

The Great Vehicle



There is a collection of stories in the *Sūtra Piṭaka* of the Pali scripture about twenty-four Buddhas who lived before Gautama Buddha. The collection entitled the *Buddhavarṃsa* begins with Śāriputra asking Gautama Buddha when it was that he first resolved to become the Buddha and what were the virtues of perfection he achieved to attain this goal. The Buddha then relates how eons ago he was a hermit named Sumedha. One day, he heard that there was a Buddha named Dīpankara teaching in a nearby town. He went to that town and saw Dīpankara Buddha approaching him at the head of a long procession of monks. Sumedha was moved to deep reverence for Dīpankara. He realized that while he could follow this Buddha and become an *arhat*, he could benefit the world more by becoming a Buddha. In that moment, he made a vow to become a Buddha in a future life. ✓

When he did so, Sumedha noticed that Dīpankara Buddha and the Saṅgha following him were approaching a patch of mud. So he lay flat on the mud and invited them to walk over him. Dīpankara read Sumedha's mind and understood that he had vowed to become a Buddha. Dīpankara then predicted that Sumedha would one day attain his goal. Sumedha returned to his hermitage to reflect on how he could achieve Buddhahood. Over time, he came to understand that he would need to perfect ten virtues to achieve this goal. The Pali text lists these ten virtues, later referred to as the Ten Perfections in early Buddhism: generosity (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*pañña*), energy (*vīriya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Gautama Buddha concludes this story by relating to Śāriputra how he perfected these virtues life after life until his full Awakening in his present life. Here and elsewhere, Gautama refers to himself during his previous lives when he pursued the perfection of the ten virtues as being a "bodhisattva." This title here means "a being who is to become Awakened"; and the Ten Perfections became associated with the life of a bodhisattva. ✓

10
perfections =
bodhisattva's
life

This story expressed an alternative to the path to Arhatship and Nirvana, namely, what would become known as the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood. Indeed, the early schools of Buddhism that we introduced in the previous chapter all recognized this Bodhisattva Path, but taught that it is a heroic path for only a very few. It is best, they argued, to follow the shorter path leading to Nirvana than the more arduous path over eons of time leading to Buddhahood. However, some Buddhist monastics did eventually resolve to follow the Bodhisattva Path. There is very little we know for certain about how, when, and where this happened. But we do know that at some time before the first century B.C.E. there were monastics in traditional monasteries of the early Buddhist tradition who took up the bodhisattva practice of the perfection of virtues alongside their fellow monastics who preferred the original path leading to Nirvana. Scholars note that during the early growth of Buddhism, the literature began to exalt the status of the Buddha, and the worship of *stūpas* and later of images of the Buddha became more and more popular.

By the first century B.C.E., the experience of this bodhisattva practice was expressed in a new literature. New *sūtras* began to appear that claimed to be discourses of Gautama Buddha that presented the wisdom and the practice of the Bodhisattva Path. These *sūtras* taught that the Bodhisattva Path is superior to that of original Buddhism because it leads to a greater attainment, namely, full Buddhahood. The qualities gained in the process of further growth beyond Arhatship could be used to benefit all living beings in ways not possible for an *arhat*. The Bodhisattva Path was therefore referred to as the *Mahāyāna*, meaning "Great Vehicle," "Great Course," or "Great Journey." Followers of *Mahāyāna* also referred to the earlier forms of Buddhism as *Hīnayāna*, or "Lesser Vehicle," as they do not lead all the way to full Buddhahood. This term carries a negative connotation. In fact, by 200 C.E., there was a split between *Mahāyāna* and the early forms of Buddhism.

The *Mahāyāna sūtras* were presented as teachings of Gautama Buddha, even though they were unknown from the beginning of Buddhism. One reason given for this historical fact was that the teachings in the new *sūtras* were deeper and more demanding than those originally taught by the Buddha. The Buddha knew that the long and arduous Bodhisattva Path would have attracted only a few followers into the Saṅgha. So he publically presented only the easier Path to Arhatship. He privately taught the Bodhisattva Path to a few followers to be passed on until the Saṅgha was ready for them to be made public. It was also claimed that the *sūtras* were taught to and preserved by certain spirits until the time was right. Others claimed that although the Buddha taught the *sūtras*, they were only "heard" by persons in their dreams when the world was ready for them.

In any case, the task for early *Mahāyāna* was to define their Great Vehicle from the new ideas presented in their *sūtras*. They considered this task as the "second turning of the wheel of the Dharma." While the different *sūtras* contribute a variety of teachings, there are some fundamental ideas that have become associated with *Mahāyāna*. Here, we mention four that are discussed in some detail in this and in the next chapter.

Audience

THE BODHISATTVA

The first characteristic notion found in developed Mahāyāna is the view that a Buddha, rather than an *arhat*, is the person who can be of most help to people who are suffering and in need of liberation. To achieve this condition of Buddhahood, one needs to follow the Bodhisattva Path. This bodhisattva life begins with what is called the "arising of the thought of Awakening," or *bodhicitta*. This *bodhicitta* is really the altruistic desire, or heartfelt aspiration, to attain Buddhahood so that one can help others gain freedom from suffering. What this means concretely is that one aspires to follow the Bodhisattva Path, or the "Great Journey," rather than the path leading to Arhatship. In fact, Mahāyāna was called the *Bodhisattvayāna*, or "Bodhisattva Vehicle" bringing one to Buddhahood, in distinction from the *Śrāvakayāna*, or "Disciple Vehicle" bringing one to Arhatship. Early Mahāyāna taught Six Perfections that advance this bodhisattva journey to Buddhahood. Later Mahāyāna introduced Ten Stages on the Bodhisattva Path and added four other perfections so that each stage has a particular perfection associated with it. These Ten Perfections vary somewhat from those of the earlier traditions mentioned above. We introduce this path in some detail later in this chapter.

WISDOM AND EMPTINESS

A second characteristic of Mahāyāna teaching is the notion of a "higher wisdom" (*prajñāpāramitā*) realizing "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). This notion has to do with the awakened experience of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. For Mahāyāna, what one experiences with awakened consciousness is that all the "factors of existence" (*dharma*s), which we have seen were so carefully analyzed in the *Abhidharma Piṭaka*, are "empty" (*śūnya*) of existing independently, or "on their own." In the language of Mahāyāna, all aspects of existence are "*svabhāva-śūnya*," that is, "empty of own-being." This means that nothing can exist on its own. In other words, all things in the world, the elementary factors of life and the particular beings that these factors constitute, are seen by a higher wisdom to have this fundamental characteristic of emptiness.

The term *śūnya*, which we translate as "empty," can mean in Sanskrit "hollow," as in something that looks solid but is in fact hollow inside. Thus, "empty of own-being" means that although things seem to ordinary experience as if they are independent entities, deeper insight shows that they are really empty, or hollow, of that independence. This is another way of saying what the Buddha himself taught, namely, that all things arise dependently. To experience this dependently arisen nature of things—their "emptiness" of independence—is the core of wisdom experience according to Mahāyāna. It is this profound Mahāyāna experience of penetrating insight into the emptiness of all things by the awakened consciousness that brings one freedom. It is this profound wisdom realizing emptiness that, coupled with a compassionate motivation to save all living beings, furthers one's Great Journey to the goal of Buddhahood.

LUMINOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

A third characteristic of Mahāyāna teaching concerns the nature of consciousness. We have seen that one view of consciousness found in early Buddhist texts teaches that the mind is naturally pure and clear, having been stained by mental defilements. While in Mahāyāna there are many and sometimes conflicting notions concerning consciousness, we find a similar strand of thought. It claims that consciousness, prior to being affected by defilements, is the luminous clarity and nirvanic status of enlightened Buddhahood. This pure luminosity as the true essence of consciousness gives people the potential for Buddhahood. But ordinary conscious life generates conceptualizations and other mental formations that frustrate this potential. In the end, it is the mind that enslaves people in a life that is untrue and unsatisfying (*duḥkha*); and it is also the mind that can set people free.

CELESTIAL BUDDHAS

Finally, the fourth characteristic notion has to do with the nature of Buddhahood, the goal of the Bodhisattva Path. While the early Buddhist texts claim that the cosmos includes realms of hells, ghosts, gods, and *Brahmā* beings, Mahāyāna expanded this vision of the cosmos by claiming that it also contains countless Buddhas residing in Buddha realms. In following the Bodhisattva Path, one can be reborn in one of these realms, where one can progress toward Buddhahood under the guidance and with the blessings of the Buddha of that realm. When one attains Buddhahood, one will also create a Buddha realm from where one will help others throughout the cosmos. In the meantime, one can receive guidance and blessings in this world, as well as visualize these "celestial" Buddhas and their realms and the advanced bodhisattvas that abide in them in ways that are spiritually transforming. These Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas develop special skillful means (*upāya*) that they use to appear in the many world systems of the cosmos in order to help other beings become free from suffering and progress in the journey to Awakening and Buddhahood.

As we noted earlier, for many centuries after the beginning of the Mahāyāna movement, indeed perhaps up until the seventh century C.E., members of this newer tradition lived in monasteries side-by-side with Buddhists who chose to follow the original teachings of the Three *Piṭakas*. However, as time passed and some of the *sūtras* became more polemical as they stressed the "superiority" of the Mahāyāna over the older tradition, Mahāyānins began to separate from the other schools. We have seen that the Theravādins spread into Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Mahāyāna flourished in various places in India from where it eventually spread into other parts of Asia, especially Central and East Asia. It became the primary form of Buddhism in such countries as Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. So, with these general comments about Mahāyāna and its teachings, we can now look at some of the individual *sūtras* that have been especially important in defining the Mahāyāna experience of Buddhism.

THE MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS

The Mahāyāna *sūtras* were written to teach the experiences of Mahāyāna in following the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood. The following are some of the major Mahāyāna *sūtras* that introduce the kinds of teachings we have already outlined. We include some selections from these *sūtras* that present (1) the notions of wisdom and emptiness, (2) the nature of consciousness, (3) the transcendent nature of the Buddha, and (4) the existence of Buddha realms. In the next section, we introduce the Bodhisattva Path and its stages and perfections in some detail.

Discovering the Perfection of Wisdom

Among the earliest of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* are the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* (*Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras*). These *sūtras* began to be written in the first century C.E. Longer versions were written during the next 200 years; more condensed *sūtras* were written from 300 to 700 C.E. (see Figure 4.1). These condensed versions include the famous *Diamond Sūtra* and *Heart Sūtra*. Within some of the Wisdom Literature, the journey of the bodhisattva is defined by the Six Perfections (giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom). This Bodhisattva Path is lived compassionately for the benefit of others because one's practice of it is motivated by *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood to save all living beings. This altruistic attitude leads the Mahāyāna

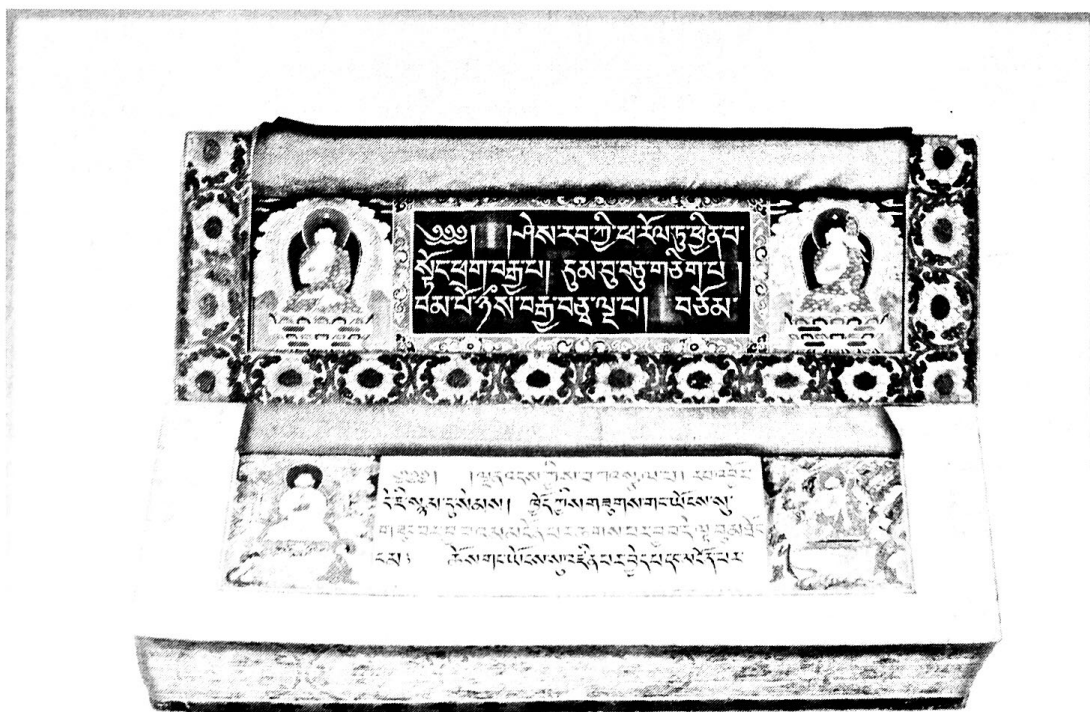


FIGURE 4.1. Illuminated manuscript in Tibetan of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* 100,000 Verses, eighteenth century, Tibet. Library of Congress, Asian Collection.

postponed Enlightenment
 Buddhist to renounce any personal attainment of Arhatship and Final Nirvana so as to continue to help others in need. In this regard, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* depict the *arhats* as selfishly leaving society behind to enjoy the quiescence of Final Nirvana after death.

In following this compassionate path, bodhisattvas can eventually be reborn in celestial Buddha realms where they can gain the powers and skillful means necessary to become Buddhas and help others do the same. As a celestial bodhisattva, and eventually as a celestial Buddha with one's own Buddha realm in the heavens of the cosmos, one will be a more universally active source of blessings for all living beings. Mahāyāna taught that these blessings are possible because of "merit transfer." Because karmic merit can be transferred from one person to another, celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas—who have accumulated great merit during eons of practicing the Perfections—can transfer that merit to needy sentient beings.

dependent but an emphasis on Two Truths
 Besides the compassion of the bodhisattva and its implications for religious practice, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* also expound the wisdom of the bodhisattva. Through the ordinary use of perception and language, one experiences the many things of the world as being separate and distinct entities. But the wisdom of the bodhisattva brings one to the realization that the things of the world are not independent; they lack their seeming inherent existence. Things as normally seen are said to be "like a dream." This does not mean that they do not exist but that they exist like a dream depending on a dreamer. In other words, the many things of the world appear as if they are independent entities; but this appearance of independence depends on one's perception of them and is not how they really exist. One term often used in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* to describe this condition of things is "non-arising" (*anutpāda*). That is, the things one sees as so separate from oneself and other beings have "not arisen" in such an independent manner.

When one experiences the real status of things, claims the Wisdom Literature, one beholds "emptiness." As we mentioned earlier, emptiness is not a thing in its own right but is precisely the way all things are in their dependent arising, namely, "empty of own-being" (*svabhāva-śūnya*). This means that emptiness is not some ultimate reality beyond the forms of existence themselves; rather, the myriad forms of existence are emptiness—they are empty of own-being. An analogy that is used to help one understand this notion of emptiness is a flower that always needs sunlight, water, soil, nutrients, and so on to live. In a similar way, Mahāyāna is saying that each being needs the full matrix of life to be what it truly is. Wisdom is the insight of the enlightened consciousness that penetrates this matrix of life, this emptiness of things. This experience of wisdom insight into the true nature of things reveals what is called, in many Mahāyāna *sūtras*, "suchness" (*tathatā*). To experience the suchness of things means to experience things "such as they are," without superimposing views about them. That is, while one ordinarily views things as independent entities, experiencing the suchness of things is to see the emptiness of this independence, to see things as they are dependently arisen.

With wisdom insight into suchness, into the empty nature of all beings, there is a liberating effect on the person of wisdom. In experiencing the emptiness of all things, one's attachments to the things of the world are loosened, defilements are brought to an end, and delusion is dispersed. The state of mind that one realizes with this freedom is Nirvana. But because Nirvana is also experienced as empty—as not an independent state separate from the ordinary *saṃsāric* world—one is also free from attachment to this spiritual status. With freedom from the world of *saṃsāra* on the one hand and from Nirvana on the other, one "courses" in the Middle Way. This means that one is free from any attachment to either *saṃsāra* or Nirvana; and therefore one is free to embrace all things as they are in their suchness, while responding to their needs out of selfless compassion. As we shall see in the next chapter, these ideas about wisdom and emptiness presented in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* became the inspiration for Mādhyamika, one of the major schools of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, as well as many of the schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in other parts of Asia.

The Heart Sūtra

With these remarks in mind, let us now look at the *Heart Sūtra*, which is said to capture in a few words the "heart" of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* in East Asia. Its teaching is given to Śāriputra, one of the Buddha's chief disciples. Note that the first part of the text begins by saying that the famous celestial bodhisattva named Avalokiteśvara, while engaged in the Great Journey, looks down at the world with his perfection of wisdom. From that vantage point, he sees that the Five Aggregates are "empty of own-being" and that emptiness is not different from the Five Aggregates. Emptiness is their true nature. Avalokiteśvara then sees that all the *dharmas*, analyzed and categorized so carefully by the earlier *Abhidharma* texts, are also empty of own-being. Therefore, from the point of view of emptiness, the *dharmas* are not produced as discrete entities to be characterized by the categories of the *Abhidharma*—they are all the same in that they are all characterized by emptiness.

Om! Praise to the blessed and noble perfection of wisdom! The noble Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva was moving in the deep journey of the perfection of wisdom. When he looked down at the Five Aggregates, he saw that they are empty of own-being.

Here, O Śāriputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. What is form is emptiness, what is emptiness is form. The same is true for sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

Here, O Śāriputra, all *dharmas* are characterized by emptiness; they are neither produced nor cease, they are neither defiled nor pure, they are neither deficient nor complete.

In the next part of the text, it is said that the perfection of wisdom realizing emptiness looks over the Five Aggregates, the six senses and their objects, the eighteen elements that constitute conscious experience, the twelve links of dependent arising, the Four Noble Truths, and the knowledge and attainment, or lack thereof, associated with the *arhat*. In fact, these factors and processes of existence are the ones that Buddhaghosa says are the “soil” to be “turned over” with knowledge and insight to become an *arhat*. However, the *Heart Sūtra* says that when Avalokiteśvara looks at these factors of existence with his higher bodhisattva wisdom, he sees that they do not exist as ordinarily conceived because they are all empty of own-being.

Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is no form, sensation, perception, mental formation, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind; no forms, sounds, odors, tastes, objects of touch, or objects of the mind; no eye-element and so on up to no mind-consciousness element; there is neither ignorance nor cessation of ignorance and so on up to neither old age and death nor cessation of old age and death. There is no *duḥkha*, no origination of *duḥkha*, no cessation of *duḥkha*, no path to the cessation of *duḥkha*. There is no knowledge, no attainment, no nonattainment.

The text goes on to say that with this higher insight into the emptiness of all things, including the attainment of Nirvana, the bodhisattva is indifferent not only to worldly things but also to any attainment of Final Nirvana apart from this world. Instead, like all the Buddhas of all periods of time, he or she relies on the perfection of wisdom to be free of any obstacles to becoming a Buddha, and in the end actually realizes Nirvana in this world. The text ends with the great *mantra* that is spoken, as it were, by a personification of the perfection of wisdom. It is implied that while ordinary *mantras* can soothe some *duḥkha*, the perfection of wisdom, like a great *mantra*, conveys the power to bring about a cessation of all *duḥkha* through Awakening inspiring joyfulness. The text concludes with an actual *mantra* in praise of the perfection of wisdom that goes beyond everything to the full Awakening of Buddhahood.

Therefore, O Śāriputra, because of being indifferent to attainment, a bodhisattva relies on the perfection of wisdom and remains thereby free from mental hindrances. Being free from mental hindrances, he or she is not afraid, overcomes erroneous views, and in the end attains Nirvana. All Buddhas of all times have attained the highest and perfect Awakening by relying on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore, one should know the great *mantra* of the perfection of wisdom, the *mantra* of great knowledge, the unsurpassed and unequaled *mantra*, the *mantra* that allays all *duḥkha*—it is true, for there is nothing lacking in it. By the perfection of wisdom is this *mantra* spoken. It is the following: Gone, gone, gone beyond, utterly gone beyond; Awakening; O joy! (*Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya-Sūtra*)

A Layperson's Sūtra

Another important Mahāyāna sūtra is the *Sūtra Expounded by Vimalakīrti* (*Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*). Composed in the first century C.E., this sūtra tells the story of Vimalakīrti, a rich layman living in Vaiśālī, whose understanding of the Buddha's teaching was so deep that he was accepted as a bodhisattva. Indeed, Vimalakīrti's wisdom was so profound that it surpassed not only the insight of the *arhats*, but even of some of the great bodhisattvas who had come down to visit from their celestial realms. Thus, the Mahāyāna point is made that the attainment of the bodhisattva is greater than that of the *arhat*, and it is not only for monastics but is also open to laypersons.

In this sūtra, as in the Wisdom Literature, the doctrine of the emptiness of things is presented. Here, it is said that because of emptiness, the world appears in ordinary experience. However, this does not mean that emptiness is an imperceptible causal force—like a God—that is apart from the things one perceives. Emptiness is instead the hidden "suchness" of all the things one ordinarily experiences with a discriminating mind. In the words of the sūtra, emptiness is the "baseless base" of all discriminated things. This emptiness, or suchness, or baseless base of existence is hidden from view by the "dualities" of the discriminating mind. By dualities are meant the perceived differences between self and other, between the senses and objects of sense, between purity and defilement, and, ultimately, between *saṃsāra* and Nirvana. When asked what the nondual condition of life is like, Vimalakīrti "kept silent without saying a word," because words cannot describe it. True understanding of this nondual reality of emptiness must be realized in the direct experience of full Awakening.

In the sūtra, there is an instructive dialogue between a goddess taught by Vimalakīrti, and Śāriputra, who represents those who follow the older path of the disciples. This discussion is about how the discriminations emphasized in that earlier tradition, between, for example, wholesome and unwholesome things, cannot capture the real suchness of things. The discriminating mind cannot see the reality that lies beyond its discriminations:

A goddess . . . listening to the Dharma in Vimalakīrti's room, appeared in bodily form and showered flowers on the bodhisattvas and chief disciples of the Buddha who were present. The flowers that landed on the bodhisattvas fell off and onto the ground. But those that landed on the disciples stuck to their bodies and did not fall off despite all their efforts to shake them off.

Thereupon, the goddess asked Śāriputra why he tried to shake off the flowers. Śāriputra replied, "I want to shake off these flowers because they are not of the status of suchness." The goddess said, "Do not say that these flowers are not of the status of suchness . . . because it is you who gives rise to such a discrimination. . . . But if you no longer make such discriminations, this all will be of the status of suchness. Look at the bodhisattvas whose bodies do not hold the flowers. That is because they have put an end to such discrimination." (*Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*, VIII)

As is said in the *Heart Sūtra*, it is by going beyond the discriminations of ordinary experience that one finds emptiness, and the freedom it brings from things "sticking" to one in ways that hinder one's spiritual journey to Awakening. However, it seems that Śāriputra did not understand the goddess's words because later he asks her to change her female body into the form of a man. He is discriminating a man's body as superior to a woman's. The goddess again teaches that in their suchness, all forms are the same in that they are in reality empty of their discriminated characteristics, including those of gender. The goddess points out Śāriputra's attachment to the male gender and chides him for not realizing that the suchness of all forms is the same. Awakening to this truth about the ultimate "sameness" of all things is—the story implies—open to everyone, male and female, lay and monastic.

Śāriputra asked, "Why do not you change your female form?" The goddess replied, "For the last twelve years, I have been looking in vain for a female form. So, what is it that you want me to change?"

Thereupon, she used her supernatural powers to change Śāriputra into a celestial goddess, and to change herself into a man similar to Śāriputra. She then asked him, "Why do not you change your female form?"

The goddess said, "Like Śāriputra, who is not a woman but only appears in female form, all women are the same. Though they appear in female form, they are ultimately not women. Hence the Buddha said, 'All things [ultimately] are neither male or female.'" (*Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*, VIII)

Exploring Consciousness

Whereas the previous two *sūtras* focus more on emptiness, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* examines the nature of consciousness, its production of ordinary experience, and its potential for Awakening and Buddhahood. The *Sūtra on the Descent into Lanka* (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*) is said by scholars to have been composed around the fourth century C.E. We have seen in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* and *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* that ordinary consciousness has a role in discriminating people's mistaken experience of independent selfhood and independent objects. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* explores how the mind creates this false dualistic experience of self and world and how the mind can also escape this misperception of things and attain Awakening and Buddhahood.

The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* stresses the need for an inward journey of meditation to overcome the ordinary workings of the mind, which produce mental discriminations that result in an unsatisfactory life. One's ordinary mental functioning dualistically objectifies an independent self and a world of independent objects in a fashion that leads to unwholesome attachment to things and, thereby, unhappiness. By turning one's meditative attention into the inner field of consciousness itself, one discovers that one's misperception of reality is based in a deeper mental phenomenon, what the *sūtra* calls the "storehouse-consciousness" (*ālaya-vijñāna*). It is this foundation of consciousness that is the ultimate cause of both one's subjective experience of selfhood

and one's objective experience of the world. This depth of consciousness is said to create both one's subjective and objective experience like the deep ocean creates waves on its surface. One's experience of oneself and the world—like waves produced by the force of the ocean—is created by the force of the storehouse consciousness. As the *sūtra* says,

At that time, the [Buddha] recited these verses: "Like waves that rise on the ocean when stirred by the wind, dancing without interruption, in a similar way the storehouse-ocean is constantly stirred by the winds of objectivity such that the multiple waves of consciousness are seen dancing about.

As the waves in all their variety are stirred on the surface of the ocean, so in the storehouse the variety of what is known as consciousness is produced. The mind and its [variety of] consciousness are discriminated as regards their form; [but] the [variety of] consciousness is not separate from the mind. . . . Just as there is no distinction between the ocean and its waves, so in the mind there is no evolution of the variety of consciousness.

"The visible world is discriminated by the [variety of] consciousness. . . . Form with characteristics and status are presented to our consciousnesses as such; they are seen as evolving in the same way as waves." (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, 46–47)

Whereas the Wisdom Literature and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* call for the bodhisattva to experience emptiness, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* calls for an experience of this ocean of consciousness below the waves of experience. The *sūtra* proposes this experience of the very foundation of consciousness because it recognizes that its storehouse produces the experience not only of selfhood and the world but of Buddhahood as well. How is this possible? The *Laṅkāvatāra* says that if one realizes a "reversion of the foundation of the mind," one can discover its clear, pure luminosity that is the very essence of Buddhahood. Therefore, the storehouse-consciousness is also called the "Womb of the *Tathāgata*" (*tathāgata-garbha*). The term *Tathāgata*—meaning "Thus come" or "Thus gone"—is a title given to Gautama Buddha. It indicates that the historical Buddha was one in a series of Buddhas who have come into the world and gone. The word *garbha* means either "womb" or "embryo." So to say that consciousness is like a womb or embryo of the *Tathāgata* means that all people can be part of this series of Buddhas because each person's innermost consciousness is like a womb that holds the embryo of Buddhahood. Here again are the words of the *sūtra*:

Nirvana is the storehouse-consciousness where a reversion takes place by self-realization. . . . When a reversion takes place in the practitioner of yoga, the [varieties of] consciousness cast off discrimination between [subject and object] in what is realized as the [nature of] mind itself. Here, one enters the *Tathāgata* stage, attaining the realization of noble wisdom; and in this stage, there is no thought of existence or nonexistence. . . . When all these [varieties of consciousness] go through a reversion, I and all the other Buddhas declare that there is Nirvana. The mode and nature of this Nirvana is emptiness, which is the status of reality. . . . [This is because the storehouse-consciousness] is like a great ocean in which waves roll on constantly, but the [depths] subsist unaffected,

free from the faults of impermanence . . . thoroughly pure in its essence. . . . The storehouse-consciousness is [thus] known by the name of the *Tathāgata-garbha*. (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, 62, 93, 99, 220–221)

This inner essence of the mind is the original pure, luminous, and nirvanic nature of the storehouse-consciousness that is beyond the dualistic discrimination of its ordinary mental functioning. With this inner realization, the embryo of Buddhahood begins to develop. In the light of the wisdom of developing Buddhahood, one experiences that all forms in emptiness display this luminous essence of the consciousness that produces them like an ocean producing waves. As we shall see in the next chapter, this understanding of consciousness is developed in the Indian Yogācāra School of Buddhist philosophy, which in turn influences many Mahāyāna schools in East Asia.

The Lotus

Another *sūtra* that is one of the most revered in East Asia is the *Sūtra on the Lotus of the True Dharma* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*) written around 200 C.E. (see Figure 4.2). Like other Mahāyāna texts, the *Lotus Sūtra*, as it is better known, emphasizes the Bodhisattva Path entailing the practice of the Six Perfections leading in the Great Journey to Buddhahood. It also presents the perfection of wisdom's vision of the entire universe, "the world of the triple sphere in all its ten directions," as empty of own-being. In lauding this Mahāyāna experience, the *Lotus Sūtra* also holds out hope that eventually even the *arhats* will reach this higher goal of Buddhahood.

The *Lotus Sūtra* has a special teaching about what it considers the transcendent Buddha. The *sūtra* claims to have been preached at Vulture Peak by a dramatically transfigured Gautama Buddha, who reveals that in reality he had attained his Awakening incalculable, limitless, myriads of eons ago, and resides forever present to the world like a father preaching the Dharma. His human form as Gautama Buddha is a skillful means (*upāya*) to give people confidence that they can attain Nirvana. To display his transcendent power, as the *sūtra* opens, Gautama Buddha enters deep meditation and produces the following effect on his listeners that fills them with awe:

At that moment, a ray issued from within the circle of hair between the Lord's eyebrows. It extended over eighteen-hundred thousand Buddha realms . . . so that all those Buddha realms were illuminated by its radiance. . . . Likewise, the noble Buddhas staying and living in those Buddha realms all became visible, and the Dharma being preached by them could be entirely heard by all beings. The monks, nuns and men and women lay devotees, practitioners of yoga, those who had attained fruition and those who had not, all became visible. The bodhisattvas, the great beings, in those Buddha realms who follow the bodhisattva's journey with ability due to their earnest faith in many kinds of lessons and ideas became visible too. . . . Then there arose this thought in the mind of the great being, Maitreya Bodhisattva, "O how great a wonder does the Tathāgata display!" (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*, I)

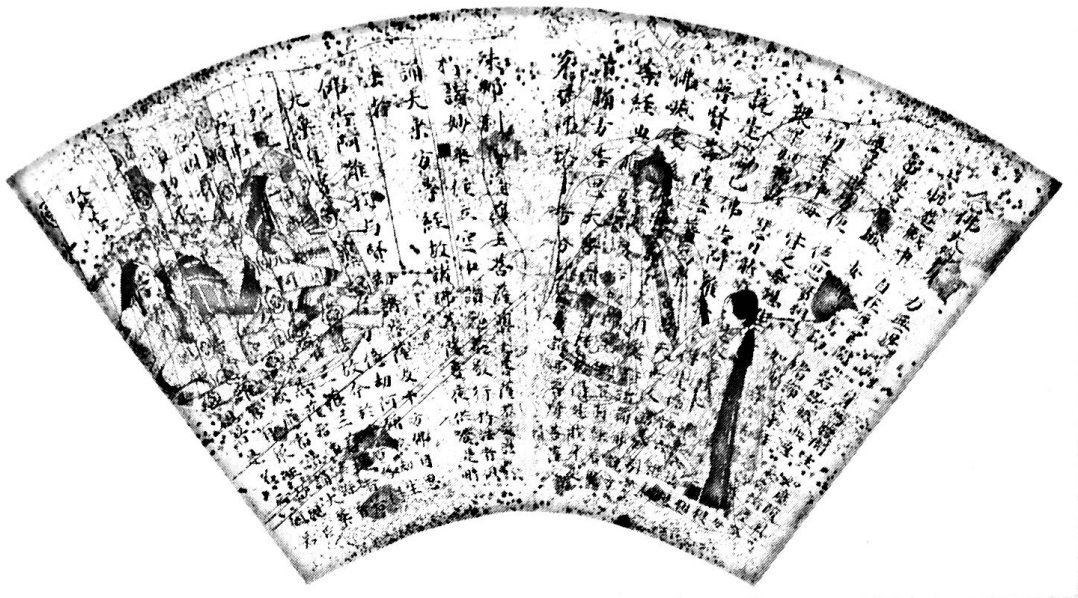


FIGURE 4.2. Mahāyāna Buddhism's spread to Japan: fan-shaped *Lotus Sūtra*; twelfth century C.E., Hōryū-ji Temple, Nara, Japan. Exhibited at Japan House Gallery, New York.

Gautama Buddha goes on in the *sūtra* to say that all Buddhas preach the Dharma of one Buddha-vehicle (*Buddha-yāna*). But because there are different kinds of people in various states of openness to this Buddha-vehicle, Buddhas use different skillful means to reach them. Therefore, there are three vehicles being taught, that of the *arhat*, the *pratyekabuddha*, and the bodhisattva. All who follow these will eventually attain supreme Awakening and become Buddhas. To explain skillful means, Gautama Buddha tells the following parable to Śāriputra. In it, he uses the analogy of three carts for the three vehicles of Buddhism.

Let us suppose the following, Śāriputra. In a certain village . . . there was a great householder, old . . . and yet wealthy . . . with a grand house that is high and spacious, but built along time ago and now old. . . . The house has but one door . . . and all of a sudden it is being consumed on all sides by a mass of fire.

Let us suppose that the man had many children . . . and that he had come out of the house. Now, Śāriputra, that man upon seeing the house being enwrapped in fire became greatly concerned . . . and made the following reflection, "I myself am able to come out from the burning house through the door . . . but my children are staying in the burning house absorbed in their playing and amusing themselves. . . . They do not perceive that the house is on fire . . . so they are not afraid and have no wish to escape. . . . Therefore, I will warn them."

With this resolution, he calls to his children, "Come, my children, the house is burning with a mass of fire. . . ." But the ignorant children do not believe him . . . for they are not afraid . . . nor understand the word "burning." On the contrary, they run around, walk about, and repeatedly glance out at their father, all because they are so ignorant.

Then the man reflects . . . "Let me use some skillful means to get my children out of the house." The man knows the disposition of the children, and . . . the man says to them, "My children, your toys which are so pretty and precious . . . goat carts, deer carts, and bullock carts . . . are outside the door of the house for you to play with. So, come out of the house, and I will give each of you what you want." And the children, upon hearing the names of the playthings they like, because they suit their desires, eagerly, pushing and running against each other, quickly rush out from the burning house. . . .

The children each go up to their father and say, "Father, give us those toys to play with that you promised, those goat carts, deer carts, and bullock carts." Then, Śāriputra, the man gives each of his children equally . . . bullock carts only. They are made of seven precious substances, provided with benches, hung with many bells, adorned with rare and wonderful jewels, covered with jewel wreaths and garlands of flowers . . . led by a multitude of servants. . . . The children climb up on the carts with feelings of astonishment and wonder. . . .

So too, Śāriputra . . . the Tathāgata, endowed with boundless and perfect Buddha-knowledge . . . is the father of all worlds, who has attained the highest perfection in knowing skillful means, and who is most merciful, patient, benevolent, and compassionate. He appears in this world, which is like a house . . . burning with a mass of misery, in order to free from affliction, hatred and delusion, all beings who are subject to birth, old age, disease, death . . . and the dark and enveloping mist of ignorance. He does so to rouse them to supreme, perfect Awakening . . . to bestow on them the immense and inconceivable joy of Buddha-knowledge. . . .

Thus, Śāriputra . . . in order to save all living beings from this world which is like a burning house . . . [the Buddha] shows them by his knowledge of skillful means, three vehicles: that of the disciples, the *pratyekabuddhas*, and the bodhisattvas. By means of these three, he attracts all beings forth . . . so that all beings, who are his children, are led to no other vehicle than the One Buddha-vehicle. (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*, III)

One is reminded here of the Second Sermon of the Buddha in which he says that the condition of the world of the Five Aggregates is "burning" with "a whole mass of *duḥkha*"—a burning about which humankind is ordinarily unaware. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is being said that a Buddha, who is outside and free from the world, uses skillful means to bring people out of this condition by offering different ideals, that of the *arhat*, the *pratyekabuddha*, and the bodhisattva. But in the end all persons escape this condition through one doorway and find one ideal, that of Buddhahood, which is more wonderful than anyone could imagine.

The Land of Bliss

A devotional side of Mahāyāna was also enriched by another set of early *sūtras*, called the *Larger and Smaller Land of Bliss Sūtras* (*Sukhāvatī-Vyūha-Sūtras*), which began to be written in the late second century C.E. The main intent of the *Larger Land of Bliss Sūtra* is to tell the story about Amitābha Buddha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light. In the *sūtra*, Gautama Buddha tells how in

The Dragon King's Daughter

The *Lotus Sūtra* has two meanings for me: its surface meaning and its deeper "experienced" meaning. Years ago, I decided to practice Nichiren Buddhism, a Buddhist school founded centuries ago in Japan that focuses on the *Lotus Sūtra*. When I first began reciting the *Lotus Sūtra* and chanting its title, *Nam-myōhōrenge-kyō*, I insisted on learning its literal meaning, though I was encouraged to experience it through sound, too.

Since the ancient Chinese characters are complex, there are many translations of the *sūtra's* title. The more suggestive one I particularly liked was "fusion with the mystic law of simultaneous cause and effect through vibration." I was assured I could draw infinite energy from such dynamic fusion for alleviating my own suffering and the sufferings of others. I tucked that away in the back of my mind and began to chant. But, I wondered, what about the rest of the *Lotus Sūtra* recited by Nichiren Buddhists?

The short explanation given to me at the time was that the *sūtra* had two parts. The first part makes the point that all human beings have the potential to attain enlightenment. Buddhahood is latent in the depths of their lives. The second part explains in parables and similes what enlightenment is. This rough sketch was a good start, but I still painstakingly wrote the literal meaning in pencil above each ancient character in my liturgy book.

Before long, as I undertook the daily practice and witnessed exciting changes in my life, the pencil jottings receded from my radar screen. Living the *Lotus Sūtra* and experiencing what my Nichiren society, Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), calls "human revolution" took on the greater importance. It is only now after eighteen years that I've returned again to the surface meaning. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, through a series of recently published dialogues on the *Lotus Sūtra*, led me back to it.

To me, the most moving part of these dialogues concerned the Devadatta Chapter. In that chapter, Devadatta, who tried to kill Śākyamuni Buddha, receives the assurance that he, too, will attain a great enlightenment. This occurs before a huge assemblage of living beings from all directions of the universe. Perhaps more shocking to the assembly is what happens next.

The Dragon King's daughter, an eight-year-old girl with the body of a dragon, is said to have reached enlightenment in an instant upon hearing the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Yet Śāriputra, a learned disciple of the Buddha, does not accept the authenticity of her attainment, and cites reasons why women cannot gain enlightenment. Through dramatic acts reflecting wisdom and compassion, the dragon girl refutes all these reasons. This incident affirms the absolute spiritual equality of women.

As a little girl, my biggest fear was to be left out of or put down by a social group. When I reached adolescence, this fear intensified and became a major preoccupation. My mother, trying to help, advised me that whenever I felt left out, I should find someone else on the sidelines and go talk with them. Well, this was good as far as it went, but it didn't change the whole group dynamic: the sad and seemingly inevitable tendency of human beings to cluster and, in the process, exclude others. The *Lotus Sūtra* sets forth a totally different group dynamic, and it does so on a cosmic scale. No one is excluded from Buddhahood.

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another world eons ago, there was a bodhisattva named Dharmākara, who knew that Buddhas have the power to create Buddha realms in the heavens of the cosmos in which they can reside. With the aid of a Buddha who was living at that time, Dharmākara learned about the excellent characteristics of these realms. He then resolved to generate a Buddha realm that would combine these excellent qualities into the purest of Buddha realms. With this possible pure Buddha realm in mind, Dharmākara expressed his bodhisattva resolve for Buddhahood in forty-eight vows. One of the main points of these vows is that Dharmākara promised that he would not become a Buddha until he had gained the powers needed to produce such a pure Buddha realm and to bring all who want to be reborn there to his Land of Bliss. After telling this story in the *sūtra*, Gautama Buddha then commented that this is exactly what happened: Dharmākara Bodhisattva is now Amitābha Buddha (see Figure 4.3) living in a Buddha realm called the “Land of Bliss” (*Sukhāvatī*). In the *Smaller Land of Bliss Sūtra*, this “Pure Land” is then described in some detail.

An important part of this story for Buddhist devotional practice and experience has to do with the power of Dharmākara’s bodhisattva resolve to bring to this Land of Bliss all those who seek to be born there. There are differing explanations as to how one can be born in the Land of Bliss. But in general it requires faith in Amitābha Buddha and a sincere desire to be born in his Buddha realm. In some verses, it is said that one must generate the thought of becoming a Buddha (*bodhicitta*), cultivate certain virtues, and chant homage to Amitābha Buddha. As we shall see later, the Mahāyāna schools in East Asia that base themselves on these *sūtras* emphasize the



FIGURE 4.3. Statue of Amida (Amitābha) Buddha at Kōtoju-in Temple, Kamakura, Japan, known as the Great Buddha dated 1252 C.E.

saving grace of Amitābha for birth in the Land of Bliss. Once there—given Amitābha's presence and power along with the purity of his Buddha realm—it will be easier to attain Awakening. At any time in the Land of Bliss, one can hear and understand more clearly the Dharma and practice that lead to Awakening. One will not encounter any evil or hindrances to spiritual attainment. Here is how the Buddha realm is described:

This Land of Bliss, Ānanda, which is the realm of Lord Amitābha, is rich and prosperous, comfortable, fertile, delightful and full of many gods and people. In this realm, Ānanda, there are no hells, no animals, no ghosts or *asuras*—no inauspicious places to be reborn. That realm of the Land of Bliss, Ānanda, produces many fragrant odors, is rich in the variety of flowers and fruits, adorned with jewel trees, which are visited by flocks of different kinds of birds conjured up by the Buddha's miraculous power. . . . On all sides it is surrounded by golden nets, and covered by lotus flowers made of precious things. . . .

And everyone hears the pleasant sound that they wish to hear. If they just wish it, they may hear about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Saṅgha, the Six Perfections, the Ten Stages . . . emptiness . . . calmness, quietude and peace, great loving kindness, great compassion, great sympathetic joy, and great equanimity. . . . This brings about the state of mind that leads to the attainment of Awakening. Also, nowhere in the realm of the Land of Bliss does anyone hear of anything unwholesome, nowhere are there any hindrances or states of punishment. . . . And that, Ānanda, is the reason for this realm called the Land of Bliss. . . . All the beings who have been born, who are born, and who will be born in this Buddha realm are all fixed on the right method of salvation until they have attained Nirvana. . . .

If any beings, Ānanda, over and over reverently devote themselves to this Buddha, if they plant a large . . . root of goodness, having raised their thoughts to Awakening, if they vow to be born in that realm, then, when the hour of their death approaches, Amitābha Buddha . . . will stand before them, surrounded by hosts of monks. Then having seen that lord, and having died with serene hearts, they will be born in precisely that realm of the Land of Bliss. (*Sukhāvatī-Vyūha-Sūtra*, 15–16, 18, 24, 27)

Finally, it is important to note that the practice of “remembering the Buddha's name” (*buddhānusmṛti*) was popular in early Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this practice, one begins with saying the word *nāmah*, meaning “hail to,” and then adds the name of a Buddha. As we shall see later, when Mahāyāna develops in East Asia, the actual chanting of “Hail to Amitābha Buddha” (Chinese: “*Namo Amituofo*”; Japanese: “*Namu Amida Butsu*”) becomes quite popular. With a sincere faith in the power of Amitābha's vow, these devotees hope to be born in his Land of Bliss, or what they refer to as the “Pure Land.”

THE GREAT JOURNEY OF THE BODHISATTVA

In Mahāyāna, the Great Journey of the bodhisattva begins with hearing the Dharma of the Buddha and taking up the practice of the Six Perfections.

Box 4.2

Strength for Living, Courage for Dying

I first encountered the Name of Amitābha or, in Japanese, Amida Buddha while I was in the army of occupation in Japan after World War II. Through my doctoral study, I became aware of the spiritual richness and meaning of this Name for countless believers in East Asia. I later became a convert to the Amidist teaching of Shinran, the Japanese founder of Shin Buddhism, after meeting many devoted members in Hawaii for whom it was a vital reality within their lives.

A heart attack made Amida's compassion and wisdom real to me in a deeply personal way through the skill of the doctors and the restorative powers of our bodies. Though I faced death, I was at peace in the experience of Amida's embrace of boundless compassion and wisdom.

Amida Buddha, whose Name means "Infinite," is the Buddha of Eternal Life and Infinite Light. In form and concept, he is the symbol of indefinable and inconceivable reality, which embraces all life and being in Oneness. He is the power of ideals, moving us to higher aspiration, though not a substantial entity. In Buddhist terms, he is empty, but manifest in all forms of existence. His mythic Vows highlight the interdependence of all beings and the cosmos. As the spiritual foundation for all value and meaning, Amida inspires our ideals of love, compassion, and wisdom.

Through intoning his Name in Japanese, *Namu Amida Butsu*, with others or voicelessly in our heart and mind, we are grateful to Life. Expressing our oneness with the Buddha, *Namu* ("I take refuge in") refers to our own ordinary or "foolish" being, and *Amida Butsu*, the Infinite. In quiet contemplation we receive strength for living and courage for dying.

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These virtues (giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom) were first advocated in the *Tripitaka*, and Mahāyāna agrees with the earlier tradition that one's motivation is what determines the real quality of one's life of virtue. For Mahāyāna, the true aspiration that should motivate the practice of virtue is "the thought of, or aspiration for, Awakening" (*bodhi-citta*). In Mahāyāna, after some time of merit-earning practice and with the aid of a teacher, the person on the Great Course experiences the compassionate aspiration to attain Awakening *for the sake of all living beings*. This aspiration inspired by compassion then becomes the motivation of the entire bodhisattva journey.

The altruistic element of this aspiration for Awakening grows stronger as the bodhisattva realizes the truth of emptiness through growth in wisdom. By this wisdom, he or she experiences the ordinary duality between self and

the world as a fiction. That is, one experiences that all things arise dependently so that oneself and the universe are empty of existing as independent entities. With this wisdom, one is also enabled to perform the Six Perfections "perfectly," that is, with selflessness. One is able to give to others, for example, without distinguishing between oneself and the others such that the virtue of the giving is "pure," without any self-centered involvement. Therefore, in Mahāyāna practice of the Six Perfections, the sixth virtue, namely the wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) so extolled in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*, is necessary to practice the other five to the degree that one can attain Buddhahood. With this wisdom base, the bodhisattva goes ahead on his or her Great Journey, cultivating the qualities of Buddhahood for the good of all living beings. The altruistic disposition of the heart is also given particular concrete expression in the bodhisattva "vows," taken by lay and monastic Mahāyāna Buddhists alike. These vows are experienced as being powerful forces in one's psyche, guiding and impelling one toward a deeper level of compassion and practice of the Bodhisattva Path.

Between 100 and 300 C.E., after the Six Perfections had been practiced for centuries, Mahāyāna Buddhism introduced the doctrine of the Ten Stages (*daśabhūmi*) to clarify further the Great Journey of the bodhisattva. Mahāyāna also added four more perfections so that there is one perfection stressed in each of the Ten Stages. These four perfections include skillful means, vows, power, and omniscient knowledge. When one considers the description of Ten Stages, three things become clear about the Bodhisattva Path. First, it is claimed that while the bodhisattva journey takes eons to complete, it enables one to aid many more beings in their pursuit of Awakening than one could by following the path to Arhatship. Second, it is also clearly taught that for a person to journey on this path, he or she requires the aid of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas to reach the goal. Third, for this aid to be realized, there needs to be a "transfer of merit" (*pariṇāmanā*) from the bodhisattvas and Buddhas to sentient beings. This kind of transfer of merit was practiced in early Buddhism. For example, a person might give a donation to a Buddhist community and gain thereby certain merit. He or she could then transfer that merit to a deceased relative. The bodhisattvas and Buddhas gain an enormous amount of merit in the Great Journey to Buddhahood that can be transferred to others. Although the merit is not originally a causal force but is the fruit of efforts on the Bodhisattva Path, it can be transformed into a cause of benefit to living beings through being directed toward them by the bodhisattvas and Buddhas. With this in mind, we first look at the original Six Perfections, and then at the Ten Stages, where we also introduce the other four perfections.

The Six Perfections

The first perfection is called *giving* (*dāna*). This virtue involves giving of material things, time, the invaluable gift of instruction about the Dharma, even one's own life for the sake of other beings in need. For giving to be a "perfection," it should be practiced with a selfless attitude based on insight into the nonduality

of oneself and others. That is, when one has transcended the perceived separation between oneself and another person, then one's giving to that person becomes an action where oneself and the other are united in the pure act of giving and receiving. One should also transform merit gained by this generous action into fuel for one's own eventual Buddhahood and transfer merit for the Buddhahood of others. This dedication of merit is also done in the practice of the other perfections. It helps the person overcome attachments to any immediate material or spiritual gratification.

The second perfection is *morality* (*śīla*), which is the first of the three aspects of the Theravāda Path of Purification discussed in Chapter 3. In fact, the other two aspects of that Way of the Elders (concentration and wisdom) are included under the fifth and sixth perfections. With these inclusions, the Great Journey of the bodhisattva is seen in Mahāyāna as an expansion, rather than a rejection, of the path of the *arhat*. In terms of morality, while some Mahāyāna monastics observe all the *Vinaya* rules, Mahāyāna teaches both lay and monastic Buddhists to practice the Ten Good Actions. These moral actions include (1) not to kill, (2) not to steal, (3) not to engage in illicit sexual behavior, (4) not to lie, (5) not to use harsh words, (6) not to use words that cause enmity between people, (7) not to engage in idle talk, (8) not to be greedy, (9) not to be angry, and (10) not to hold wrong views. It is believed that the Ten Good Actions can begin the necessary moral purification of unwholesome thoughts and dispositions, as well as the actions that arise from such afflictive thoughts and mental attitudes. The result of this perfection of morality is freedom from troubling passions and, thereby, a greater inner balance, mental calm, and equanimity, which are highly valued in all forms of Buddhist spirituality. This freedom and balance provide the basis for deeper spiritual advancement in meditation and wisdom.

The third perfection is *patience* (*kṣānti*). This perfection entails the patient endurance of hardships and the forgiveness of those who harm the bodhisattva in those hardships. With wisdom, one can see that the person who harms one is just caught up in negative attitudes and ways of living based on previous causes and conditions. While the perfection of giving helps one overcome greed, patience aids in the conquest of hate, another of the Three Root Evils. Patience also means to be patient with difficult Buddhist doctrines—such as those about emptiness—that can be confusing to persons with little experience on the bodhisattva journey.

The fourth perfection is *vigor* (*vīrya*), which refers to the effort, zeal, and energy needed to overcome unwholesome thoughts and attitudes, to cultivate positive virtues, to study the Dharma, and to do good actions. Vigor corresponds to Right Effort in the Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha and includes the four types of Right Effort we discussed when we introduced the Eightfold Path. However, as a perfection in Mahāyāna, it also implies the heroic compassionate effort one should exert to benefit all living beings. Finally, vigor refers to the sustained fervor that is necessary to maintain enthusiasm on the spiritual journey—which at times can seem long and arduous. This vigorous determination is inspired by the deep compassion that

arises from seeing others in need of help and realizing that as a Buddha, one can be of most help to all living beings.

The fifth perfection is *meditation (dhyāna)*, corresponding to concentration (*samādhi*), which is the second of the three aspects of the Theravāda Path of Purification. In Mahāyāna, the layperson as well as the monastic is welcome to study and practice meditation. In advancing in meditation practice, the bodhisattva perfects certain forms found in earlier traditions, such as the Four Meditations, the Four Formless Meditations, the Four Divine Abodes, and the practice of tranquillity and insight meditation. However, the bodhisattva does not accept rebirth into the heavenly realms to which some of these meditations lead. Instead, he or she seeks to be reborn only in the Buddha realms where he or she can progress in the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood.

It is said that the bodhisattva perfects innumerable other forms of meditation and *samādhi* states, thus opening the Mahāyāna tradition to an acceptance of new types of meditative practices. Also, Mahāyāna stresses three types of meditation from the earlier tradition because they can be used so well to cultivate their experience of emptiness. First is meditation on "emptiness" itself, which is used to realize the lack of independent selfhood of the things one ordinarily perceives. The second form of meditation is on "signlessness." Here, the ordinary cognition of things is transcended so that one does not see their "signs," or perceptible characteristics. This implies the meditative transcendence of the "signs," or characteristics, that distinguish between one's mind and the objects of experience, between subject and object. Thus, one strengthens a "signless" experience of emptiness. The third meditation is on "wishlessness." Here, based on meditations on emptiness and signlessness, one eliminates attachments to, or "wishes" for, the things of the world. The bodhisattva is also free from any wish for liberation from the world as long as there are beings in the world who need his or her help.

The sixth perfection is *wisdom (prajñā)*, corresponding to the third of the three aspects of the Theravāda Path of Purification. In the previous description of three forms of Mahāyāna meditation, we can see that the fifth perfection aids in the attainment of wisdom. The experience of wisdom penetrates the empty, signless, and wishless nature of reality with such power that one finds greater freedom and peace. Therefore, this wisdom is the door to Awakening and Buddhahood. Because of this generative function, Mahāyāna often personifies wisdom as a goddess and refers to her as "the mother of all Buddhas." That is, wisdom—like a mother—"gives birth to" all the qualities of the enlightened character. For example, as we have said, it is by experiencing the emptiness of any independent selfhood with the eye of wisdom that one is able to practice the other five virtues with perfect selflessness.

In Mahāyāna, wisdom penetrates the various factors and processes of life and understands how some of these lead to happiness and others to suffering. It penetrates the dependently arisen nature of life and understands the causes and conditions that make some relations satisfying and others not. In these ways, Mahāyāna wisdom is similar to that of Theravāda. However, the

ultimate realization of the bodhisattva's insight is emptiness, the true suchness of life. With this perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva finds that in living the Dharma, he or she is free from the afflictive thoughts and emotions and the unwholesome words and actions that produce a life of suffering for oneself and others. According to Mahāyāna, this insight into emptiness is such a powerful antidote to *duḥkha* that it overturns ignorance and the attitudes that lead to these negative thoughts, feelings, words, and behaviors. In their place, compassion arises as the spontaneous expression of emptiness and deepens the altruistic attitude (*bodhicitta*) of the bodhisattva toward all living beings.

The Ten Stages

After practicing the Six Perfections for centuries, the Mahāyāna tradition began to teach that there are certain discernible stages (*bhūmi*) of spiritual growth on the bodhisattva's Great Journey. Eventually, Ten Stages became the accepted steps in this spiritual itinerary. In this traditional view, the Six Perfections were related to the first six stages, and four more perfections were added to fit with the final four stages. As we shall see, in the final four stages, bodhisattvas evolve beyond what is possible for human beings. They are born in Buddha realms—such as the Land of Bliss of Amitābha Buddha—to pursue the last four stages. We will introduce these Ten Stages with passages from the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, as it is preserved in the Twenty-Sixth Book of the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (*Avatamsaka Sūtra*).

A Joyous Choice

The first of the Ten Stages is called *joyous* (*pramuditā*). Here the bodhisattva produces, based on previous good deeds, the "aspiration for Awakening" (*bodhicitta*). Thereby, he or she enters the family of the Buddhas and becomes "joyous." At this stage, the bodhisattva works especially on the first perfection of giving, or generosity. By experiencing with wisdom the emptiness of all things, he or she can give selflessly to benefit others without regret, worry, or desire for praise. Also, by seeing the "nonseparateness" between self and other, the bodhisattva can give to others with the proper attitude of empathy and compassion. Here is how this stage is described in the *sūtra*:

So, in beings who have developed the roots of goodness . . . who have developed pure intentions . . . who have developed pity and compassion . . . the aspiration for Awakening [*bodhicitta*] is aroused, the quest for enlightened knowledge . . . for the salvation of all beings.

With this arousing, the bodhisattva . . . is born into the family of the Buddhas is established in the lineage of the Buddhas . . . and is certain to attain perfect Awakening. Thereby established in this condition, the bodhisattva attains the first stage of the Bodhisattva Path, that of great joy. . . . One becomes joyful thinking of the Buddhas and the Dharma, of bodhisattvas and their practices, of

the purification of the Perfections . . . and of the ability they will have to benefit all beings. . . .

Seeing the mass of *duḥkha* suffered by beings . . . the bodhisattva develops great compassion, and seeks to free them from their sufferings . . . to bring them to the everlasting bliss of Nirvana. Thus . . . by sympathy and loving kindness, and by great effort, the bodhisattva relinquishes all things with equanimity . . . for the sake of the salvation of all beings. . . . Of the Ten Perfections, the perfection of giving is foremost . . . so the roots of goodness become more pure and useful.

Purity, Luminosity, and Radiance

The second stage is called *purity* (*vimalā*). This purity is the result of practicing the second perfection, morality. Here the bodhisattva develops the Ten Good Actions and overcomes impure inclinations to engage in unwholesome actions. With wisdom, the bodhisattva's selflessness from stage one is expressed in all the wholesome actions of moral living. With purity of mind, speech, and action, there grows an inner equanimity in the person that is the basis for more profound meditation practice, and a deeper attainment of wisdom. In the words of the *sūtra*,

Bodhisattvas in the stage of purity naturally develop the Ten Good Actions. . . . By means of these good ways of acting . . . effort is made to achieve the complete purification of all aspects of action. . . . Thus many Buddhas come to be perceived by the bodhisattvas who live in accord with the power of morality. . . . They attend those Buddhas, and they learn the Ten Good Actions from them with great respect . . . thereby they purify generosity and morality.

The third stage is called *luminosity* (*prabhākārī*). Here, the bodhisattva's luminous wisdom is like the light of the sun as it penetrates the suchness of all things. This same luminous wisdom is like a fire in that its insight into the emptiness of life burns away attachments. It also burns away any perception of duality between oneself and the world during the practice of meditation. This luminous state is strengthened by the third perfection of patience. It is here too that the bodhisattva—with a luminous, patient, and gentle mind—practices with greater success the Four Meditations, Four Formless Meditations, and Four Divine Abodes. The practice of patience helps the bodhisattva overcome anger, hatred, and even annoyance over any harmful acts or words. In luminous wisdom, everything is viewed with patient endurance and compassion. Finally, it is here that the bodhisattva develops the five supernatural abilities (*siddhis*) that are also recognized in earlier Buddhism. Here again are passages from the *sūtra*:

The bodhisattva in the third stage examines the impermanent nature of all conditioned existence and sees it in its suchness. . . . Seeing all conditioned existence in this way, the bodhisattva's mind is more and more free from attachment to all these conditioned things, and is directed toward gaining enlightened knowledge.

Bodhisattvas at this stage of luminosity leave behind desires, evil, and unwholesomeness for the realization and practice of the Dharma. . . . With pure mindfulness, they achieve and are established in the fourth stage of meditation . . . not for enjoyment, but for the realm of neither perception nor non-perception . . . In the same way, their minds are full of loving kindness . . . compassion, joy, and equanimity . . . and experience the five supernormal abilities. . . . Furthermore, the [bodhisattva's] patience and gentleness are purified along with friendliness, freedom from anger . . . and pride. . . . For among the Ten Perfections, the perfection of patience is foremost.

The fourth stage is called *radiance* (*arcīṣmatī*). At this stage, the bodhisattva cultivates the fourth perfection of vigor, by which he or she is able to eliminate mental and emotional afflictions. Here, mindfulness and the four types of Right Effort taught by the Buddha are practiced more deeply. With the removal of these afflictive obstructions to the spiritual life, the bodhisattva's wisdom becomes even more "radiant." With this new vigor in the Great Journey, the bodhisattva pursues the traditional Eightfold Path with even greater effort. Thereby, doubts are cut off and the person's disposition becomes more relaxed, kindly, gentle, and peaceful. As the *sūtra* says,

The bodhisattvas in this radiant stage examine . . . internal and external phenomena with awareness and mindfulness . . . overcoming worldly desire and aversion. . . . The bodhisattvas use vigorous effort to keep unwholesome states of mind from arising . . . to destroy unwholesome states that have arisen . . . to give rise to wholesome states that have not arisen . . . to cultivate wholesome states that have already arisen. . . .

Based on detachment . . . they develop Right Understanding . . . Right Thought . . . Right Speech . . . Right Action . . . Right Livelihood . . . Right Effort . . . Right Mindfulness . . . Right Concentration . . . As the bodhisattvas develop the aspects of the [Eightfold] Path with skillful means and wisdom . . . they attain patience, self-control and peace. Being patient, self-controlled and peaceful, they contemplate the aspects of the [Eightfold Path] in order to purify the higher stages with constant vigor . . . and they produce great roots of goodness, they destroy worldly defilements . . . all doubts are cut off, and they attain joy and inner peace.

Meditation and Wisdom

The fifth stage is called *difficult to conquer* (*sudurjayā*). With great purity and equanimity, the bodhisattva's wisdom is now able more deeply to penetrate the Four Noble Truths about existence. With this indestructible wisdom, the bodhisattva is "hard to conquer" by persons caught in ignorance and evil, but wants to free them from their suffering condition. On this level, the bodhisattva cultivates the fifth perfection of meditation so that he or she is also "hard to conquer" by any inner tendencies toward distractions, as well as temptations or trials. Also at this level, out of compassion for others, the bodhisattva learns about culture, the arts, science, and medicine to help other sentient beings. The *sūtra* says,

[They] attain concentration that cannot be conquered, and by so doing, they know correctly the truth of *duḥkha*, the truth of the cause of *duḥkha*, the truth of the cessation of *duḥkha*, and the truth of the [path to cessation's] attainment. . . . They know how the mass of *duḥkha* has been caused by ignorance and craving. . . . And it occurs to them, "How strange and sad that these ignorant beings . . . increase the fetters of *duḥkha* . . . do not pull out the arrows of pride and wrong views . . . do not extinguish the flames of hate, greed and delusion, and do not destroy the darkness of ignorance."

Whatever good the bodhisattvas undertake . . . they do so to lead all beings to freedom, to the ultimate Nirvana. . . . The bodhisattvas, thus engaged in helping living beings, practice whatever might benefit these beings, such as writing and teaching, mathematics, the various sciences including medical science . . . song and dance, drama and music . . . these things the bodhisattva undertakes to learn out of compassion. . . . For bodhisattvas in this stage, the perfection of meditation is most important . . . and having attained concentration, they affect a trillion worlds.

The sixth stage is called *face-to-face* (*abhimukhī*). Here, the bodhisattva reaps the fruit of the meditative attainments of the fifth stage and realizes the sixth perfection, wisdom. Thereby, the bodhisattva is brought "face-to-face" with reality itself. What he or she sees with wisdom insight is the empty, signless, and wishless nature of things. One comes to this realization by observing the dependent arising of existence. In a way that is similar to how Buddhaghosa described the person on the Four Paths contemplating over and over the dependently arisen factors of existence, the bodhisattva is said to contemplate the dependent arising and dependent cessation of all factors of existence from ten different perspectives. The bodhisattva does so in such a way that he or she overcomes any attachment not only to the world but also to Nirvana. Having practiced all the aspects of the Theravāda Path of Purification that leads to being an *arhat*, the bodhisattva could now enter Final Nirvana after death if he or she wishes. But because of his or her detachment to Nirvana and compassionate aspiration to attain Awakening for the benefit of all living beings, the bodhisattva decides to continue being reborn into the world. As long as there are beings in need, he or she will continue the Great Journey to full Buddhahood to better help others. Here are the *sūtra's* words:

Based on a meditative understanding of the true nature of all things, the bodhisattva . . . guided by great compassion . . . observes the arising and cessation of the world. . . . Bodhisattvas contemplate dependent arising in ten patterns, and because of contemplating it in terms of . . . its inherent emptiness . . . the door of emptiness and salvation is realized by them. Because of the emptiness of own-being . . . the signlessness of all things is realized by them. For those who have entered into emptiness and signlessness . . . the door of wishlessness and salvation is realized by them. Entering these three doors of salvation, they leave behind the views of self and object . . . of being and nonbeing. Filled with even more compassion, they go ahead in working for the Awakening yet to be achieved. . . . Among the Ten Perfections, the perfection of wisdom is most important to these bodhisattvas, but they also practice the others.

Beyond Arhatship to Buddhahood

The seventh stage is called *going far* (*dūraṅgamā*). Skillful means as a seventh perfection is added to the original six, and is especially practiced at this level of spiritual life. Remaining in the world and perfecting skillful means (*upāya*) to help others gain enlightenment, the bodhisattva is "going far" beyond the *arhat's* attainment. By skillful means, the bodhisattva is able to adapt his or her teaching the Dharma to the needs of different persons. By developing an ability to know the minds and hearts of others, he or she can practice skillfully all the perfections in each moment for the benefit of others. For the bodhisattva to cultivate all the wisdom and skillful means he or she needs at this point in the Great Journey, it eventually becomes necessary that he or she no longer be born as a human being. Therefore, the bodhisattva must be born as a "celestial bodhisattva" in a Buddha realm to develop certain abilities. As *sūtra* says,

They achieve access to the seventh stage by . . . skillful means, the perfection of wisdom and knowledge. . . . They train their mind well in realizing emptiness, signlessness and wishlessness, but they also collect a great supply of virtue and knowledge. They obtain selflessness . . . but they continue to live loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. . . . They become calm and peaceful by removing the fires of afflictions, but they continue to extinguish the fires of afflictive greed, hatred and delusion in all beings.

While the bodhisattvas at this seventh stage have transcended most of the mass of afflictions . . . they cannot be said to be defiled by afflictions, or to be free from afflictions. Why? Because their afflictions do not affect their behavior, they cannot be said to be defiled by their afflictions. Because they are still seeking full Buddha-knowledge . . . they cannot be said to be free from afflictions. . . . [But] by attaining certain concentrations in which skillful means and wisdom are purified, and with the power of great compassion, bodhisattvas go beyond the stages of the disciples [of Theravāda] and the *pratyekabuddhas*. . . . [In this] seventh stage called "going far," most of the bodhisattvas become celestial beings . . . skilled at leading all beings to certainty.

The eighth stage is called *immovable* (*acalā*). The bodhisattva has now gone beyond any false or inadequate conceptualization of the world and is completely established in the Dharma—a position from which he or she is "immovable." It is as though the bodhisattva awakens from a dream and sees the Truth in a new and fresh way. His or her practice now becomes effortless. In this new experience, the bodhisattva's commitment to the Great Journey is also said to be "irreversible." This irreversibility is similar to that of the Streamwinner of the earlier tradition who will never turn back. The difference is that the bodhisattva's Great Journey, Mahāyāna claims, leads beyond the *arhat's* attainment to full Buddhahood. In this new freedom, the bodhisattvas focus on the eighth perfection of "vows" (*praṇidhāna*), which are the concrete expressions of the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living beings. Also at this stage, the bodhisattvas gain more

advanced forms of skillful means associated with Buddhahood. For example, they obtain the ability to manifest in various emanation bodies throughout the universe to instruct the Dharma to all forms of life. Here we can see why the bodhisattva must be a celestial being rather than a human being—no human could gain such an ability. As the *sūtra* puts it,

When they attain the eighth stage, called the immovable, bodhisattvas become free from all effort having attained the condition of effortlessness that is freed from mental, physical and verbal striving. . . . It is like a boat . . . that is dragged with great effort to the ocean; but once in the ocean, sails effortlessly by the wind.

They know the ways in which the realm of desire . . . the realm of form . . . and the formless realm [are] constituted. . . . They know the varieties of beings . . . and they apply their knowledge to producing emanations . . . in whatever forms in which beings are born . . . for the purpose of aiding these beings to mature . . . to perfect Awakening. . . . With this knowledge at this stage, not moving from their Buddha-realm, they can appear in . . . untold Buddha realms, taking on the different characteristics of beings . . . according to their attitudes and dispositions . . . with endless forms of emanation bodies for the development and teaching of all beings.

This eighth stage is named "immovable" because the bodhisattvas abiding there cannot be turned back from their journey; thus it is called the stage of irreversibility. . . . These bodhisattvas primarily practice, among the Ten Perfections, the perfection of vows . . . and with the power of these vows, they produce . . . countless emanations of bodies.

The ninth stage is called *good insight* (*sādhumati*). At this advanced stage, the bodhisattva perfects even more skillful means for bringing others to Awakening and uses them in all the realms throughout the entire cosmos. Here again, we can see why this stage can only be fully practiced by a celestial bodhisattva. At this level, the bodhisattva's understanding of all the "paths" of Buddhism is perfected into "good insight." He or she has clear insight into how people are "entangled," as Buddhaghosa also puts it, in *duḥkha*. Based on this good insight, he or she is enabled to teach the Dharma skillfully, and with a skill and eloquence that even surpasses the abilities of the gods. To do so, the bodhisattva practices the ninth perfection of "power" (*bala*). For example, with one such power, he or she understands and uses all the languages and means of communication of all living things in all parts of the cosmos. Here again are the *sūtra*'s words:

Bodhisattvas at the stage of good insight have penetrating insight into good, evil and neutral conduct . . . the conduct of disciples [of Theravāda], the conduct of *pratyekabuddhas*, the conduct of bodhisattvas, and the conduct pertaining to Buddhahood. . . . With this awareness, bodhisattvas know how all beings get entangled mentally, entangled with afflictions . . . they know the aspects of the mind . . . of the afflictions . . . of weakness and strength. . . . Thus, bodhisattvas know the differences between all living beings' conduct, and undertake to liberate them according to their condition.

Knowing all this, the bodhisattvas give the Dharma to all beings . . . according to their mental dispositions and attitudes . . . their entanglements and afflictions . . . their actions and habits. They apply whatever skillful means may bring liberation by appearing in numerous forms in all worlds . . . knowing the language of all beings . . . with the necessary knowledge to explain the Dharma. . . . Thus, having attained mental power . . . they infuse a billion worlds and teach the Dharma to all beings according to their differences in mentality. . . . Most of the bodhisattvas at this stage become [celestial beings] with great powers, lords of millions of worlds.

The Dharma Cloud

The tenth and final stage is called *Dharma cloud* (*dharma meghā*). Here, the bodhisattva practices the tenth perfection of "omniscient knowledge" (*jñāna*). He or she masters all forms of concentration (*samādhi*) and resides in the *samādhi* of the "knowledge of the omniscient." In this concentration, the rays of wisdom from all Buddhas rest on the bodhisattva's head, sharing their wisdom and consecrating him or her with the qualities of Buddhahood. The bodhisattva is then able to keep in mind this "Dharma cloud," showered on him or her by the Buddhas, from which he or she rains the Dharma throughout the cosmos. However, he or she must be born one more time to undertake the full life of a Buddha and create his or her own Buddha realm. Meanwhile in this tenth stage, the bodhisattva produces limitless emanation bodies throughout the cosmos, raining down the Dharma for the benefit of all beings. As a tenth-stage bodhisattva, obstructions to omniscience are removed, and skillful means, confidence, and power reach their utmost in preparation for birth as a Buddha:

Those bodhisattvas . . . are said to have attained the stage of consecration with the knowledge of the omniscient in all of its aspects. . . . They realize innumerable millions of concentrations. . . . At the end of innumerable millions of concentrations, he or she realizes a bodhisattva concentration called "receiving consecration by the special knowledge of the omniscient."

Upon the attainment of this concentration . . . the bodhisattva appears seated on a great jewel lotus . . . then as many bodhisattvas as there are other jewel lotuses encircle that bodhisattva on those other jewel lotuses, entering a million concentrations, gazing upon the bodhisattva in the middle of the circle. . . . Then from between the eyebrows . . . of all the Buddhas there come rays of light possessing the knowledge of the omniscient . . . illuminating all worlds . . . causing Buddha realms to quake . . . reaching throughout space, until they return to the encircling assembly, where they disappear into the top of the head of the bodhisattva being consecrated. . . . When the rays of light enter that bodhisattva's head, he or she is said to be consecrated in the realm of the perfectly Awakened Ones. . . . Thus, he or she enters the ranks of the perfect Buddhas.

Thus consecrated, the bodhisattva, mature in virtue and knowledge, is established in the tenth stage, called "Dharma cloud." Bodhisattvas at this stage have complete knowledge of the totality of the cosmos. . . . Since the vast knowledge of the Buddhas is immeasurable, the penetrating knowledge of the bodhisattva at this stage is also considered omniscient. . . . [And] in the arising of just

a moment of thought, the bodhisattva can now go throughout the universe . . . manifesting infinite embodiments all at the same time. . . . They can also cause the wonderful qualities of the Buddha realms to appear in their own bodies. . . . [Thus] they illumine numerous worlds and cause numerous beings to mature.

THE THREE BODIES OF THE BUDDHA

Now that we have seen what the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood entails, this question arises: What exactly is a Buddha in the Mahāyāna tradition? In fact, the notion of Buddhahood developed in Mahāyāna over a number of centuries growing from the notion of the nature of a Buddha taught in early Buddhist traditions. Early Indian Buddhist schools like Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṅghika formulated a two-body theory of the Buddha. This included a form body (*rūpakāya*) and a Dharma body (*Dharmakāya*). The Sarvāstivādins claimed that the Buddha's physical form body is born into the world with human limitations and impurities, while the Dharma body of his enlightened realization transcends the world and is always pure. The Mahāsāṅghikins went further in claiming that the Buddha's Dharma body is ultimately omniscient and omnipotent, and has a limitless life span. His physical form body is manifested in the world to liberate living beings and is itself pure. This view of Mahāsāṅghika was the basis for what would evolve into the Mahāyāna notion of the three bodies of the Buddha (*trikāya*).

As we have seen from selections from the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the teaching of suchness (*tathatā*) claims that the very essence of all beings is pure and nirvanic. This essence may be covered by defilements, but it is never tarnished. It is one, the same for all beings, never changing, unmade and uncreated, and hidden in all things. A living Buddha in his Awakening realizes this true nature of all beings. He realizes it as his "Dharma Body," his *Dharmakāya*. Here, the Buddha is identified in his Dharma Body with the pure and real nature of all things. He is that suchness; it is his true nature. The *Dharmakāya* is the ultimate body of the Buddha, the first of the three bodies of the Buddha according to Mahāyāna. This is true for all Buddhas; they are all in essence the one *Dharmakāya*.

Beyond this more abstract description of the *Dharmakāya*, its realization in individual Buddhas is described as wisdom and compassion filling the entire cosmos. This penetration of the universe by the *Dharmakāya* brings light and compassion to all beings. Here is the religious side to the Mahāyāna notion of *Dharmakāya*. It is the foundation and the support of everything, and it is the source of their transformation through skillful means. While the Dharma Body is eternally quiescent, the transformation of living beings leading to Awakening and Buddhahood is carried out in specific ways by the various Buddhas that manifest the Dharma Body. The *Dharmakāya's* "transformation of support" expresses itself in the two other bodies of the Buddha that together with the Dharma Body make up the *trikāya*. It is through these other two bodies that the *Dharmakāya* delivers sentient beings from suffering and leads them to Awakening and Buddhahood.

The second body of the Buddha is called the "Enjoyment Body" or "Reward Body" (*saṃbhogakāya*). Mahāyāna teaches that a Buddha gains great merit both as a Buddha and as a bodhisattva prior to Buddhahood. This merit produces certain attributes and powers that enable a Buddha to take a celestial *saṃbhogakāya* form as a reward to be enjoyed by that Buddha and others who reside in his celestial Buddha realm (*buddhakṣetra*). A *saṃbhogakāya* Buddha creates this celestial realm by transforming his pure consciousness into the limitless future. In that realm, a Buddha manifests the boundless light and limitless life span of his essence, the *Dharmakāya*. While the *Dharmakāya* is the quiescent one true nature of a Buddha, the *saṃbhogakāya* contains all the Buddha's supernatural attributes and powers as a reward for his practice. These are used by the *saṃbhogakāya* Buddha in teaching, providing blessings, and caring for the needs of all sentient beings. In this regard, the only way a tenth-stage bodhisattva can gain full Buddhahood is by the teachings of a living Buddha. So one of the primary responsibilities of a celestial Buddha is to enable these bodhisattvas who have one more birth to Buddhahood to achieve that goal in his celestial realm.

Finally, we come to the third body of the Buddha, the *nirmāṇakāya* or "Manifestation Body." The ultimate nature of the Buddha is the quiescence of the *Dharmakāya* penetrating the whole cosmos, individual Buddhas can manifest themselves in different forms according to the needs of sentient beings. These forms are *nirmāṇakāyas* endowed with wisdom and compassion to expound the Dharma, to turn the wheel of the Dharma. They may manifest as a human Buddha or as an ordinary person, animal, or even a ghost to liberate different kinds of sentient beings. Gautama Buddha is considered a *nirmāṇakāya*. Manifestation Buddhas like Gautama use their skillful means to mature ordinary people in the paths of both the *arhats* and the bodhisattvas. They all have the *Dharmakāya* as their foundation, wisdom and compassion as their core, and transformation of living beings as their activity.

Celestial Buddhas

The second body of the Buddha, the celestial *saṃbhogakāya*, provides Buddhists with many sources of powerful help. Akṣobhya Buddha is one of the most famous of the celestial Buddhas. When he took up the practice of the Bodhisattva Path, he made a vow never to be angry or have thoughts of malice or hatred toward any living being until he attained Buddhahood. Thus, he was named Akṣobhya, meaning "Unperturbed." Akṣobhya Buddha is perhaps the first of the celestial Buddhas during this eon to be mentioned in the early Mahāyāna *sūtras*. In one of the early *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*, Gautama Buddha is said to have enabled his hearers to see Akṣobhya Buddha. In the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, it is said that Vimalakīrti revealed Akṣobhya's Buddha realm called *Abhirati*, "Joyous," that is populated mainly by *arhats* and a few bodhisattvas. It is said that with the assistance of Akṣobhya, a person can easily attain Arhatship in his Buddha realm. Scholars see this fact as indicating that Akṣobhya Buddha represents a transitional stage between the goals of Arhatship and Buddhahood.

Certainly the most widely known celestial Buddha is Amitābha, or the Buddha of "Unlimited Light." He is also known as Amitāyus, the Buddha of "Unlimited Life." As we saw earlier in this chapter, the story of Amitābha Buddha is presented in the *Land of Bliss Sūtras*. This Land of Bliss (*Sukhāvatī*), also called the "Pure Land," is Amitābha's Buddha-realm. Amitābha Buddha will bring good Buddhists to the Pure Land at death if they arouse the thought of Awakening, meditate with a faithful mind on Amitābha, and desire to be reborn in his Pure Land. Amitābha has the power to bring even an evil person to his Pure Land if that person hears the name of Amitābha Buddha, repents, and seeks to be reborn in the Pure Land. There is a mixture of inhabitants in the Pure Land, including mainly bodhisattvas and some *arhats*. However, the sole practice in this Pure Land is the Bodhisattva Path leading to Buddhahood. We will later explore more about the traditional practices that developed in East Asia around these notions concerning Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land.

Vairocana Buddha is another of the great celestial Buddhas. His name means "Shining Out" like the sun. The first mention of Vairocana is perhaps in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. There, he is described as being at the center of the cosmos like a cosmic sun radiating the light of the Dharma to all worlds. The luminous rays of his light dispel the darkness of ignorance releasing sentient beings from all obstructions to Awakening. These rays are often represented in Buddhist art. His Buddha-realm was born from the lotus and was purified by Vairocana for eons. Unlike the Buddha-realms of Akṣobhya and Amitābha, the Lotus Land of Vairocana is not inhabited by *arhats*, but only by bodhisattvas. Here we see a Mahāyāna development from the Buddha-realm of Akṣobhya where there are mainly *arhats* and a few bodhisattvas, to the Buddha-realm of Amitābha where there are mostly bodhisattvas and a few *arhats*, to the Buddha-realm of Vairocana where there are only bodhisattvas. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* also considers Vairocana to be the same as Gautama Buddha, but just different bodies. In later *sūtras*, this relationship is described as Gautama Buddha being the *nirmāṇakāya* of Vairocana.

Celestial Bodhisattvas

Certain tenth-stage bodhisattvas also became celestial persons to be worshiped and venerated. Given their powers gained in the Bodhisattva Path, they too are considered sources of help for Buddhists on the Great Journey. These bodhisattvas are called "Great Beings" (*mahāsattvas*). Different *sūtras* identify these Great Beings in longer or shorter lists. Three of the most important are Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, and Avalokiteśvara. Maitreya, or "Kindly One," is mentioned in the early Pali texts as the bodhisattva who in the distant future will become a Buddha in this world. At the present time, Maitreya is living in the Tuṣita Heaven waiting to be born as the next Buddha after Gautama. In the meantime, he uses his powers and skillful means to respond to the needs of all living beings, especially to those expressed in prayers by worshippers. In tenth-century China, there was a Chan (Zen) monk named Budai. Budai was a happy and rather portly monk who gave presents to chil-



FIGURE 4.4. Stone statue of Budai, 10th century Chinese monk said to be Maitreya Buddha.

dren from a bag he carried with him. After his death, a legend developed in China that he was, in reality, an emanation body of Maitreya. In the West, his image is sometimes called "the Laughing Buddha" (see Figure 4.4).

Mañjuśrī, or "Sweet Glory," is a celestial bodhisattva who resides in many worlds and is so revered for his great wisdom that he is called the "prince of the Dharma." He often appears in dreams and visions and protects Buddhists in times of need with his great powers. Mañjuśrī is known especially for using his great wisdom to destroy ignorance and awaken knowledge.

Avalokiteśvara resides in the Buddha realm of Amitābha Buddha. His name means "the Lord Who Looks Down," indicating that Avalokiteśvara looks down from Amitābha's realm with love and compassion, ready to respond to the needs of living beings (see Figure 4.5). So, while he possesses all virtues, he is especially known for his love and compassion, which he expresses in his limitless forms of skillful means. He often takes on an emanation body to appear compassionately in this world. In Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is believed to be an emanation of Avalokiteśvara. Later Buddhist art portrays Avalokiteśvara as having many heads and arms, representing his ability to notice and respond to the needs of many beings at the same time. In East Asia, Avalokiteśvara is represented as a female bodhisattva who is widely worshiped. In China she is known as Guanyin, and in Japan as Kannon.



FIGURE 4.5. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva statue at Gandan Monastery, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, known as “Megjid Janraisig (the Lord who looks in every direction), made of copper and covered with gold leaf.

The celestial bodhisattvas and celestial Buddhas inspire Mahāyāna Buddhists to travel the bodhisattvas course to full Buddhahood. They also encourage Buddhists who are on that way of spiritual transformation to seek the help of those who are more advanced on the Bodhisattva Path and those who have already achieved the goal. This and the other teachings of Mahāyāna present the world with the religious experiences of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Another task of Mahāyāna has been to explain the philosophical implications of these experiences in systematic ways. This led to the founding of certain Mahāyāna schools of thought in India that, together with their Abhidharma counterparts, contributed to the intellectual Indian Buddhist culture that we introduce in the next chapter. As we shall see in

later chapters, these Indian Mahāyāna schools would eventually be brought to other parts of Asia where they inspired more recent forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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