneself, a sense of seeing through confusion, and a sense of openness. But this whole process happens very abruptly. There is no time to analyze. There is no time to walk out or to hold on. There is not even time to refer back, to note that "I am doing this."

A bodhisattva's activity is both energetic and gentle. We have enough power to exert our energy, but at the same time there is the gentleness to change our decisions to suit the situation. Such gentle, energetic activity is based on knowledge: we are aware of the situation around us, but we are also aware of our version of the situation—what we want to do. Every aspect is seen clearly.

Having taken the bodhisattva vow, we may feel somewhat hesitant to act on our inspiration. Looked at generally, the situations we find ourselves in seem illogical and confusing. But once we look at our everyday life in the definite way of ongoing practice, our actions can become much more clear-cut: when there is a pull toward ego we can cut through that tendency; when there is hesitation about going beyond our egocentric perspective we can let go. Our hesitation may be that we are afraid we may not make the right decision, that we don't know what to do. But we can push ourselves into the situation so that the proper direction comes about naturally. We may be slightly fearful of the consequences of our action, somewhat tentative in our approach. But at the same time there is confidence, the inspiration to deal with things properly. That combined mentality of confidence and tentativeness comprises skillful action.

In a sense, taking the bodhisattva vow is pretense. We are uncertain that we are able to tread on the bodhisattva path, but we still decide to do it. That leap is necessary in developing basic confidence. The situations we encounter in our everyday lives are both solid and workable. We don't have to shy away from them, nor do we have to exaggerate them by rolling in like a tank. We work with each situation simply and directly, as it happens.

This kind of bodhisattva activity is traditionally described in terms of the six *paramitas*, or transcendental virtues: generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation, and transcendental knowledge.

The paramita of *generosity* is particularly connected with the notion of sharing knowledge, or teaching. In fact, everybody who takes

the bodhisattva vow is regarded as a potential teacher. If we refuse to teach out of paranoia, embarrassment, or a sense that we want to possess our knowledge, we are abandoning sentient beings. Even if we feel we are not up to becoming teachers, we should be prepared to become apprentice teachers. We should be willing to share what we know with others. At the same time, we have to control ourselves to the extent that we do not share something we do *not* know.

In the bodhisattva ceremony, we express our generosity by making an offering to the three jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. Fundamentally, we are offering our own ego: we are offering our sense of sanity to the Buddha, our keen perception of the nature of the path to the dharma, and our sense of companionship to the sangha.

A traditional way of developing generosity is to offer our food to someone else. Even if we are hungry, we hold our plate of food in our hands and give it away mentally before eating. At that very moment of giving something away, we are actually beginning to practice the paramitas. By giving away something personal and significant in our lives, we are helping to clarify our attachments and to overcome the habitual pattern of spiritual materialism. And in fact, we are also abandoning the attainment of enlightenment at that point.

The paramita of *discipline*, or morality, is based on a sense of trust in oneself. In contrast, traditional morality is often based on a lack of trust and a fear of one's own aggressive impulses. When we have such little confidence in our own intelligence and wakefulness, so-called immoral persons pose a tremendous threat to us. For instance, when we reject a murderer as an immoral person it might be because of our fear that we might murder somebody as well. Or we might even be afraid to hold a gun, which represents death and killing, thinking that we might shoot ourselves on the spot. In other words, we do not trust ourselves or our own generosity. That obsession with our own inadequacies is one of the biggest obstacles on the bodhisattva path.

If we feel we are inadequate bodhisattvas, we do not make good bodhisattvas at all. In fact, that obsession with a moralistic, guilt-ridden approach is a form of being trapped in the hinayana perspective. It is an attempt to confirm one's ego. The sense of trust in oneself allows the bodhisattva to work skillfully with whatever is happening, to the point of being willing to commit immorality out of compassion for sentient beings. This is obviously quite delicate, but it fundamentally involves trying to work with people in an intelligent way.

Bodhisattva discipline arises from a sense of trust in oneself, but it also involves arousing trust in others. There is a sense of heroism, of raising the banner of sanity and proclaiming an open way. If we are too mousy or small, we do not know who we are or with whom we are communicating. There is still a feeling of territoriality, of keeping things to ourselves. And since we base our trust on some feeling of being special, we are afraid of arousing the confidence of those around us. We do not want to destroy our own petty base of power. In contrast, the bodhisattva path is expansive, a great vision of openness in which there is tremendous room to work with people without one-upmanship or impatience. Since our vision is not dependent on maintaining ego, we cannot be threatened. We have nothing to lose, so we can actually give an inch in our relations with people.

The paramita of *patience* is the willingness to work with our own emotions through the practice of meditation. This in turn allows us to begin to work peacefully with others. Usually we don't want to work with aggressive people because we feel they will not give us an easy time. They are a threat to our unbodhisattva-like mentality of looking for pleasure and security. And when we encounter somebody who wrongs us, we harbor tremendous resentment and refuse to forgive him. Our tendency is always to view such aggressive people, rather than our attitude of holding back, as the problem. But the paramita of patience requires that we stop the ego-centered approach of always blaming others. Quite simply, the practice of patience means

not returning threats, anger, attacks, or insults. But this does not mean being purely passive. Instead we use the other person's energy, as in *judo*. Since we have related to our own aggression through the practice of meditation, we are not threatened by the other person's aggression, nor do we need to respond impulsively or aggressively. Our response is self-defensive in the sense that we do not return such a person's threat, and at the same time, we prevent further aggression by allowing the other person's own energy to undercut itself.

The paramita of *exertion* involves being willing to work hard for the sake of others. Tremendous energy comes from overcoming the emotional complications and conceptual frivolity of one's mind, which usually provides an excuse for avoiding bodhisattva activity. We no longer indulge our laziness and self-centeredness by dwelling on the familiarity and snugness of our own emotional complications. The bodhisattva is inspired to overcome such laziness by developing simplicity. Such simplicity arises from a perspective of spaciousness in which we do not need to manipulate our emotions in any way or to get rid of them by acting them out; instead we can deal directly with them as they arise. In this way emotions are no longer obstacles but a source of further energy.

In addition to our emotions, our minds also have a conceptualizing quality, which seems to be a combination of panic and logical reasoning. We are constantly insecure, and therefore we are constantly trying to reassure ourselves. Our minds have the ability to produce hundreds of answers, hundreds of reasons to assure ourselves that what we are doing is right. And when we teach, we impose this conceptualizing chatter on others. In order to justify ourselves in such a situation, we talk a lot, trying to con our students. The bodhisattva is able to see this tremendously complicated structure of ongoing self-confirming chatter. Having overcome the laziness of emotional indulgence through simplicity, the bodhisattva is also able to see through the conceptual superstructure arising out of the emotions.



To the bodhisattva, neither the emotions nor conceptual mind is seen as an obstacle. In fact, nothing is regarded as an obstacle, and nothing is regarded as evil or bad. Everything is simply part of the landscape of the bodhisattva's journey. So the bodhisattva sees his or her life as one continuous venture—the perpetual discovery of new understanding. And since his notion of path is not restricted in any way, there is the development of tremendous energy and a willingness to work very hard. So the paramita of exertion is not a project; it is the natural and spontaneous expression of the vastness of the bodhisattva's vision.

In practicing the paramita of *meditation*, we relate to meditation as a natural process; it is neither an obstacle nor a particular virtue. If we become impatient with constant thought-chattering in our meditation practice, we may avoid meditating. We had been expecting a comfortably rewarding situation, so we are unwilling to work with the irritations that constantly come up—we can't be bothered. On the other hand, we might get very attached to how good a meditator we are. Any kind of blissful experience we regard as some form of divine grace, as proof that what we are doing makes sense. We feel we can meditate better and more than anybody else. In this case, we view our meditation practice as a contest for the championship. But whether we try to avoid sitting practice or become attached to it as some sort of self-confirmation, we are still avoiding the paramita of meditation, which is a willingness to work unceasingly with our own neurosis and speed.

The paramita of *transcendental knowledge* is a quality of interest in the teachings that is nondogmatic and not based on furthering the development of ego. From the point of view of transcendental knowledge, any gesture based on developing ego or taking the easy way out is heretical. Such heresy is not a question of theism or atheism, but of preaching the language of ego, even if it is done in the name of buddhadharma. Even while practicing the mahayana,

we may still be looking for a self as our basic being: "There's still some hope, I can develop tremendous muscles. I can develop tremendous lungs. I can show you that I can control my mind even though I believe in the mahayana tradition." But that double-agent approach is extremely stupid and unworkable.

It is possible for us to become so attached to the mahayana perspective that we renounce and disparage hinayana. But without the discipline of hinayana there is no basis for the development of mahayana. On the other hand, we may become very dogmatic and attached solely to hinayana. This seems to be an expression of our cowardice: we are not willing to step onto the wide-open path of mahayana. In contrast to these dogmatic extremes, the paramita of transcendental knowledge has a perky quality of interest in the intellectual logic of all three yanas: hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana. This interest and curiosity is not purely intellectual but is based on the practice of meditation.

Basically, the idea of bodhisattva activity is to have good manners. In spite of our own irritation we should be able to extend our hospitality to others. This is quite different from hypocritical hospitality. Rather, it is an expression of enlightenment; it is a working state of mind in which we extend hospitality beyond our irritations.

It is perhaps most important in working with others that we do not develop idiot compassion, which means always trying to be kind. Since this superficial kindness lacks courage and intelligence, it does more harm than good. It is as though a doctor, out of apparent kindness, refuses to treat his patient because the treatment might be painful, or as though a mother cannot bear the discomfort of disciplining her child. Unlike idiot compassion, real compassion is not based on a simple-minded avoidance of pain. Real compassion is uncompromising in its allegiance to basic sanity. People who distort the path—that is, people who are working against the development of basic sanity—should be cut through on the spot if need be. That is extremely important. There is no room for idiot compassion. We

should try to cut through as much self-deception as possible in order to teach others as well as ourselves. So the final cop-out of a bodhisattva is when, having already achieved everything else, he is unable to go beyond idiot compassion.

Taking the bodhisattva vow has tremendous power for the very reason that it is not something we do just for the pleasure of ego. It is beyond oneself. Taking the vow is like planting the seed of a fast-growing tree, whereas something done for the benefit of ego is like sowing a grain of sand. Planting such a seed as the bodhisattva vow undermines ego and leads to a tremendous expansion of perspective. Such heroism, or bigness of mind, fills all of space completely, utterly, absolutely. Within such a vast perspective, nothing is claustrophobic and nothing is intimidating. There is only the vast idea of unceasingly helping all sentient beings, as limitless as space, along the path to enlightenment.

#### The Bodhisattva Vow Ceremony

Taking the bodhisattva vow is a public statement of your intention to embark on the bodhisattva path. Simply acknowledging that intention to yourself is not enough. You have to be brave enough to say it in front of others. In so doing, you are taking a big chance, but you are going to go ahead with it anyway.

To begin the ceremony, you request the teacher to give the bodhisattva vow and to accept you into the family of the Buddha by saying: "May the teacher be gracious to me. Just as the former tathagatas, arhats, samyaksambuddhas, exalted ones, and bodhisattvas living at the level of the great bhumis developed an attitude directed toward unsurpassable, perfect great enlightenment, so also I request the teacher to help me in developing such an attitude." The teacher responds by instructing you, as his disciple, to renounce samsara and to develop compassion for sentient beings, desire for enlightenment, devotion to the three jewels, and respect for the teacher. He reminds you to deepen the feeling of compassion and to plant it firmly in your heart, since "sentient beings are as limitless as ce-

lestial space and as long as there are sentient beings they will be affected by conflicting emotions, which will cause them to do evil, for which in turn they will suffer."

This ceremony is magical: the bodhisattvas of the past, present, and future are present, watching you. At this point you prostrate three times to these people, as well as to your own conscience. In doing these three prostrations, you bind yourself to the earth and reacknowledge your basic state of homelessness.

You then begin the actual vow by saying: "From now on, until I have become the very quintessence of enlightenment, I will develop an attitude directed toward unsurpassable, perfect great enlightenment so that the beings who have not crossed over may do so, who have not yet been delivered may be so, who have not yet found relief may find it, and who have not yet passed into nirvana may do so."

The discipline at this point in the ceremony is to identify with the elements, which nurture all sentient beings. You are becoming mother earth; therefore, you will have to accommodate all sorts of pokings and proddings and dumping of garbage but in fact you are delighted by the whole thing. At this point you read a passage from *The Bodhicharyavatara* by Shantideva that expresses this process quite beautifully: "As earth and other elements, together with space, eternally provide sustenance in many ways for the countless sentient beings, so may I become sustenance in every way for sentient beings to the limits of space until all have attained nirvana."

Now that you have given yourself to others, you are not going to be resentful. Sometimes after a guest has arrived and you are offering him your hospitality, you may have a sense of regretting that you ever invited him. Or you may remember that as a child you sometimes found your parents' hospitality very claustrophobic and annoying: "I wish Daddy wouldn't invite those strangers over. I like my privacy." But from the point of view of a bodhisattva, your parents' example is fantastic. You are committing yourself to that kind of hospital-

ity, and you are willing to admit people into your space. In doing so you are following the example of former bodhisattvas who also committed themselves to basic generosity, intelligence, and enlightenment. So with that in mind, you repeat: "As the sugatas of old gave birth to the bodhichitta and progressively established themselves in the discipline of a bodhisattva, so I too, for the benefit of beings, shall give birth to the bodhichitta and progressively train myself in that discipline."

Next, you offer a gift as an expression of generosity and further commitment. Even if the gift is a corpse, you are going to present whatever you have as a real gesture of committing yourself to bodhichitta. In giving something about which you care very much, too much—whatever it may be you are offering your sense of attachment, your basic attitude of clinging.

The presentation of a gift is equivalent to the moment in the refuge vow when the preceptor snaps his fingers. But the reason you don't have the abstract energies of the lineage or of basic Buddhism coming into your system in this case is that the bodhisattva vow is more on the emotional level. Taking refuge is related to the ordinary, moralistic level: your commitment is that you are not going to be unfaithful. The bodhisattva vow is much more subtle: you don't really have a specific moment in which bodhichitta enters into you. But in some way or other, when you give your gift and you are inspired to let go of your clinging and self-centeredness, at that moment you really become a child of the Buddha, a bodhisattva. At that point, whether you like it or not, you take on a heavy burden—which is happily unavoidable. You cannot undo it. In the case of hinayana, you can give up your vow, but you cannot give up your bodhisattva vow, even after lives and lives. You cannot give it up because the discipline of mahayana is not based on physical existence but on conscience, in the very ordinary sense.

Having offered your gift, you can appreciate what you have

done. Realizing that you have not made a mistake you say: "At this moment my birth has become fruitful, I have realized my human life. Today I am born into the family of the Buddha. Now I am a child of the Buddha."

The next passage you recite gives all kinds of examples of how you can be helpful to society and to the world—how you can live with yourself and with other sentient beings: "From now on I will forthrightly perform the actions befitting to my family. I will act so as not to degrade the faultlessness and discipline of my family. Just as with a blind man finding a jewel in a heap of dust, thus, somehow, bodhichitta has been born in me. This is the supreme amrita which destroys death, the inexhaustible treasure which removes the world's poverty; it is the supreme medicine which cures the world's sickness, the tree which provides rest for beings weary of wandering on the paths of existence; it is the universal bridge on which all travelers may pass over the lower realms, the rising moon of mind which dispels the torment of the kleshas; it is the great sun which puts an end to the obscurity of ignorance, the pure butter which comes of churning the milk of holy dharma. For travelers wandering on the paths of existence seeking happiness from objects of enjoyment, it is supreme bliss near at hand, the great feast which satisfies sentient beings."

Now you are ready to receive your bodhisattva name. The name you receive symbolizes generosity in working with others. It is not a further means of building up your territory or identity, but an expression of nonego. You are no longer yours, but you belong to others. Bodhisattva names are more powerful than refuge names because there is more need of being reminded to work with others than of being reminded to work on yourself. Your bodhisattva name is an expression of your subtle style: somebody could insult you by using it; somebody could encourage you by using it. It expresses a more sensitive area than the refuge name, which is