

The Four Bodhisattva Practices

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

The journey to Buddhahood is very long. On this journey one must walk the Bodhisattva Path and practice the six paramitas: giving, precepts, forbearance, diligence, samadhi, and wisdom. However, cultivators often become tired along the way. To help us overcome this challenge, we need to develop the spirit of the Four Bodhisattva Practices.

I. Practice over eons of time

The Buddha said it takes three *asamkhyeya kalpas* of cultivation to reach Buddhahood. How long is one *asamkhyeya kalpa*? It is a period of four medium kalpas, each of which is made up of twenty minor kalpas. One minor kalpa is the length of time for the average human life expectancy to increase and decrease.

Starting with the average life expectancy for humans as 10 years, for every 100 years, the life expectancy increases by one year until the average life expectancy becomes 84,000 years. People's life's expectancy increases when their hearts are pure and the world they live in is peaceful and harmonious. When people's hearts become impure, conflicts will arise, causing wars, famine, and epidemics. In addition, human's destructive actions also cause natural disasters. Hence, from 84,000 years, the life expectancy then decreases by one year for every 100 years until it reaches 10 years.

Therefore, one minor kalpa is the time it takes for the average life expectancy of humans to increase from 10 years to 84,000 years and then to decrease to 10 years. So, three *asamkhyeya kalpas* is indeed a very long time. During this time, we are bound to encounter obstacles, such as criticisms and inner struggles, which test our faith in cultivation. We might become exhausted and feel discouraged, so we must learn to practice over eons of time without growing tired of cultivation.

The six paramitas allow us to overcome these obstacles. The first paramita encourages us to give, whether it is our strength, material goods, time, or effort. The second paramita is upholding Buddhist precepts to keep our heart and mind pure, followed by practicing forbearance to accept any situations, including difficult people and criticisms. The paramita of diligence allows us to make progress and always stay on the Bodhisattva Path. The fifth paramita is developing samadhi by training ourselves to be mindful with our thoughts and actions, always thinking meticulously, and being able to discern right from wrong. The last paramita is gaining wisdom, which guides us on the path of cultivation. The six paramitas help us develop the endurance we need for cultivation.

II. Practice cultivating blessings, wisdom, and virtues continually

Eons of time are made up of single moments. By cultivating every moment of his time, the Buddha perfected his blessings, wisdom, and virtues. To attain Buddhahood, one must also cultivate blessings, wisdom, and virtues. Life after life, the Buddha served living beings in the

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five realms: hell, animal, hungry ghost, human, and heaven, by delivering them from suffering. In continually doing so, he increased his blessings and wisdom.

In our cultivation, we must also spend all of our time doing good deeds and helping living beings just like the Buddha. In this way, we will accumulate blessings, gain wisdom, and develop our virtues.

III. Practice uninterrupted cultivation

It takes three great kalpas worth of cultivation to attain Buddhahood; thus, to make progress we must seize time to cultivate diligently. However, we often tend to neglect our cultivation when our mind is interrupted by afflictions, ignorance, and delusion. Such spiritual illnesses cloud our mind. Without mental clarity, we waste precious time being caught up with people issues, matters, and material things. Therefore, we must be aware of these afflictions and ignorance and not let them interrupt us.

IV. Practice with respect

In our cultivation, we need to practice having a respectful heart. First, we must have respect for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Having perfected his virtues, the Buddha has set an example for living beings in accomplishing Buddhahood. The Dharma, Buddha's teachings, allows us to comprehend life's truth and all the workings of the universe. The Sangha, a community of Buddhist monastics that upholds the teachings and spreads the Dharma, guides us on the path of cultivation and helps us to understand the Dharma. Without the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it would be difficult to attain enlightenment. Therefore, we need to be grateful and respectful to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

In addition, we need to respect every person because everyone has an innate Buddha nature and is capable of becoming a Buddha. On the other hand, as we encounter and learn more of the teachings, we must not allow arrogant thoughts about our own Dharma knowledge or feelings of superiority to arise in us. We have to remain humble and respectful.

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The road to enlightenment is long and takes eons of time to complete its course. Therefore, while practicing the six paramitas, we must keep in mind the Four Bodhisattva Practices, and practice respectfully and diligently over eons of time without interruption to accumulate blessings, wisdom, and virtues. That is the attitude to embrace in our spiritual cultivation.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks

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