

Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal

Here Sangharakshita explores some of the most important doctrines and practices of Mahayana Buddhism: The Arising of the Bodhicitta, the Bodhisattva Vow, the Six Paramitas, and the Ten Stages (Bhumis) of the Bodhisattva Path. In doing all this he also manages to make it all relevant to our own living of the spiritual life.

Note

In this and the following lecture series Sangharakshita takes for granted the Indo-Tibetan understanding of the 3 Yanas. However, his thinking on the three yanas has changed since he gave these lectures - he no longer considers them to represent stages in the development of the individual - and it is important that you understand that when you study them.

Therefore if you study this series, or any of the following series, before you have studied the series *Emphases and Re-statements of Traditional Buddhist Teachings* you should at least study chapter two (*The Unity of Buddhism*) of Subhuti's book *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, especially pages 39 - 53.

Primary Study Material

The primary study material for this term is found in *The Bodhisattva Ideal* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse) which comprises edited versions of the original lectures that he gave on the theme and selections of question and answer sessions on related topics. The original lectures can also be accessed from www.freebuddhistaudio.com .

1. **The Origin and Development of the Bodhisattva Ideal.**
2. **The Awakening of the Bodhi Heart.**
3. **The Bodhisattva Vow.**
4. **Altruism and Individualism in the Spiritual Life.**
5. **'Masculinity' and 'Femininity' in the Spiritual Life.**
6. **On the Threshold of Enlightenment.**
7. **The Bodhisattva Hierarchy.**
8. **The Buddha and the Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time.**

Suggested Further Reading for Term 6

'The Bodhisattva Principle', from *The Priceless Jewel* (Windhorse).
Mahayana Buddhism, Paul Williams (Routledge). Especially the Introduction and CC.9-10.

Meeting The Buddhas, Vessantara (Windhorse)

Wisdom Beyond Words (Windhorse)

The Bodhicaryavatara, Shantideva. Trans. Crosby and Skilton (OUP).

The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Har Dayal (Motilal Banarsidass).

A Survey of Buddhism (Windhorse), C4

A Concise History of Buddhism by Andrew Skilton (Windhorse), C11-13

What is the Dharma? (Windhorse), C13

Who is the Buddha? (Windhorse), C4 (for unit 5) C5 (for unit 7)

Unit 5: 'Breaking Through into Buddhahood' (L63)

Unit 8: 'Enlightenment as Experience and as non-Experience' (L119, also found in *The Taste of Freedom*)

Study Questions

Unit 1 The Origin and Development of the Bodhisattva Ideal

1. Identify and then summarise the distinctive emphases of the Bodhisattva Ideal.
2. Reflect and then comment on the significance of the story of the simsapā leaves.
3. In what ways can the bodhisattva be described as 'the ideal Buddhist'?
4. Identify and reflect on some of the reasons for the inconsistency between what we sometimes say and what we do. Summarise your reflections.
5. 'The point is that one needs to be open to whatever the Buddha can give.' (p.12) How do we achieve this receptivity?
6. Comment on the Buddha's attitude to Kisagotami.
7. Why do you think fearlessness is stressed as an aspect of Enlightenment?
8. What makes a Buddha unique? What does this tell us about Enlightenment?
9. Do you find the Bodhisattva Ideal personally inspiring? Explain why.

Unit 2 The Awakening of the Bodhi Heart

1. What is the bodhicitta? Can you identify any analogues of it in your own life or those around you?

2. What does it mean to say that the bodhicitta is not individual?
3. 'The bodhicitta is more likely to arise in a spiritual community...' (p.34). Why?
4. What is the difference between the 'absolute' and 'relative' bodhicitta?
5. 'Something of the absolute clings to you despite everything...' (p.37). Reflect and then comment on this remark.
6. What is a myth? Briefly describe a myth/story which has significance for you and explain why you are moved by it.
7. Is the point of 'Stream Entry' and the arising of the bodhicitta the same or different?
8. What is punya? Do you think this concept is useful? Explain your response.
9. Give a brief account of Shantideva's method for developing the bodhicitta
10. Reflect on two of Vasubandhu's four factors then summarise your thoughts.

Unit 3 The Bodhisattva Vow

1. What is a vow and what might be the value of making one? (You may one to report any personal experience of vow taking.)
2. Can we take the Bodhisattva vow literally? Explain your view.
3. Reflect on the precepts you took when you became a Mitra. Choose one and explain what it has meant to you to take this precept.
4. Sangharakshita talks about helping others in practical ways. What guidelines do you use in helping others?
5. 'One can't do anything with or for other people without at least a touch of the bodhisattva ideal to keep one going. Otherwise, there will be a reaction sooner or later.' Comment on this statement.' (p.73)
6. 'I know I shall love death because I have loved life.' (Tagore) Reflect and comment on this statement.
7. The six element practice is considered an antidote to conceit. Is there anything in your own spiritual practice that has a similar effect?
8. The third great vow of the Bodhisattva is 'May I master all dharmas.' What does this mean?

Unit 4 Altruism and Individualism in the Spiritual Life

1. Why did Mahayana Buddhists consider it necessary to emphasise the altruistic dimension of the spiritual life?
2. Give a brief account of where your best interest seemed to conflict with someone else's. Were you able to transcend this conflict?

3. 'If one acts mindfully that in itself will help to purify one's motives.' (p.92) Explain how this process might work.
4. Why is dana the first perfection? Reflect on your own practice of dana. How might you intensify it?
5. Do you think of merit as a literal or psychological concept (or both or neither). Say why.
6. How do dana and sila constitute a pair?
7. Sangharakshita says it is important to establish contact with our pre-Christian past. Do you share this view? Explain your answer.
8. Reflect and comment upon Sangharakshita's points about *how* we should give.
9. How might conventional and natural morality be distinguished? Why is this distinction important?
10. 'Indeed, creative work is a psychological necessity.' (p.117) Comment on this claim.

Unit 5 'Masculinity' and 'Femininity' in the Spiritual Life

1. What do you think Shantideva is getting at when he says '...he brings the stick, but you bring the body...' (p.123)?
2. 'Forbearance is the greatest aestheticism.' Reflect and then comment on this statement.
3. '...To engage in politics or business is simply laziness...' (Gampopa, p.134). Comment on this.
4. What is tolerance? How is it different from pseudo-egalitarianism?
5. What is 'spiritual receptivity'? Comment on how you are working to develop this in your practice.
6. Reflect and then comment on the significance of prayer within Buddhism.
7. Identify and then comment upon some of the reasons why we may not make as much spiritual progress as we could.
8. What does it mean to say that the Bodhisattva 'plays'?
9. Comment on the role of grace (adiathana) as described in this unit (pp.141-2).
10. 'The bodhisattva can be described as psychologically and spiritually bisexual, integrating the masculine and the feminine at every level of his or her psychological and spiritual experience.' (p.144) Comment on this quote.

Unit 6 On the Threshold of Enlightenment

1. 'Thus the truth is realised with the help of certain conceptual formulations which on their intellectual level reflect the transcendental reality they express.' (p.149) Comment on this statement.
2. How can images and symbols communicate Enlightenment? Illustrate your answer with an example of significance to you.
3. Reflect and then comment on Sangharakshita's teaching of 'more and more of less and less.' (p.150)
4. What is the purpose of meditation within Buddhism?
5. What is dhyana? What is its significance for the Buddhist path?
6. Reflect and then comment on the significance of the three gateways to liberation.
7. Reflect and then comment on the meaning of sunyata.
8. How is prajña to be distinguished from knowledge?
9. Give a brief exposition of one of the five wisdoms.

Unit 7 The Bodhisattva Hierarchy

1. Why do you think the Buddha felt the impulse to reverence someone or something even after his Enlightenment experience?
2. 'In fact, the spiritual life itself is inseparable from the hierarchical principle.' (p.172) Reflect and comment on this statement.
3. Can the principle of spiritual hierarchy be reconciled with contemporary notions of 'equality'?
4. Reflect and comment on the value of kalyana Mitras. If possible draw examples from your own experience.
5. What is 'satsangh' and why is it important?
6. 'To put oneself in the position of serving someone is to acknowledge that the person one is serving is better than oneself in some respects. It is this that many people are unwilling to do.' (p.177) Reflect on and then summarise your own thoughts and feelings about serving others.
7. What is a novice bodhisattva? To what extent - if any - do you identify with this stage?
8. 'Anyone who has tried to live a spiritual life knows how difficult it is to make even a little progress.' (p.184) Why is it so difficult? Please answer from personal experience.
9. In the context of the bodhisattva path, what is meant by 'irreversibility' and how is it achieved?
10. What are the bodhisattvas of the Dharmakaya?
11. Reflect on one of the bodhisattva figures (e.g. Tara) then summarise your thoughts about their significance.

Unit 8 The Buddha and Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time

1. What does it mean to say that the path and goal are discontinuous? (p.202)
2. Identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the 'path' as a metaphor for spiritual life.
3. Identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of 'deepening one's present experience' as a metaphor for spiritual life.
4. 'When you come to a point outside time, as it were, you realise that you have been there all the time. So when you have gained Enlightenment, you realise that you always were Enlightened.' (p.205) What do you think this means?
5. What is the dharmakaya?
6. What is meant by 'eternity'?
7. 'The Buddha is reality.' (p.211) Reflect and then comment on this statement.
8. In what way does the bodhisattva symbolise the 'evolutionary urge'?
9. Reflect on your own preferred model/metaphor for spiritual life. How does it compare with the models presented in this unit?

This material was originally compiled by Nagapriya for the distance-learning version of the Mitra Study Course and has subsequently been edited and updated by Saccanama.