

Fifty-Two Stages of Realization of Bodhisattvas

This article aims to explain briefly the content of the fifty-two cultivation stages of Mahayana Buddhism for bodhisattvas. We hope that practitioners attain enlightenment and awaken to the True Mind at the soonest and find the key to the great door of Buddha Bodhi through learning and practicing Buddhadharma from these correct knowledge and insights. They will then enter the inner door of Buddhadharma and cultivate, in sequence, the Path toward Buddhahood and eventually complete the practice to attain ultimate Buddhahood.

The infinite vastness of the sea of Buddhadharma is immeasurable both in breath and depth. The Buddha, being kind and compassionate, established eighty-four thousand expedient and skillful means for sentient beings to choose the most appropriate method to enter the dharma hall based on their individual capacity and intellect. One of these expedient and skillful means is the Mahayana's Path of Vision. Pursuant to this cultivation method, practitioners will be able to open the door to the Path of Buddhahood in an expedite and accurate manner. Attaining the Path of Vision in Mahayana is attaining enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind in the Chan tradition. It is the entrance to the path of Mahayana Buddhadharma as well as the fundamental aspect of the practice and realization of Buddha Bodhi. Only after having attained enlightenment and awakening to the eighth consciousness tathagatagarbha, can we claim to have entered into the inner practice of Buddhadharma and begin the sequential practice and learning on the path toward Buddha Bodhi. Otherwise, we will always be practicing the six paramitas at the external parameters.

The Chan patriarch Bodhidharma once said (paraphrased as follows): "To achieve enlightenment and awakening to the true mind is the highest path of all Buddha. How can we realize the Path of Vision of the Mahayana with our limited virtue, minute wisdom, laxness and arrogance? We categorically need to endure uncountable eons of diligent practice. It requires sentient beings to practice the impossible and uphold patience on the unbearable. Only then will we be able to realize the highest path of all the Buddha—the True Mind tathagatagarbha."

What are the prerequisites to foster an early maturity of the causes and conditions that will bring about enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind? There are altogether seven prerequisites.

1. Establish correct knowledge and view through listening to Dharma and reading Buddhist sutras. However, we must first get acquainted with a truly enlightened mentor beforehand. Truly enlightened mentors can include various Buddhas in the past and present. They also include the tripitaka or the twelve divisions of Buddhist canon as well as Mahayana bodhisattvas. Only those who are enlightened and have awakened to the True Mind can be considered Mahayana bodhisattvas. In addition to approaching truly enlightened mentors, we should also read books written by these mentors to acquire fundamental knowledge and view about Buddhism. These include the Five Aggregates, the Eighteen Elements, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Paths, the Ten and Twelve Links of Dependent Arising and so forth. Furthermore, we have to observe our own acts and engage in personal contemplation in order to be able to understand and experience the deeper meaning and knowledge about Buddhadharma and establish correct views about the practice toward Buddhahood.

2. Cultivate virtue and accumulate the great power of meritorious quality and develop broad and wholesome affinities with others. In general, it is essential to accumulate abundant stocks of virtue, regardless whether one practices meditative concentration or treads on the Path to Liberation or Buddhahood. Without the necessary virtue, we will be confronted with many hindrances and obstructions that will prevent us from practicing at ease. To cultivate virtue, we should first take refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma and the sangha), provide offerings to the Three Jewels, be filial, obedient and devoted to our parents, and respect our teachers with high regards. Furthermore, we should cultivate kindness and mercifully refrain from killing. We should also avoid developing bad relationships with sentient beings and instead, should further our practice of the ten wholesome deeds to benefit them through our physical, verbal and mental acts. We should also perform charitable giving including material goods, dharma teaching and fearlessness and dedicate the merits of these cultivated virtue to ourselves to enhance our ability to realize the ultimate reality of the dharma realm. Fundamentally, cultivating virtue is to accumulate stocks of virtue that are needed for seeing the path. It is one of the foundations of the path of cultivation. It is not yet the practice and learning of Buddhadharma.

3. Receive and uphold the three refuges. After taking refuge in the Three Jewels, we should continue to take the five precepts or bodhisattva precepts. In addition, we should make the four great vows earnestly in front of the Buddha, vowing to realize the True Mind and see Buddha nature. We should also be willing to in turn, help sentient beings, under proper conditions, attain awakening to the True Mind and see Buddha nature. The four great vows are (1) though sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to help liberate them all; (2) though afflictions are inexhaustible, I vow to eradicate them all; (3) though the Dharma doors are immeasurable, I vow to learn them all; and (4) though the Path to Buddhahood is unsurpassed, I vow to attain it.

4. Eliminate greed for the five desires. Greed for five desires refers to chasing of wealth, sex, fame, food and sleep, or alternatively, chasing of the sensual pleasures derived from form, sound, odor, taste, and tactile objects. If we are fond of sensual pleasures of the five desires, such as frequently thinking about savoring of delicious food, participating in interesting and exciting activities, or seeking out beautiful objects, our mind will be susceptible to distractions, thus adversely impacting our practice. All of these distance and deviate ourselves from our vow and direction of realizing the True Mind and seeing Buddha nature, as well as achieving liberation. We should instead gradually rid ourselves from greed for the five desires.

5. Repent our karmic hindrances and establish a deep and firm belief in causality (cause and effect). When we seek realization of the True Mind or practice on the Path to Liberation, our karmic adversaries, relatives and creditors will often try to obstruct our practices to reach our goals. We should repent often, in front of the Buddha, for all our bad deeds that we have committed ever since innumerable eons and dedicate the merits of our repentance back to our adversaries, relatives and creditors. We should pray and wish for them to become our fellow practitioners in immeasurable future lives and provide mutual support to each other on the Path to Liberation or even the wondrous Path to Buddhahood. We need to possess deep and firm belief in the notion of cause and effect to sustain us in our unwavering practice. Even though we may not be able to manage to see the path in the current lifetime, our efforts will not go to waste. We know that all the wholesome and pure deeds, as well as pure dharma seeds accumulated through our studies and practices will always be stored in our own tathagatagarbha. It will lead to our relatively easier and effortless enlightenment in our future lives when the conditions are conducive and mature. A deep and firm belief in causality is the foundation for cultivating Buddhadharma.

6. Eliminate conceit and arrogance. Conceit and arrogance stem from discernment and discrimination. They will not be completely eliminated until one reaches the stage of virtual enlightenment. Arrogance can be divided into two simple categories: (1) arrogance in regarding oneself as superior, and (2) arrogance in regarding oneself as inferior. The arrogance in regarding oneself as superior manifests itself when one feels much superior to others and not willing to listen to others carefully. Such a person will not readily accept teachings from true enlightened mentors. The arrogance in regarding oneself as inferior stems from self-abasement, a type of self-shackling. These two types of arrogance stem from attachment to the "self". Therefore, the best amulet to protect our body and mind is to prevent arrogance from surfacing. If we are always humble and respect others, we can eliminate our pride. It will also become easier for us to receive teachings from and being nurtured and supported by true enlightened mentors.

7. Initiate great vows. Attaining enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind is a supreme and transcendent act for bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are born from great compassion. Selfishness and concerns only about one's own benefits from awakening is not the mentality of a bodhisattva. They belong to ordinary, unenlightened people. A person with such self-centered attitude and mindset will not resonate nor correspond with the Mahayana's enlightenment of true awakening. Bodhisattvas should frequently make great vows to rescue all sentient beings in front of the Buddha and wishing that they too can realize the ultimate reality of the dharma realm. Bodhisattvas will then be able to resonate with all Buddhas and bodhisattvas to interact and correspond with them and receive guidance and support from true enlightened mentors, all of which help foster more conducive conditions and environment for the realization of the True Mind and seeing of Buddha nature.

Enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind is finding the eighth consciousness by way of Chan contemplation. Awakening to the True Mind is acquired through wisdom acquired from instantaneous awakening. It is not a gradual process. It is different from what is depicted in the ten ox-herding picture from the ancient time, in which one first seek the foot tracks, then the tail, rear end, body and eventually the head of the ox. These are all conjured up illusory imaginations. They do not comprise the actual state of contemplation and personal experiences of a true practitioner. After having found the True Mind, one should be able to observe that it operates incessantly without ever stopping, even when one is asleep. All sentient beings are perfectly equal since all of them possess their own perfect and complete True Mind. It is only due to different karmic actions performed in previous lives that sentient beings manifest various different external

forms such as cattle, dog, cat, pig, mouse, cockroach, ant, etc. In fact, each one of us possesses our own tathagatagarbha. After having realized the tathagatagarbha, one acquires the knowledge-of-general-aspect pertaining to prajna. Based on this knowledge-of-general-aspect, one can sequentially and gradually cultivate the knowledge-of-specific-aspects and the knowledge-of-all-aspects pertaining to wisdom. One will then gradually fulfill and complete the practice and realization on the Path toward Buddhahood.

Starting from the initial resolve, ordinary unenlightened sentient beings need to practice through fifty-two stages, which include the stages of Ten Faiths, Ten Abidings, Ten Practices, Ten Dedications, Ten Grounds, Virtual Enlightenment and Sublime Enlightenment to fully complete the practice and realization of the Path to Buddhahood. These stages are briefly explained in the following paragraphs.

First, the stages of the Ten Faiths. The most difficult thing in the process of practicing and studying Buddhadharma is the establishment of confidence. The *Flower Garland Sutra (Avataṃsaka-sūtra)* illustrates as follows: "Faith is the source of the path and the mother of virtue. Faith can nurture wholesome roots, help surpass the demon path, foster samadhi, and bring about and complete the practice toward Buddha bodhi." In other words, complete and perfect faith is necessary and essential as a prerequisite, whether it is for the dharma door of Buddha mindfulness contemplation, samadhi training, the practice of the Path to Liberation or even the achievement of the Path to Buddhahood. As stated in the sutra, it takes one eon or even ten thousand eons to cultivate the needed confidence before one can surpass the disposition of an ordinary being. Upon entering the first stage of Abiding, one will no longer retrogress in faith and will continue to practice Buddha bodhi sequentially until the attainment of Buddhahood.

Second, the stages of Ten Abidings. Also known as the stages of Ten Orientations, the stages of Ten Abidings are the stages at which bodhisattvas have oriented their mind to tend toward the Path to Buddhahood as well as the Path to Liberation in Mahayana. At the first stage of Abidings, bodhisattvas learn the paramita of charitable giving. They then learn and uphold precepts in the paramita of morality at the second stage of Abidings. At the third stage of Abidings, bodhisattvas learn and practice the paramita of forbearance. Bodhisattvas then learn and practice the paramita of diligence at the fourth stage of Abidings. The fifth stage of Abidings includes the learning and practice of the paramita of meditative concentration. The paramita of prajna will be learned and cultivated at the sixth stage of Abidings. Upon enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind, bodhisattvas gain direct comprehension of prajna and personally realize the ultimate

reality of the dharma realm and enter the seventh stage of Abidings. The wisdom acquired by bodhisattvas at the seventh stage of Abidings is called the knowledge-of-general-aspect pertaining to prajna, also referred to as the fundamental wisdom of non-discrimination. Upon realizing the tathagatagarbha, even though bodhisattvas can observe directly the function and operation of the True Mind, they can only obtain a general and coarse framework about the dharma characteristics of the virtue and function attained. This kind of wisdom is referred to as the knowledge-of-general-aspect pertaining to prajna. Subsequent practices on the Path toward Buddhahood are all based on this wisdom. It is hence called the fundamental wisdom of non-discrimination. Through continued and sequential practices, bodhisattvas will be able to see Buddha nature with the physical eye and attain direct comprehension of the illusoriness of the world when they reach the tenth stage of Abidings. Bodhisattvas who practice in the first through to the tenth stages of Abidings are called bodhisattvas with a disposition attained through practice because firstly, they still harbor heavy habitual tendencies, and secondly, there are still innumerable dharma they need to foster, study, and practice. Hence, they are aptly labelled pursuant to this disposition attained through practice.

Third, the stages of the Ten Practices. The stages of the Ten Practices are also named the Ten Nourishing stages. Bodhisattvas need to nourish their noble nature during these stages. To fully attain the noble nature at the earliest, bodhisattvas need to subdue afflictions arising from self-attachment and eliminate bad habitual tendencies that are present at the stages of Ten Abidings. This practice is called the nourishment of noble nature. In addition, bodhisattvas must further eradicate their egocentric notion toward the “self” or else, they will never be able to bring out their noble nature nor enter the first ground. Bodhisattvas need to subdue their dispositional hindrances forever like an arhat and elicit noble nature in order to become bodhisattvas with noble disposition. Only after having perfected all the practices of the stages of Ten Practices can they enter the first stage of the Ten Dedications.

Fourth, the stages of Ten Dedications. The Ten Dedications are also known as the Ten Adamantine because bodhisattvas are fearless in their effort to save and protect sentient beings through refuting evil dharma and manifesting the right ones, even to the extent of giving up their lives. Such deeds are adamant diamond acts. Once the stages of Ten Dedications have been perfected, that is, all the expansive virtue accumulated from protecting and supporting true dharma have been perfected before entering the first ground, bodhisattvas’ disposition of the path will also be perfected at this time. With full attainment of the knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths that is necessary before entering

the First Ground and making the ten inexhaustible vows, bodhisattvas then enter the First Ground and start to practice at the stages of the Ten Grounds toward a noble disposition.

The stages of Ten Abidings, Ten Practices and Ten Dedications are collectively named the Three Stages of Worthiness. Bodhisattvas at the Three Stages of Worthiness learn and cultivate the knowledge-of-specific-aspects pertaining to prajna. The relationship between the eighth consciousness True Mind and all dharmas as well as how they function collectively and seamlessly are expounded in numerous different aspects and directions. Bodhisattvas then enter the First Ground to continue to study the knowledge-of-all-aspects only after thoroughly perfecting the knowledge-of-specific-aspects.

Fifth, the stages of the Ten Grounds. Bodhisattvas who practice through the Ten Grounds are also called Bodhisattvas with a Noble Disposition. It is only from this point onwards can they be truly considered as having entered the stage of cultivation on the Path to Buddhahood. Relying on the knowledge-of-specific-aspects pertaining to prajna as a foundation, bodhisattvas enter the First Ground and continue to study the knowledge-of-all-aspects. Knowledge-of-all-aspects refers to wisdom regarding all the seeds of the eight consciousnesses, including knowledge about all tainted seeds of the mundane world, as well as taintless seeds of the supramundane world, the continuous flow of all aspects of the seeds, etc. The knowledge-of-all-aspects is also called the knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths before its cultivation and realization have been perfected. Once it has been perfected, the transformational existence of birth and death will come to an end, and the ultimate fruition of Buddhahood will be achieved.

Sixth, Virtual Enlightenment and Sublime Enlightenment. It takes three incalculable eons for Mahayana bodhisattvas to complete the practice and realization of the fifty-two stages and become bodhisattvas with Virtual Enlightenment. At this stage, bodhisattvas have not perfected all the virtue or the thirty-two majestic physical features or the eighty good marks unique to a Buddha. They still need to continue to cultivate specific virtues associated with the majestic features and good marks in the next one hundred eons. This is the equivalent of practicing whereby “not a single place is not the place to sacrifice one’s physical body nor a single moment not being the moment to sacrifice one’s life.” Only after diligently benefiting sentient beings during this period, will bodhisattvas be able to accumulate the necessary virtue to become Buddha. In addition to accumulating virtue, bodhisattvas with Virtual Enlightenment have to eradicate the finest traces of ignorance and self-attachment that are partial to cognitive hindrances within the one hundred eons. Subsequent to the attainment of all of the required virtues, they become a

final-stage bodhisattva or simply a bodhisattva with Sublime Enlightenment. The renowned Bodhisattva Maitreya is a bodhisattva with Sublime Enlightenment. A bodhisattva with Sublime Enlightenment lives in *Tuṣita* Heaven. This type of bodhisattvas observe and wait for the right time and condition to be born into the mundane world. Either when conditions mature for his disciples to receive dharma or the timing for teaching Buddhadharma matures, bodhisattvas with Sublime Enlightenment will descend into his mother's womb, be born into the human world, manifest the eight phases of the Buddha's life, and attain the unsurpassed, complete, and perfect enlightenment. He then becomes the great kindness and great compassion, the great magnificence and great power, the unsurpassed, complete, and perfect enlightenment, and leader of human and celestial beings with the complete ten epithets, or simply the Buddha and World-Honored One!

From the aforementioned descriptions of the fifty-two stages cultivated and realized by bodhisattvas of distinct teachings, we can see that the Path to Buddhahood is not easily attainable. It definitely does not fit the claim that "one arrives at the Buddha ground immediately upon enlightenment." Achieving enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind is just the beginning of the practice and cultivation on the Path toward Buddhahood. It takes countless eons and vigorous practices to perfect the prajna of the knowledge-of-general-aspects, knowledge-of-specific-aspects, and knowledge-of-all-aspects as well as additional cultivation of innumerable virtue. Only after all virtues and wisdom have been perfected can Buddhahood be achieved.

The paramount precondition in learning and practicing Buddhadharma is the possession of correct knowledge and view and the attainment of enlightenment and awakening to the True Mind through the practice of the Chan school. Only with correct knowledge and view will we have the opportunity to realize the True Mind and subsequently open the door leading to Path to Buddhahood!