

Charitable Giving—with Benevolence as Expansive as the Heavens and Earth to Benefit all Sentient Beings

This is about the charitable giving performed by the Buddha during the causal ground when he was a bodhisattva as recorded in the *Collective Sutra of Six Perfections*, Book 3.

Once upon a time, there was a bodhisattva with all the riches he could wish for. He worshiped the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) piously and was kind and compassionate to all sentient beings. One day, he saw a turtle in a market and felt pity for. He approached the merchant and inquired about the price of the turtle. The merchant knew that this man was a kind and compassionate bodhisattva with enormous wealth who was willing to help sentient beings and who never haggled over prices while making a purchase.

The merchant replied: “One million dollars. It will be wonderful if you buy him; otherwise, I will take him home and cook him for my meal.”
“Very good, I’ll buy it,” the bodhisattva replied.

After bringing the turtle home, the bodhisattva cleaned up its wound, released it into a river and watched it swim safely away from the bank. Filled with mixed feelings of grief and joy, he made a vow: “I wish all sentient beings in hell and all hungry ghosts who are shackled and in prison to be free from these sorts of disasters, and have healthy bodies and safe lives like the turtle I just released into the river today.” With joined palms and fingers crossed, he then made obeisance, prostrated to ten directions, and wished, “Sentient beings are confused and restless and I will protect and shelter them. I will provide them with water during droughts; with boats or rafts during floods; with food and drink

in hunger and thirst; with enough clothes in cold weather; with calm and cool feeling when annoyed; with medical treatments when in sickness; with light and brightness when in dark; and I vow to become a Buddha to liberate them during the evil world of five turbidities.”

“Excellent! You will certainly be able to accomplish your goal and complete the path to Buddhahood,” all Buddhas in ten directions praised the bodhisattva.

One night not long after, the turtle that was released by the bodhisattva chewed on the door of the main entrance of the bodhisattva’s house. The noise was loud enough that it caught the bodhisattva’s attention. He stepped out and noticed the turtle. The turtle spoke in human language to the bodhisattva, “You saved my life; I come to return the favor. Since I live in water and understand how the level of the water changes, I know there will be a pending huge flood that will cause a calamity. I hope you immediately prepare a sturdy boat and I will come to help you when the time arrives.”

“Wonderful!” replied the bodhisattva. On next morning, the bodhisattva went to the King’s palace and reported the message to the King. Because the bodhisattva had a good reputation, the King believed what he said and evacuated all his citizens living in low-lying areas to highland.

Soon came the flood and the turtle arrived and said to the bodhisattva, “The flood is approaching; please hurry up onto your boat and follow me. I will guide you to safety.” While the boat was following the turtle, the bodhisattva noticed a snake swimming next to the boat; he said, “Save the snake!”

“Very good!” said the turtle. After that, they saw a fox drifting by; the bodhisattva said, “Save the fox!”

“Very good!” praised the turtle. Next, they came across a person struggling in water and yelling for help. The bodhisattva said, “Save the person!”

But the turtle warned, “Don’t save this person! Ordinary people are hypocritical and deceitful and are seldom able to keep their promises. Being ungrateful to friends, he may bring troubles and bad consequences in the future.”

The bodhisattva replied, “I save even animals; how can I not save a human being? I cannot bear this kind of heartless behavior!” So, the person was saved.

“You will regret this in the future!” said the turtle. The boat finally reached a safe place. “I have returned your great favor. Now I am going home,” the turtle bade farewell to the bodhisattva.

“When I become a Buddha, I will help liberate you from this mundane world,” said the Bodhisattva.

The turtle said: “That will be excellent!” The snake and the fox left following the turtle.

The fox, as a cave dweller, was searching for a cave for himself and discovered one that was filled with gold nuggets buried by ancient people. He was very excited and said to himself, “I can use the gold to return the bodhisattva’s favor of saving my life.” The fox went to inform the bodhisattva and said, “I have found a hundred pounds of gold in my cave. The cave is not a tomb or a house. The gold nuggets did not come from a robbery or theft. I hope I can use them to return your favor of saving my life.” After pondering for a while, the bodhisattva said to himself, “It would be a waste and would not benefit the poor if I don’t accept this offer and let the gold left buried underground. If I accept it and give it to the poor instead, it will provide them significant support; furthermore, it will be a good deed.” Thus, he accepted the offer, went to the cave and picked up the gold nuggets.

Just when the bodhisattva was doing this, the person rescued from the flood by the bodhisattva saw it and said to the bodhisattva, “You should give me half of the gold.” The bodhisattva replied, “Fine. I will give you ten pounds.” The person said, “You committed a crime when

you dug up a tomb and stole the gold. If you don't give half of it to me, I will report your crime to the government official."

"The poor are living a miserable life; I intend to make an equitable giving to them. Now you ask for a half, how can this be fair?" the bodhisattva explained. The person still reported to the government official and the bodhisattva was detained and put in jail.

When the snake and the fox learned about this news, they got together and discussed a plan to rescue the bodhisattva. The snake said, "I will go and rescue him!" He held a medicine pouch in his mouth and entered the prison to visit the bodhisattva. He was saddened when he saw that the bodhisattva was not in a good shape and said to him, "Keep this medicine with you. I am going to bite the prince. My venom is extremely poisonous and no one will be able to treat the bite. Only this herb can save the prince." The bodhisattva remained silent after hearing the plan.

As planned, the snake went and bit the prince. The prince's life was in danger so the King immediately declared, "If anybody can save the prince's life, I will make him prime minister of this country."

The bodhisattva went to the King and said that he could save the prince's life. He used the herb to treat the prince and saved his life. After the prince had recovered, the King granted the bodhisattva a position as a prime minister just as he promised. The King asked the bodhisattva how he managed to get the herbal antidote. The bodhisattva described the whole event from the beginning to the end. The King felt sad and blamed himself, "I have been deceived!" He punished the bad person who was rescued in the flood and extended amnesty throughout his country.

The bodhisattva in this story was a previous incarnation of Buddha Sakyamuni, the King was Bodhisattva Maitreya, the turtle was Ananda,

the fox was Sariputra, the snake was Maudgalyayana and person being rescued was Devadatta. The reason that the Buddha along with his disciples could perform the great episode of liberating all sentient beings more than two thousand and five hundred years ago, was due to confluence of all the causes and conditions that had been cultivated over incalculable lives to enable them to congregate in the same place and time. The Buddha was already a passionate bodhisattva filled with loving kindness benefiting sentient beings and practicing incalculable and boundless charitable giving during the Causal Ground that enable him to eventually attain Buddhahood. This kind of benevolence as expansive as the heavens and earth in benefitting all sentient beings is truly an example that ought to be followed by the Buddhist disciples in this and future generations.