

## *To be Born in a Heaven by Keeping the Precepts*

This is a story found in Section 2 of “Upholding the Precepts Chapter” in Volume 1 of the *Dharmapada Sutra* in which the Buddha taught about different karmic fruitions due to different mentalities on keeping the precepts.

Once upon a time, there were two novice Buddhist monks in the kingdom of **Rājagrha** who wished to pay a formal visit to the Buddha in the Jetavana ashram the kingdom of **Śrāvastī**. However, the middle ground between these two countries was very vast and empty. At that time, the climate was so sizzling hot and dry that most of the spring water had been dried up. These two monks had heatstroke because of hunger and thirst as well as heat. At that time, they saw that there was still a little bit of water left in a pond. Nevertheless, there were still some tiny bugs moving in the water, so they could not drink the water. These two monks talked to each other: “We came from afar to pay a formal visit to the Buddha; unexpectedly, we are going to die here today.”

One of them said: “We should drink the remaining water to save our lives so that we are able to move forward to pay a formal visit to the Buddha.” The other replied: “The precepts of Buddha are led by benevolence. If I can survive by killing living beings, even if I can see the Buddha, there will be no benefits; I would rather uphold the precepts and die. I will not struggle to survive by violating the precepts.”

Hence, after drinking water, one of the monks continued to go forward. The other monk did not drink water and died. After death, he was reborn in the Trayastrimsa Heaven, the second level of the heavens of the desire realm, and became a heavenly being. After thinking, the heavenly being who was reborn in a heaven knew the cause and condition of his being reborn in the realm of heaven: due to his upholding the precepts without any violation, he was reborn in the Trayastrimsa Heaven this life. Moreover, he believed that virtuous rewards were coming. Thus, carrying flowers and incense, he immediately appeared before the Buddha; he stood beside the Buddha after prostrating to the Buddha.

The monk who saved his own life by drinking water continued his journey but felt very tired. After several days, he arrived. After seeing the sublime and magnificent power of the Buddha, he prostrated himself before the Buddha and stated while crying: “I feel very sad that my companion could not come here because he died on the way here. I would like you to know about it!” The Buddha said: “I have already known about it!” Then the Buddha pointed and said: “This heavenly being is your companion at that time. Because of keeping the precepts, he was reborn in a heaven; moreover, he had seen me before you did.” The World-Honored One continued to say: “You wanted to see me, but you failed to comply with the precepts that I had established. Although you have seen me, I have not seen you. You are very far away from me; however, the one who kept the precepts is standing right before me.”

The monk who had saved his own life by violating the precept because of drinking water came to see the Buddha; however, he only saw the response-body Buddha that was manifested, not the “real Buddha.” The other monk

who obeyed and carried out the precepts and was reborn in a heaven not only attained the good attribution of being reborn in a heaven but also the original cause of being able to see the “real Buddha.” A bodhisattva enters the stage of Seventh Stay; that is, a bodhisattva becomes enlightened and attains awakening to the True Mind, when he sees the real Buddha, which is his own dharma body—the eighth consciousness Tathagatagarbha. However, why is keeping the precepts the original cause of seeing the “real Buddha” and even the ultimate Buddha? Let us look at the dharma of keeping the precepts in the following paragraphs.

There are the Five Precepts, eight precepts, precepts of monks, precepts of nuns, bodhisattva precepts, and so on in the monastic discipline of Buddhism; however, all these precepts are included in the bodhisattva precepts. In Volume 40 of the *Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*, Bodhisattva Maitreya teaches: “What are all precepts of a bodhisattva? The bodhisattva precepts are roughly divided into two kinds, precepts for lay practitioners as well as precepts for monastic monks and nuns, which are called all precepts. Also, according to the two pure precepts of lay practitioners as well as monastic monks and nuns, bodhisattva precepts can be roughly divided into three categories, including the precepts of conduct, the precepts for practicing all virtuous deeds, and the precepts for giving benefits to sentient beings.” The precepts for lay practitioners and the precepts for monastic monks and nuns are part of bodhisattva precepts; yet there are differences in the partial acceptance of the precepts according to the manifestation of bodhisattvas in the present lifetime. The true way of keeping precepts refers to accepting and upholding the bodhisattva precepts.

Part of the purpose of accepting and keeping the precepts of conduct is to subdue either coarse or fine affliction so that one will have the causes and conditions of being able to further attain direct comprehension of the illusory nature of the aggregates, sense-fields, and elements in future lives. Being able to accept and keep the precepts of conduct, one would be able to accept and keep and even carry out wholesome dharma. For example, all wholesome dharma, including the path of the ten wholesome activities, Five Precepts, four foundations of mindfulness, Four Proper Lines of Exertion, and so on, should be learned and practiced by all bodhisattvas. The purpose of cultivating all kinds of wholesome dharma is to benefit oneself and others so that Buddhahood will be eventually attained by all. In addition, benefitting others means to give benefits to sentient beings of various levels according to different practices and realization of bodhisattvas.

The bodhisattva precepts are divided into three categories, which are the precepts of conduct, the precepts for practicing all virtuous deeds, and the precepts for giving benefits to sentient beings, by expedience. These three kinds of precepts are actually an integral whole; a practitioner should not keep the precepts of conduct only or keep the precepts for giving benefits to sentient beings only, either. They are mutually related and interdependent. According to different conditions of each life, a bodhisattva might focus more on practicing one of the three kinds of precepts in a certain life. Nevertheless, all three are supposed to be kept and practiced equally without being partial. This truth can be observed and explained by the Four Great Vows. In other words, the precepts of conduct focus more on the “vow to end countless afflictions.” The precepts for practicing all virtuous deeds focus more on the

“vow to learn infinite Dharma-doors.” The precepts for giving benefits to sentient beings focus more on the “vow to save numerous sentient beings.” According to the different causes and conditions sentient beings encounter, we should help them to arouse the aspiration for keeping the precepts.

When conditions are more mature and they possess more abilities in the future, they will practice the precepts section by section. While practicing these three kinds of precepts, one still keeps the initial resolution of keeping the precepts and even work on it more firmly. Following along with the different causes and conditions of manifestations in every life, a bodhisattva sometimes appears as a lay practitioner or sometimes appears as a monastic, so he is able to fully complete the precepts for lay practitioners and the precepts for monks and nuns successively. However, no matter if the precepts are for lay or monastic people, they all belong to the bodhisattva precepts. Eventually at last, the three categories of pure precepts are complete. When the three categories of pure precepts are complete, the great “vow to attain the supreme Buddhahood” that one makes on the causal ground is also complete.

According to the explanation above, we can know that truthfully practicing the precepts is an indicator of the length of time for sentient beings to attain Buddhahood. This wise monk who would rather die of thirsty than break the precept of harming or killing sentient beings could receive the Buddha’s praise and “see the Buddha” personally. Based on the basis of “seeing the Buddha – realizing the true reality personally,” one is able to rapidly achieve the Buddhahood way; therefore, all bodhisattvas who resolve to make the great vow to move towards the way to Buddhahood must keep the precepts carefully without negligence.