

## Chapter 12

# The Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva

The Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva<sup>1</sup> teaches us about how to adjust our psychological feelings when we reach the last stages of cultivating enlightenment. Let us first review a previously addressed topic. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* has provided detailed instructions on how to succeed in cultivation. After passing through the stages of “three felicitous acts”, “six harmonious ways”, “three disciplines”, a Buddhist learner will enter a new level of cultivation, which is the Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva.

This book will elucidate the ten great vows, which are seen as the last steps for Buddhist learners to advance to the Buddhahood. These vows are not complex.

The ten great vows<sup>2</sup> are:

1. to worship buddhas
2. to praise tathāgatas
3. to make offerings
4. to repent sin
5. to rejoice in the merits attained by others
6. to ask the Buddha to teach the Dharma
7. to ask buddhas to stay in the world

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<sup>1</sup> 十大願王.

<sup>2</sup> 1.禮敬諸佛; 2.稱讚如來; 3.廣修供養; 4.懺悔業障; 5.隨喜功德; 6.請轉法輪; 7.請佛住世; 8.常隨佛學; 9.恒順眾生; 10.普皆回向.

8. to follow buddhas for study
9. to be friends with all beings
10. to devote his merits to the salvation of others

### **1. To worship buddhas**

In this first vow, the meaning of “buddha” is broad and general. The term “buddha” embraces all animate and inanimate beings, which are seen as the buddhas of the future in Buddhist teaching. In other words, we ought to extend our reverent attitude to everyone and everything we encounter in this world. This reverence includes not only all sentient beings and myriad things, but also our responsibilities. We should even have respect for evil people. Perfection is our goal. We can attain perfection only through our reverence toward everything.

### **2. To praise tathāgatas**

The tathāgatas in the second vow are associated with good dharmas and true dharmas that resonate with Buddha-nature. We need to distinguish the first vow from the second vow. The first vow concerns having reverence for every person - including evil persons. The second vow concerns praising perfect virtues.

### **3. To make offerings**

Making offerings is not limited to the donation of gifts or money to temples and other charitable bodies. It also refers to knowing the benefits of making offerings. Amongst all types of offerings, the offering of the Dharma is supreme. Another way to express this is to say that the most important offering is to help others dispel ignorance and

acquire truth. Buddhist followers are taught to practice this kind of offering.

**4. To repent sin**

Repentance refers to a state of mind. Having a truthful mind is of supreme importance. Buddhism does not require its followers to repent through rituals.

**5. To rejoice in the merits attained by others**

The merit of rejoicing in the progress of others is to become happy about the good deeds of other people. We must overcome jealousy. In Christianity, jealousy is viewed as a kind of sin. The goal of Buddhism is to help everyone attain Buddhahood as soon as possible. The ultimate purpose is to attain vast perfection. Animate and inanimate beings are all viewed as equally perfect and cognitive. When people around us are making achievements, this contributes to our having a cheerful state of mind. In Christian documentaries I have watched, I have occasionally observed the depiction of the improvement of a suffering person's material and spiritual conditions that is a result of their having heard the gospels. We shall not feel jealousy but become happy, in accordance with the teaching of the merit of rejoicing in the progress of others.

**6. To ask the Buddha to teach the Dharma**

It is interesting that ancient Buddhist scriptures were usually written on volumes of scrolls. "Scroll" here refers to the "wheel of the Dharma". Unrolling a written scroll would enable people to read the scriptures. A 360-degree rotation symbolizes the completion of all the scriptures on a volume.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, the wheel of the Dharma is: 1) to be able to crush all afflictions in the same way that rocks and gravels are rolled and fragmented by a giant wheel; 2) to be able to pass teachings down to generations after generations such that the spinning of the wheel never stops.

To ask the Buddha to teach the Dharma, means we should invite those qualified to interpret the Buddha's teachings-especially the implications of Buddhist scriptures.

**7. To ask buddhas to stay in the world**

Buddhist disciples shall ask good and virtuous teachers to remain in the world, to turn the wheel of the Dharma, to spread the teachings, and to benefit sentient beings.

**8. To follow buddhas for study**

The eighth vow asks learners to follow the words and deeds of the Buddha, which are contained in Buddhist scriptures.

**9. To be friends with all beings**

When we introduce Buddhist philosophy to others, we should make sure that everything we say and do is appropriate. Moreover, we shall not argue with students for the purpose of expressing our own views.

**10. To devote his merits to the salvation of others**

In Buddhism, merits are transferable. The key principle undergirding the transfer of merits is the awakened mind. Because of our compassion toward others, we are inclined

to give back merits we have earned to all sentient beings instead of saving them for ourselves. This is a particular feature of Mahayana Buddhism.

The author remembers having read an English book about Buddhism that included a discussion of rewards for others; however, this book did not explain the reason why there is such a system. The author acknowledged that this would raise questions in people's minds: will we reduce our own merits by giving away our merits to others? Is this just like depositing our money in a bank account or exchanging money for gambling chips? How are merits transferred to others? We should understand that we redistribute our merits to others out of our compassion. We are not motivated by personal favoritism toward any particular person.

### **Could the precepts of the worship of buddhas influence human behaviours?**

Let us take a look at the ways in which we apply the ten great vows in our practices of ancestral worship and their constructive effects. Assume that my grandfather was a notorious figure who was tried and sentenced as a war criminal by the international tribunal. Should I still show my respect for him? Or assume that I am a public figure whose actions are being observed. What should I tell my children about how they should think and behave with respect to their great grandfather? I can see there are several alternative attitudes:

Attitude 1): Although I know in my heart that my grandfather has committed an atrocity. Nevertheless, I can still claim his innocence and ignore the ruling of the international tribunal. Some compatriots would probably respect my blind patriotism. However, praising my grandfather's loyalty to his country while forgetting his inhumane crimes is obviously incorrect. This would send wrong messages to other people and to my own children.

Attitude 2): I may genuinely believe in my grandfather's innocence, in which case I shall absolutely respect him and ignore the ruling on his case.

Attitude 3): I shall tell my children my sincere feelings. I shall let them know that we have the obligation to guard our nation, which is respectable. But it is wrong to use patriotism as an excuse to commit inhumane atrocities. In this case, I could still explain my reverence toward my grandfather, according to the first vow of "worshipping the buddhas". Following the tenth vow, I could transfer my merits to him, in the hope that his pain will be relieved. I know that because of the thinking of all animate and inanimate beings are all viewed as equally perfect and cognitive, my grandfather will re-enter the processes of cyclic rebirth, and will even attain Buddhahood. All this reveals the compassion of the Buddha's teaching, and leads to vast perfection.

Attitude 4): I could still respect my grandfather, and pay homage to his memorial tablet, while remaining silent about his merits and demerits. Unfortunately, people will misunderstand my silence; they will mistake my silence as an expression of my support for war crimes.

Attitude 5): I could avoid visiting my grandfather's memorial tablet and explaining my mind. Before I decide to not to pay tribute, I should seriously consider my true attitude in this matter. Paying tribute to one's own grandfather is an indispensable aspect of East Asian culture. My failure to show respect to my ancestors would be taken as an indicator of my ignorance of this culture.

The second attitude may or may not be an appropriate choice, depending upon the specific circumstances and facts. If I do not take the second attitude, I am certain that I would take the third attitude. I believe that everyone will respect me for my choice.

Buddhist theory is quite profound in dissolving hatred. The best example is the pardoning of heinous criminals who suffer in Hell. Without the compassion of Buddhism, evil people would all go to Hell and would never receive redemption.

Equipped with sincerity and knowledge about Buddhism, as long as the relevant parties communicate with each other, and respect history, the enmity between Japan and its former enemies over the visits to Yasukuni Shrine would be readily

solved. This is another instance where we can see how Buddhism can help us solve our problems to foster sincere attitude and harmonious environment.