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Loving-Kindness Practicing of Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism

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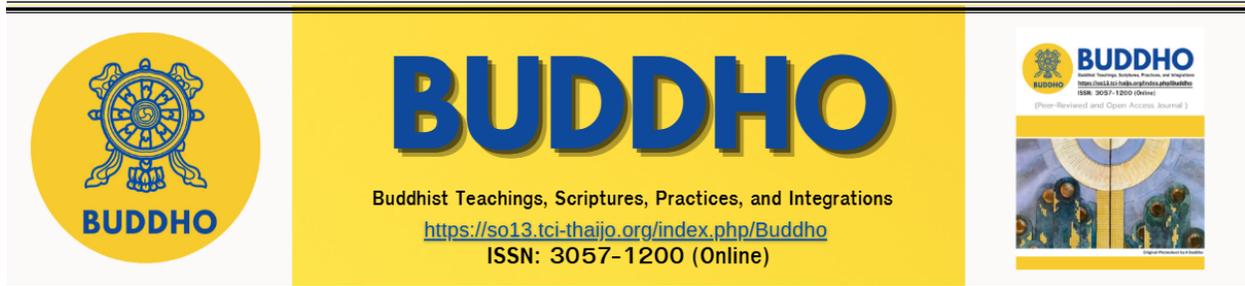
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Loving-Kindness Practicing of Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism

Suvichak Pasvan*

Abstract

Loving-kindness (Maitrī) is a fundamental virtue in Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in the Bodhisattva path. The practice of loving-kindness is deeply rooted in the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, reflecting the selfless compassion that defines a Bodhisattva. This study explores the doctrinal foundations of loving-kindness in Mahayana texts, including the Lotus Sūtra, Avataṅsaka Sūtra, and Bodhisattvabhūmi, highlighting how the concept transcends mere emotional benevolence to encompass a profound commitment to universal liberation. The analysis also draws upon the teachings of influential Mahayana scholars such as Ācārya Śāntideva and Nagarjuna, who elaborated on the practical applications of loving-kindness in ethical conduct and meditative cultivation. Furthermore, this research examines contemporary interpretations and applications of loving-kindness in modern Buddhist practice. By synthesizing scriptural, philosophical, and practical perspectives, this study aims to deepen the understanding of loving-kindness as a transformative force in the Bodhisattva's journey towards enlightenment.

Keywords: Loving-Kindness, Bodhisattvas, Mahayana Buddhism

Introduction

Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on the cultivation of loving-kindness (Maitrī) as an essential quality of a Bodhisattva. Rooted in the Bodhisattva ideal, loving-kindness is not merely a personal virtue but a dynamic force aimed at alleviating the suffering of all sentient beings. The Bodhisattva path, characterized by the Six Perfections (Pāramitās), positions loving-kindness within a broader ethical framework that encompasses generosity (Dāna), morality (Śīla), patience (Kṣānti), effort (Vīrya), meditation (Dhyāna), and wisdom (Prajñā).

The concept of loving-kindness in Mahayana Buddhism extends beyond individual practice to societal transformation. Classical texts such as the Lotus Sūtra and the Avataṅsaka Sūtra depict

the Bodhisattva as an embodiment of boundless compassion and unconditional love, striving tirelessly for the enlightenment of all beings (Gomez, 2005). The Bodhisattvabhūmi of Asanga further elaborates on the techniques for cultivating loving-kindness, emphasizing its role in overcoming negative mental states and fostering a mind of equanimity (Keown, 2013). Likewise, Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra (Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life) underscores the necessity of loving-kindness as a means to break the cycle of self-centeredness and develop an altruistic attitude essential for spiritual progress (Wallace & Wallace, 1997).

In addition to its textual and philosophical dimensions, the practice of loving-kindness in Mahayana Buddhism has influenced various cultural and ritual traditions across East Asia. Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhist traditions have integrated Maitrī into meditation practices, monastic ethics, and social engagement. Recent scholarly discussions have also examined the relevance of loving-kindness meditation (Maitrī Bhāvanā) in contemporary mindfulness movements and interfaith dialogue (Harvey, 2018).

This paper seeks to explore the doctrinal foundations, historical development, and practical applications of loving-kindness in Mahayana Buddhism. By examining both classical sources and modern interpretations, this study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Maitrī as a central element of the Bodhisattva path, bridging the gap between scriptural teachings and lived experience.

Mahayana Buddhism and the Emphasis on Loving-Kindness (Maitrī) as a Bodhisattva's Essential Quality

Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on the cultivation of loving-kindness (Maitrī) as a fundamental characteristic of the Bodhisattva path. This ideal is deeply rooted in the canonical texts, particularly within the Āgama sources, which provide a foundational basis for understanding the ethical and philosophical dimensions of Maitrī. This paper critically examines the role of loving-kindness in Mahayana Buddhism, drawing from the Āgama texts and other relevant Buddhist scriptures, while also exploring its practical implications for practitioners.

The Concept of Maitrī in Mahayana Buddhism

Maitrī, often translated as loving-kindness or benevolence, is a core element in Buddhist teachings. In the Mahayana tradition, it is not merely an individual virtue but an essential quality for a Bodhisattva, one who aspires to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. The cultivation of Maitrī is frequently discussed in the Āgama texts, which are early Buddhist scriptures parallel to the Pali Nikayas. One of the significant references to Maitrī can be found in the Madhyama Āgama (T.26), which underscores the importance of loving-kindness as a meditative practice that dissolves hatred and fosters harmonious relationships among beings (Anālayo, 2012). Similarly, the Ekottarika Āgama (T.125) elaborates on the gradual development of Maitrī through the practice of the Four Immeasurables (Brahmavihāras), emphasizing its transformative potential for overcoming mental defilements (Choong, 2010).

Maitrī as the Ethical Foundation of the Bodhisattva Path

In Mahayana thought, the Bodhisattva embodies selfless compassion and dedicates his existence to the alleviation of suffering for all beings. Maitrī serves as a foundational principle that guides the ethical conduct and moral choices of a Bodhisattva. The Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra illustrate that a Bodhisattva's compassionate actions are motivated by deep loving-kindness, which extends beyond personal relationships to encompass all sentient beings (Chang, 1983). The Maitrī Sūtra, preserved in the Chinese Āgama collection, explicitly defines loving-kindness as an antidote to anger and hostility. It states that the true Bodhisattva does not harbor resentment, even when faced with adversity, but instead responds with unwavering compassion and patience (Karashima, 2010). This aligns with the broader Mahayana doctrine that emphasizes boundless compassion (*karuṇā*) alongside loving-kindness as indispensable virtues.

The Psychological and Meditative Aspects of Maitrī

From a meditative perspective, the practice of Maitrī is not limited to moral cultivation but also serves as a transformative mental discipline. The Saṃyukta Āgama (T.99) describes Maitrī meditation as a method that leads to the attainment of deep concentration (*samādhi*) and ultimately prepares the practitioner for higher wisdom (*prajñā*) (Bodhi, 2000). This meditative cultivation is further elaborated in the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra, which explains that the state of universal loving-kindness fosters the development of the Bodhisattva's great vow (*mahāpranidhāna*) (Paul, 1985). Furthermore, the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines) connects Maitrī with the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), suggesting that true loving-kindness arises from a deep realization of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of self and phenomena (Conze, 1975). This synthesis of wisdom and compassion is what distinguishes Mahayana ethical thought from earlier Buddhist traditions.

Maitrī, as an essential quality of the Bodhisattva, is deeply embedded in Mahayana Buddhism's doctrinal and ethical framework. Drawing from the Āgama sources and Mahayana sutras, it is evident that loving-kindness is not only a moral ideal but also a practical method for attaining spiritual liberation. The cultivation of Maitrī through meditation, ethical conduct, and wisdom ultimately leads to the realization of the Bodhisattva ideal, making it a central pillar of Mahayana Buddhist practice.

The Concept of Loving-Kindness in Mahayana Buddhism and Societal Transformation

Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes that loving-kindness (Maitrī) extends beyond individual practice to societal transformation. Classical texts such as the Lotus Sūtra and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra depict the Bodhisattva as the embodiment of boundless compassion and unconditional love, striving tirelessly for the enlightenment of all beings. This paper critically examines the role of Maitrī in fostering collective well-being, as envisioned in Mahayana scriptures, and its implications for modern society.

Loving-Kindness as a Catalyst for Social Transformation

Maitrī in Mahayana Buddhism is not limited to personal development but serves as a foundation for societal harmony. The Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra) illustrates the Bodhisattva as an agent of social transformation, emphasizing that compassionate wisdom should be directed toward uplifting all sentient beings (Kubo & Yuyama, 2007). Similarly, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra (Huayan Jing) portrays an interconnected cosmos where the welfare of one is tied to the welfare of all, highlighting a vision of a compassionate society founded on mutual support and ethical conduct (Cleary, 1984). The Mahāyāna Sūtrālamkāra, attributed to Maitreya, further expounds on this notion, stating that the true Bodhisattva engages in altruistic actions that transform communities and societies, not merely individual minds (Jamspal et al., 2004). This idea aligns with the Buddhist ideal of engaged Buddhism, where social justice, education, and ethical governance are essential manifestations of loving-kindness.

The Bodhisattva Ideal and Universal Compassion

In Mahayana thought, the Bodhisattva vows to forgo personal liberation until all beings are freed from suffering. This selfless commitment is vividly portrayed in the Lotus Sūtra, where the Bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) manifests in various forms to assist those in distress, demonstrating that Maitrī must be practical and responsive to societal needs (Reeves, 2008). The Avataṃsaka Sūtra elaborates on this by describing a Bodhisattva's role as one who embodies infinite compassion, constantly working to eradicate ignorance and social injustices (Gómez, 1996). This expansive view of loving-kindness contrasts with earlier Buddhist traditions that emphasized individual liberation. The Mahayana perspective asserts that true awakening is inseparable from the well-being of others. The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra reinforces this by depicting an ideal lay Bodhisattva, Vimalakīrti, who remains in society to engage in compassionate service rather than retreating into monastic isolation (Thurman, 1976).

Practical Implications in Contemporary Society

The Mahayana vision of Maitrī has profound implications for contemporary social ethics. Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh have drawn from these classical texts to promote socially engaged Buddhism, advocating for peace, environmental sustainability, and human rights (Hanh, 1998). This reflects the idea that loving-kindness should manifest in tangible actions that address structural suffering and societal inequalities. Furthermore, modern Buddhist organizations, inspired by Mahayana teachings, have actively engaged in humanitarian efforts, demonstrating how the principles of Maitrī can shape global movements for compassion-based activism (Queen & King, 1996). The integration of Buddhist ethical teachings with social policies reflects an evolving interpretation of the Bodhisattva ideal, making it relevant to contemporary global challenges.

Mahayana Buddhism extends the concept of loving-kindness beyond individual practice to encompass societal transformation. The Lotus Sūtra and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra depict the Bodhisattva as an exemplar of boundless compassion, actively working for the liberation and welfare of all beings. This ethical framework continues to inspire movements for social justice, proving that Maitrī remains a timeless and dynamic force in shaping both spiritual and societal well-being.

Conclusion

Mahayana Buddhism places profound emphasis on loving-kindness (Maitrī) as an essential quality of the Bodhisattva ideal, deeply embedded in its doctrinal and ethical framework. The Agama texts and Mahayana sutras highlight Maitrī not only as a moral virtue but also as a crucial meditative practice that fosters inner transformation and social harmony. The Bodhisattva path underscores that genuine loving-kindness is boundless, extending beyond personal cultivation to encompass all sentient beings, leading to collective liberation. By integrating Maitrī with wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā), Mahayana Buddhism presents a holistic vision of ethical and spiritual development that remains relevant in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Suggestion

Given the profound impact of Maitrī on both individual and societal levels, further research could explore its application in modern Buddhist movements, particularly in socially engaged Buddhism. Additionally, comparative studies between Mahayana and Theravāda perspectives on loving-kindness could provide deeper insights into its varied interpretations and practices. Another avenue for exploration is the intersection of Buddhist Maitrī with contemporary psychological theories on altruism and emotional well-being, highlighting its universal significance beyond religious boundaries.

Body of Knowledge

Maitrī, as emphasized in Mahayana Buddhism, serves as a cornerstone of both ethical and meditative practices, shaping the Bodhisattva's path to enlightenment. Canonical Foundations: The Agama texts, including the Madhyama Āgama and Ekottarika Āgama, illustrate the significance of Maitrī in overcoming mental defilements and fostering harmonious relationships. The Mahayana sutras, such as the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra and Avataṃsaka Sūtra, further elaborate on its role as a guiding principle for compassionate action. Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions: The Bodhisattva ideal underscores selfless devotion to the welfare of all beings, with Maitrī serving as the antidote to anger and hostility. This aligns with the broader Mahayana doctrine, which pairs loving-kindness with compassion (karuṇā) and wisdom (prajñā) to form a comprehensive ethical framework. Meditative and Psychological Aspects: Meditation on Maitrī, as detailed in the Saṃyukta Āgama and the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, facilitates deep concentration (samādhi) and fosters an understanding of the emptiness (śūnyatā) of self and phenomena. This synthesis of meditative discipline and philosophical insight reinforces the

Bodhisattva's commitment to universal compassion. Societal Transformation: Mahayana Buddhism extends the practice of Maitrī to the collective sphere, advocating for social justice, ethical governance, and communal well-being. The Lotus Sūtra and Avataṃsaka Sūtra illustrate how the Bodhisattva acts as a catalyst for social transformation, working tirelessly to alleviate suffering. Contemporary Buddhist movements, such as engaged Buddhism, reflect this ideal by addressing global issues like environmental sustainability and human rights.

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