

SECTION FOUR: BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND TERMINOLOGY

4.1 What Does Pusa (Bodhisattva) Mean?

The Chinese word *pusa* is an abbreviated transliteration of the Sanskrit word bodhisattva. The complete transliteration should be *putisaduo*. “Bodhi” means “awakened” or “enlightened” and “sattva” means “sentient being,” so bodhisattva means “awakened sentient being.” The term sentient being refers to any form of life that can feel love and other emotions, mainly animals. Bodhisattvas are enlightened sentient beings who are aware of all sentient beings’ sufferings, feel sympathy for others’ plight, and act to succor them. Therefore, we often speak of a person who is altruistic and helps those in difficulties as “having the heart of a bodhisattva.”

The basic meaning of the word bodhisattva is very different from what most Chinese people understand. The clay or wooden statues of various spirits or gods such as the neighborhood locality god or city god are definitely not bodhisattvas. Rather, bodhisattvas are those who have faith in the Buddha’s teachings and seek to practice them, who then vow to liberate themselves and others, and who can even disregard themselves in order to save others.

To become a Buddha, a sentient being must pass through the stage of being a bodhisattva, and he or she must make and take to heart great vows, especially the Four Great Vows: “To deliver innumerable sentient beings, to cut off endless vexations, to master limitless approaches to

the Dharma, and to attain supreme Buddhahood.”¹ We can see how difficult it is to be a real bodhisattva.

But in another sense of the word, anyone who aspires to become a Buddha, from the time the vow is first generated until the eventual attainment of Buddhahood, can be called a bodhisattva. Hence, there is a difference between ordinary bodhisattvas and noble bodhisattvas. The bodhisattvas mentioned in the sūtras are mostly noble bodhisattvas. According to the *Sūtra on the Deeds of Bodhisattvas as Necklaces of Gems*, bodhisattvas can be classified into fifty-two levels, and only the top twelve levels (from the first ground to the tenth ground, plus the ground of equivalent enlightenment and the ground of wondrous enlightenment) are noble stages. Actually, a bodhisattva in the wondrous enlightenment stage is a Buddha, and a bodhisattva in the equivalent enlightenment stage will become a Buddha in his next life. The bodhisattvas we know of, such as Guanyin, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Samantabhadra, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, and Earth Treasury are bodhisattvas at the stage of equivalent enlightenment.²

4.2 What Do Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Refer To?

During the Buddha’s time, there was no distinction between the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. The Dharma is of one flavor; it’s just that different listeners understand it differently and attain different levels of realization.^{3*}

To listeners with shallow karmic capacity, the Buddha taught basic human ethics such as keeping the five precepts and practicing the ten good deeds, the so-called human and heavenly vehicles. To listeners who felt great repugnance for life, the Buddha taught the lesser vehicle of the śrāvaka, the means to liberate beings from cyclical existence. And to those with deep karmic capacity and the compassionate wish to transform the world, he taught the greater vehicle of the bodhisattva.

In fact, there are a total of five vehicles in Buddhist practice: the human, heavenly, śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva vehicles. Those who practice the five precepts and ten good deeds in a superior

manner ascend to the heavens, while those who practice them in an average manner are reborn as humans. Together, these two vehicles are called the human and heavenly path. Śrāvakas are practitioners who have transcended life and death after hearing the Dharma and practicing it. Pratyekabuddhas are practitioners who have transcended life and death after practicing themselves, without having heard the Dharma from a teacher. The practices of these two, śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, are collectively called the path of liberation. The bodhisattva path is a practice that seeks liberation without renouncing human and heavenly activities. Thus, the Mahāyāna bodhisattva path integrates both the liberation path and the human and heavenly path.

Those who only practice the five precepts and the ten good deeds of the human and heavenly path are still ordinary people. In contrast, individuals who have attained liberation and are hence no longer subject to birth and death are called noble ones.^{4*} Noble ones who are only interested in practicing the Dharma for liberation, with no intention to come back to liberate other sentient beings, are referred to as followers of the Hīnayāna, meaning “small or lesser vehicle.”

Bodhisattvas aim to attain supreme Buddhahood and liberation on one hand, and to save numberless sentient beings from suffering on the other. Therefore, they are called followers of the Mahāyāna, or the “great vehicle.”

Buddhism can also be divided into the Northern and Southern traditions according to its geographic distribution. According to one system of classification, the Northern tradition is based on Sanskrit scriptures and is Mahāyāna Buddhism; China is central to this tradition, which also spread to Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and Tibet. The Southern tradition is based on Pali scriptures and is Hīnayāna Buddhism; Sri Lanka is central to the tradition, which also spread to Thailand and Burma.^{5*} Actually though, this is just the Northern tradition’s classification system, and the Southern tradition completely rejects it: as we can see in scroll 45 of the *Monastic Code of the Mūlasarvāstivāda* and in sūtra 769 in scroll 28 of the *Za ahan* sūtras, the term *dasheng* [meaning “great vehicle,” which could translate back into the Sanskrit

word *mahāyāna*] is used to label the practice of the **Eightfold Noble Path**.⁶ Also, in sūtra 669 in scroll 26 of the *Za ahan* sūtras, the term *dashi* [meaning “great person,” which could translate back into the Sanskrit word *mahāsattva*] is used to describe practitioners who practice the four methods of inducement.⁷ Finally, in scroll 19 of the *Zengyi ahan* sūtras, the six perfections (*liudu*) of the Mahāyāna are clearly mentioned.^{8*}

In terms of theoretical development the Northern tradition is superior to the Southern tradition. But in terms of actual practice, people in the Northern tradition do not necessarily follow the Mahāyāna path, nor do those in the Southern tradition necessarily follow the Hīnayāna path. And except for vegetarianism, the Northern tradition in China has no practices superior to those of the Southern tradition. During the Wei-Jin period (220–420), the practice of **pure talk**, which was centered on the abstruse philosophy called **dark learning** or “studies of the abstruse” that developed from the Daoist thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi, was prevalent. Mahāyāna Buddhism was received in a similar vein: elite scholar-gentry during that period discussed Buddhist ideas as an idle pastime, as a part of their “pure talk.” In fact, the theoretical underpinnings of the Chinese Tiantai and Huayan schools somewhat reflect this trend. Therefore, the modern Japanese scholar Kimura Taiken (1881–1931) has criticized Chinese Buddhism as the Buddhism of scholarship, not the Buddhism of practice. His critique is not totally unfounded.

In fact, the philosophical structures of the Tiantai and Huayan schools largely emerged from the enlightenment experiences of eminent Chinese monks; these structures lack sufficient basis in Indian Buddhist thought. Therefore the true spirit of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism has not yet been disseminated among the people, much less become a refuge for the common Chinese people. Consequently, some have said that Chinese Buddhism is Mahāyāna Buddhism in philosophy, but Hīnayāna Buddhism in practice.

APPENDIX C

STAGES OF THE BODHISATTVA PATH

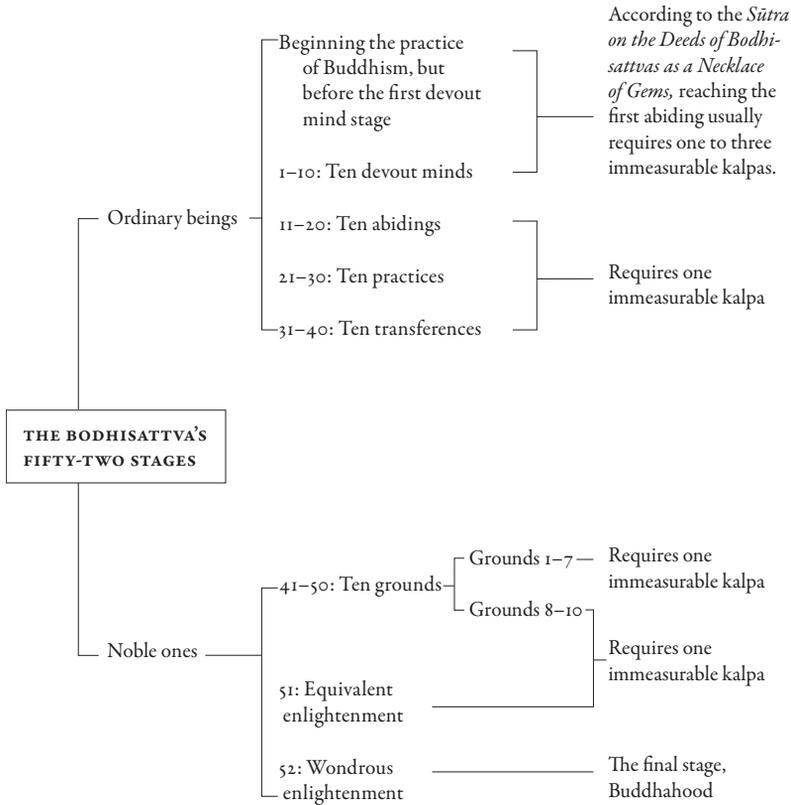


FIGURE 10. THE BODHISATTVA'S FIFTY-TWO STAGES

This chart delineates the set of stages described (with minor discrepancies) in many Buddhist sūtras and which correspond to the stages of the Tiantai school's Distinct Teachings. These are the stages that Sheng Yen refers to throughout most of this book, except when he refers to the stages of the Tiantai school's Perfect Teachings, for which see entry 4.4.

52 From the *Monastic Code in Four Divisions*, scroll 3, T 1428: 22.584a11. *Author.*

53 See the *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, chapter 18, no. 15 (translation in Bühler 1879, 272). Also cf. the *Laws of Manu*, chapter 9, no. 74–76 (also available in English in Bühler 1886). *Trans.*

54 For a somewhat different explanation, see Sheng Yen 2001a under the entry “Buddhism and Abortion.” *Trans.*

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1 The Four Great Vows can be found explicitly, albeit with slightly different wording, in many Chinese commentaries, and in the *Precious Mirror of the Lotus School of Mount Lu* they appear in the same form given here: see T 1973: 47.335c22–23. *Trans.*

2 See entry 4.4 and appendix C for more on these stages. *Trans.*

3 In this entry, we have retained the term “Hīnayāna” rather than changing it to “Nikāya” as we have done elsewhere. See entry 2.1, n. 1. *Trans.*

4 Technically speaking, according to early Buddhist texts, individuals who have reached a certain level of enlightenment, after which final liberation will occur within a limited number of lifetimes, can all be referred to as “noble ones,” regardless of whether they have attained final liberation or not. *Trans.*

5 Many scholars today would divide contemporary Buddhism into the following traditions: Southern Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos; and parts of southern Vietnam, southern China, and eastern Bangladesh), with Pali the principle scriptural language; Eastern Buddhism (China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam), with Chinese the principal scriptural language; and Northern Buddhism (Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan; and parts of Nepal, Russia, western and northern China, and northern India), with Tibetan the central scriptural language. Because the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures came directly from India and not from China, and indeed many Indian missionaries went directly to Tibet, we can distinguish the Eastern from the Northern tradition. See Harvey 1990, 1–8. *Trans.*

6 See T 1442: 23.875b22 and T 99: 2.200c26–201a1, respectively. *Trans.*

7 At T 99: 2.185a27. On the other hand, these terms in Chinese could be translated back into any number of Sanskrit terms. For instance, *dàshèng* 大乘

could translate any of the following: *mahāyāna*, *agrayāna*, *jinayāna*, *parama-dharma*, *varayāna*, and others. *Dàshì* 大士 could translate *mahāpuruṣa*, *mahāsattva*, *kula-putra*, *puruṣa*, *bodhisattva*, and other words. *Trans.*

8 See T 125.2.645a28–b25. Since Sheng Yen would categorize these three texts as “Hīnayāna” texts, and given that he drew his conclusions based on what he read in Chinese texts, it seems that he assumes the Mahāyāna-ish terms in the Chinese translations (i.e., *dàshèng* 大乘, *dàshì* 大士, and *liùdù* 六度) have Pali equivalents. Pali texts are the only canonical texts of the so-called Southern tradition, which signifies only the Theravāda school and not all “Hīnayāna” schools. Many Pali texts do correspond to Chinese texts. The corresponding Chinese texts are not, however, translations of contemporary Pali texts. Rather, scholars believe that both the Pali and Chinese “Hīnayāna” texts diverged from a common ancestral canon of scriptures. Of the four references Sheng Yen cites, only sūtra no. 769 of the *Za ahan* has a corresponding Pali sutta, namely sutta no. 45.1.4 in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (translation in Bodhi 2000, 1525). And in this sutta as it exists today, although mention is made of the “divine vehicle” (P. *brahmayāna*) and the “vehicle of Dhamma” (P. *dhammayāna*; S. *dharmayāna*), no “great vehicle” (P. *mahāyāna*) is mentioned.

Many Theravāda Buddhists today would reject this classification system not by claiming that their own tradition already is “Mahāyāna” in a different sense of the word, but by rejecting the legitimacy of all non-Pali Buddhist scriptures, which they regard either as having become distorted over time or as thoroughly spurious from the beginning. *Trans.*

9 There are many variations on these stages in Buddhist texts. In one standard account in the *Sūtra on the Deeds of Bodhisattvas as Necklaces of Gems*, it is said to take three immeasurable kalpas starting from the first abiding stage, which is already quite an advanced stage compared to that of most people. In fact, it says that if an ordinary person begins practicing Buddhism, it will take one to three immeasurable kalpas just to reach the first abiding stage. *Trans.*

10 The idea of “[mutual] entering” (*[hù]rù* 互入) is closely related to ideas such as “mutual penetration” (*hùtōng* 互通) and “mutual identity” (*hùjī* 互即). For an accessible introduction to Huáyán 華嚴 (S. *avatamsaka*) thought in English, see Cook 1977. The theme of the relative nature or equivalence of measurements can be found throughout the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. For instance, in chapter 17 of the Śikṣānanda’s translation (T 279), statements similar to those in the quotation above are found at T 10.89c. Thomas Cleary (1993)