

A Brief Guide to the Stages and Paths of the Bodhisattvas

by Patrul Rinpoche

I pay homage to my master who is inseparable from Lord Mañjuḥṣa!

I will now set out the various stages and paths of the bodhisattvas in a way that is clear and easy to understand. There are five paths and ten stages (or bhūmis). The five paths are as follows:

1. The path of accumulation
2. The path of joining
3. The path of seeing
4. The path of meditation
5. The path of no-more-learning

The ten bhūmis will be explained below in conjunction with the path of meditation.

1. The Path of Accumulation

On the path of accumulation, the bodhisattvas, or ‘heirs of the victorious ones’, generate positive intention and bodhicitta in both aspiration and action. Having thoroughly developed this relative bodhicitta, they aspire towards the ultimate bodhicitta, the non-conceptual wisdom of the path of seeing. This is known, therefore, as the stage of ‘aspirational practice’.

It is called the path of accumulation because it is the stage at which we make a special effort to gather the accumulation of merit, and also because it marks the beginning of many incalculable aeons of gathering the accumulations.

The path of accumulation is divided into lesser, intermediate and greater stages.

On the *lesser* stage of the path of accumulation, it is uncertain when we will reach the path of joining. On the *intermediate* stage of the path of accumulation, it is certain that we will reach the path of joining in the very next lifetime. On the *greater* stage of the path of accumulation, it is certain that we will reach the path of joining within the very same lifetime.

The Lesser Stage

The root text says:

The applications of mindfulness... may we engage....!

This indicates that on the lesser stage of the path of accumulation, we meditate mainly on the *four applications of mindfulness*.

Firstly, there is the **application of mindfulness to the body**(1).¹ In this meditation, the *outer* 'body' is understood to be the outer physical environment, the *inner* body is our own physical body, and '*in between*' there are the bodies of other sentient beings. We examine these three with precise intelligence, and rest, with meditative concentration, in the recognition that ultimately they are unreal and their nature is space-like emptiness. During the post-meditation, we train in recognizing them as illusory and dream-like.

This practice is especially useful as an antidote to physical desire. We can consider that this body contains all kinds of impure substances like blood and pus, and that it plays host to the 404 types of disease or the 60,000 harmful influences (*dön*), as well as all kinds of bacteria and tiny organisms. We can also consider how, once we have died, the body will decay, become a skeleton and so on.

Secondly, for the **application of mindfulness to feelings**(2), we examine *pleasurable*, *painful* and *neutral* feelings with precise intelligence, and rest in a state of meditation, recognizing feelings to be unarisen and beyond arising. During the post-meditation phase, we train in recognizing that all feelings are insubstantial, like a plantain tree, and that they are suffering by their very nature.

Thirdly, for the **application of mindfulness to mind**(3), we use precise intelligence to investigate *greater*, *lesser* and *intermediate* types of perception, and then we rest in meditation upon their emptiness nature. During the post-meditation, we must understand the nature of the mind to be beyond ceasing and beyond remaining.

Fourthly, with the **application of mindfulness to phenomena**(4), we use the precise intelligence of discernment to analyze all phenomena included within the category of formations, and then settle in the recognition of their nature, which is equality. During the post-meditation, we recognize how all phenomena resemble the eight similes of illusion: they are like a dream, a magical illusion, a mirage, a hallucination, a reflection, an echo, a city of gandharvas or an apparition.

Moreover, in the first case, the body is the object to be analyzed with precise intelligence, but once this so-called 'body' has been thoroughly investigated and any notion of its true reality has been destroyed, the ensuing space-like emptiness becomes the true object for the application of mindfulness. It is just the same with the other three. The practices of the four applications of mindfulness each have their own objects of focus, but in essence they all consist of the space-like meditation and the illusory post-meditation. There is no aspect of them which is not included in these two.

The Intermediate Stage

On the intermediate stage of the path of accumulation, we chiefly practise the ***four correct abandonments***.

This means that we strive, first of all, to ensure that we **do not develop any non-virtuous tendencies**(5) that we have not previously developed.

Secondly, we swiftly **eliminate any non-virtuous tendencies**(6) that we have developed.

Thirdly, we **cultivate any virtuous tendencies**(7) that we have not yet developed.

And fourthly, we ensure the **virtues we have cultivated are further increased**(8).

These are known as the four correct abandonments because we abandon all non-virtues and whatever obstructs the cultivation of virtue. They mainly concern our conduct, whether through body, speech or mind.

The Greater Stage

On the greater stage of the path of accumulation, we practise the ***four supports of miraculous ability***:

The first of these is the '**miracle support of determination**(9), which is to meditate with enthusiasm and aspiration towards meditative concentration, so that the mind does not stray into lack of faith or wrong views.

The second, the **miracle support of exertion**(10), is to apply ourselves with diligence to the practice of meditative concentration, and to exert ourselves in both eliminating any faults or obstacles, and in cultivating the necessary qualities, so that we remain unaffected by temporary circumstances.

The third is the **miracle support of attention**(11), which ensures that we remain in a state of one-pointed attention, thus avoiding the divided attention that is caught between various thoughts and distracting influences. Through this, we realize actual meditative concentration.

Fourth, the **miracle support of discernment**(12), helps us sustain meditative concentration during daily activity, as a way of gaining the miraculous powers, such as the superknowledges.

These four are called 'supports' because they support the meditative concentration out of which a range of miraculous attainments can arise.

By manifesting various miraculous powers on the greater path of accumulation, we can travel miraculously to the fields where buddhas actually reside. There, we can receive and master countless hundreds and thousands of Dharma teachings.

Bodhisattvas who do this gain continuous meditative concentration which they are able to maintain through the strength of their wisdom.

2. The Path of Joining

The path of joining is so named because it provides the connection [between the path of accumulation and] the direct insight of non-conceptual wisdom on the path of seeing.

It consists of *four stages*. These are:

—the first two stages of warmth and summit, during which it is uncertain when we will reach the path of seeing, and

—the final two stages of acceptance and supreme attribute, from which we are sure to reach the path of seeing in the very same lifetime.

The root text says:

Warmth and summit and so on... may we enter...!

The meaning of this is as follows:

The non-conceptual wisdom of the path of seeing is likened to a fire that incinerates the emotional obscurations. However, even before they catch fire, two sticks will produce a degree of heat when they are rubbed together. In a similar way, certain indications or signs of ‘warmth’, unlike any we have experienced before, develop in our being as the coarser destructive emotions subside. This is known as the *stage of warmth* on the path of joining. The *stage of summit* is so named because it is the pinnacle of all sources of mundane virtue. At the *stage of acceptance*, we can fearlessly accept the reality of emptiness as the nature of things. The *stage of supreme attribute* is so called because it is marked by the attainment of the very highest qualities that can arise from meditation that is still within the mundane sphere.

These four—warmth, summit, acceptance and supreme attribute—are known as the *four factors conducive to definite emergence*.

On the stages of warmth and summit we cultivate the *five powers*:

Firstly, with the power of **faith**(13), we feel an intense aspiration towards the wisdom of the power of seeing.

Through the power of **diligence**(14), we exert ourselves in the methods for arousing the wisdom of the path of seeing, without slipping into laziness.

Through the power of **mindfulness**(15), we are able to maintain the higher training in discipline without allowing it to deteriorate.

Through the power of **meditative concentration**(16), which corresponds to the training in higher concentration, we are able to rest evenly in meditation.

Through the power of **wisdom**(17), we are able to develop the view of the natural state and take it to heart as the training in higher wisdom.

On the stages of acceptance and supreme attribute, these five faculties are practised in the absence of their corresponding obstructing factors. When they are no longer obstructed by, respectively, any lack of faith, laziness, forgetfulness, distraction or lack of awareness, the five qualities of **faith**(18), **diligence**(19), **mindfulness**(20), **concentration**(21) and **wisdom**(22) are known as the *five strengths*.

3. Path of Seeing

The path of seeing is so called because it is the stage at which we first see the supermundane wisdom of the noble ones.

The root text says:

Mindfulness, discernment and so on... May we reach the stage...!

The meaning of this is as follows:

The enlightenment factor of the **precise discernment of phenomena**(23) refers, in general, to the wisdom that precisely discerns the individual aspects of all things and events. Here, in this context, it applies more specifically to the knowledge and acceptance, and then subsequent knowledge and acceptance, of the character of each of the four noble truths. In other words, it refers to the sixteen moments of acceptance and knowledge, during which the fundamental nature of all the specific characteristics of phenomena is shown to be beyond any conceptual elaboration, and we accept this without fear.

There are, in addition, the enlightenment factors of **mindfulness**(24), **diligence**(25), **joy**(26), **mental and physical pliancy**(27), **samādhi**(28) and **equanimity**(29)—making seven factors of enlightenment altogether.

Here, equanimity means to have evenness of mind. For example, bodhisattvas possessing this kind of equanimity could experience sandalwood ointment being applied to them by someone on their right, and flesh hacked off their bodies by someone on their left, but would feel neither attachment [to the one] nor aversion [to the other].

Recognizing and then perfecting this authentic view, which is the wisdom of the path of seeing, the bodhisattva becomes more exalted, or more noble (*ārya*), than an ordinary being.

First Bhūmi

This is the first of the ten bhūmis of the noble bodhisattvas, the stage at which the truth of the reality of things is seen. It is therefore called the path of seeing. At this stage, there is also an experience of abundant bliss, unlike any known before: this bhūmi is therefore known as the stage of '*Perfect Joy*'.

At this stage, purifying the obscuration of avarice and its associated habitual tendencies, and perfecting the *pāramitā of generosity*, bodhisattvas gain twelve sets of *one hundred* qualities.

They are able to:

- enter into and arise from one hundred samādhi meditations in a single instant,
- see one hundred buddhas face to face, and receive their blessings,
- travel to one hundred buddha realms,
- cause one hundred world systems to shake,
- illuminate one hundred world systems,
- bring one hundred beings to complete maturity,
- manifest in one hundred aeons in a single instant,
- know one hundred aeons in the past and
- one hundred aeons in the future,
- open one hundred doors to the Dharma,
- manifest one hundred emanations, and
- for each of these bodies, manifest one hundred attendants.

At this stage, a bodhisattva can take birth as a *ruler over Jambudvīpa*.

4. The Path of Meditation

The path of meditation consists of meditating on, and gaining familiarity with, the wisdom that was realized on the path of seeing. The training here is in the **noble eightfold path**.

The root text says:

View, intention, speech.... May we traverse....!

The meaning of this is as follows:

Since non-conceptual wisdom has been realized on the path of seeing, there is genuine realization of the view of how things really are, which is the **correct view**(30).

Through the power of this [correct view], no destructive emotions arise in the mind, and all thoughts are spontaneously virtuous, so there is **correct intention**(31).

When the mind is virtuous, non-virtues of body and speech will not arise, and all that is said will be of benefit to beings. This is **correct speech**(32).

Whatever actions one does will be for the benefit of others, so there is **correct action**(33).

Always content, never stained by the five styles of unethical livelihood, there is **correct livelihood**(34). The five styles of unethical livelihood are: 1) hypocrisy; 2) flattery; 3) soliciting; 4) expropriating; and 5) calculated generosity. All these five are abandoned.

Being diligent, having eliminated weariness and fatigue while working for others' benefit, there is **correct effort**(35).

Always maintaining the flow of mindful awareness, there is **correct mindfulness**(36).

Remaining in the meditative equipoise of the fourth *dhyāna* and similar states, and entering into various forms of samādhi, there is **correct concentration**(37).

The nine bhūmis of the path of meditation are traversed in the following way:

Second Bhūmi

At the lesser of the three lesser levels of the path of meditation, the **pāramitā of discipline** is perfected. All the obscurations associated with flaws in discipline are purified.

Similar qualities to those mentioned above (when discussing the path of seeing) are gained, so that bodhisattvas can enter into and arise from one thousand samādhi

meditations in a single instant, and so on. The difference is that here there are twelve sets of *one thousand* qualities.

They can take birth as a ***ruler over the four continents***

This second bhūmi is called '***Immaculate***', because it is free from the stains of faulty discipline.

Third Bhūmi

At the intermediate of the three lesser levels of the path of meditation, the ***pāramitā of patience*** is perfected. All the obscurations associated with anger are purified.

Twelve sets of *one hundred thousand* qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from one hundred thousand samādhi meditations in a single instant, and so on.

One can take birth as a ***ruler over the Heaven of Thirty-three***, like Indra.

This third bhūmi is called '***Illuminating***', because bodhisattvas who have reached this stage shine the light of Dharma on those beings who are enshrouded in the thick darkness of their negative tendencies.

Fourth Bhūmi

At the greater of the three lesser levels of the path of meditation, the ***pāramita of diligence*** is perfected. All the obscurations associated with laziness are purified.

Twelve sets of *ten million* qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from ten million samādhi meditations in a single instant, and so on.

One can take birth as a ***ruler of the House of Gemini*** (Skt. *Parākrama*).

This fourth bhūmi is called '***Radiant***', because bodhisattvas who have reached this stage radiate the fiery wisdom that burns away the emotional and cognitive obscurations.

Fifth Bhūmi

At the lesser of the three intermediate levels of the path of meditation, the ***pāramitā of meditation*** is perfected. All the obscurations associated with distraction are purified.

Twelve sets of *one billion* qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from one billion samādhi meditations in a single instant, and so on.

One can take birth as a ***ruler of Enjoying Emanations***.

This fifth bhūmi is called '*Difficult Training*', because bodhisattvas at this stage can remain in samādhi for their own benefit and simultaneously strive to accomplish the welfare of others.

Sixth Bhūmi

At the intermediate of the three intermediate levels of the path of meditation, the *pāramitā of wisdom* is perfected. All the obscurations associated with ignorance and delusion are purified.

Twelve sets of *ten billion* qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from ten billion samādhi meditations in a single instant, and so on.

One can take birth as a *ruler of Tuṣita*.

This sixth bhūmi is called '*Clearly Manifest*', because for bodhisattvas at this stage, all the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are fully evident.

Seventh Bhūmi

At the greater of the three intermediate levels of the path of meditation, the *pāramitā of skilful means* is perfected. All the obscurations associated with lack of skilful means are purified.

Twelve sets of *one trillion* qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from a trillion samādhi meditations in a single instant, and so on.

One can take birth as a *ruler of Controlling Others' Emanations*.

This seventh bhūmi is called '*Far Progressed*', because it is advanced far beyond the state of saṃsāra.

These first seven bhūmis are known as the seven impure bhūmis because while we are on these stages impure appearances can still be perceived directly.

Eighth Bhūmi

At the lesser of the three greater levels of the path of meditation, the *pāramitā of strength* is perfected. All the obscurations associated with lack of strength are purified.

Twelve sets of qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from, in a single instant, as many samādhi meditations as there are *atoms in a hundred thousand great universes* of a thousand worlds.

One can take birth as a *ruler over a first-order universe of a thousand realms*

This eighth bhūmi is called '**Immovable**', because bodhisattvas who have reached this stage cannot be moved by discerning or non-discerning perceptions. Their five senses and emotional mind are transformed, they gain access to pure realms and make evident both the all-accomplishing wisdom and the wisdom of discernment.

Ninth Bhūmi

At the intermediate of the three greater levels of the path of meditation, the **pāramitā of aspiration** is perfected. All the obscurations associated with unfulfilled aspirations are purified.

Twelve sets of qualities are gained, such as the ability to enter into and arise from, in a single instant, as many samādhi meditations as there are *atoms in a million great universes*.

One can take birth as Brahma, the **ruler over a second-order universe of one thousand times one thousand worlds**.

This ninth bhūmi is called '**Perfect Intellect**', because the bodhisattvas who have reached this stage possess perfect discriminating awareness and the like.

Tenth Bhūmi

At the greater of the three greater levels of the path of meditation, the **pāramitā of primordial wisdom** is perfected. Bodhisattvas at this stage are freed from the conceptual obscurations.

They gain qualities, such as being able to enter into and arise from, in a single instant, as many samādhis as there are *inconceivable atoms in inconceivable buddhafiels*. Just as before, they possess the twelve sets of qualities, ending with the perfect retinue, which at this stage means being surrounded by as many attendants as there atoms in inconceivable buddhafiels.

These bodhisattvas can take birth as **the ruler of the gods of a pure realm** They serve as the regent of a buddha and bring benefit to others on a vast scale.

This tenth bhūmi is called '**Cloud of Dharma**', because bodhisattvas who have reached this stage cause rain-like Dharma to fall from the clouds of their dhāraṇī and meditation, upon the fields of beings to be trained.

5. The Path of No-More-Learning

At this level, immeasurable rays of light shine out from the bodhisattva's body and make offerings to all the buddhas of the past, present and future, who send back tremendous rays of empowering light. Subtle cognitive obscurations, which are latent habitual tendencies, are vanquished through the antidote, vajra-like samādhi,

and complete and full enlightenment is attained.

Of the five paths, this is the fifth. It is called ‘no-more-learning’, because there is no further training to be done on any path.

When the path of no-more-learning is realized, the bodhisattva reaches the eleventh bhūmi, ‘**Universal Radiance**’.

In response to requests from many scholars, especially Jigdar, this was written by the renunciate Śrī Nirmīṭaka (Patrul Rinpoche). May our own tradition, the vajra vehicle of the early translation school, flourish and spread in every direction and throughout the whole of time.

May virtue abound! Mangalam!

| Translated by Adam Pearcey, 2007. Edited by Phillipa Sison.

1. To help reveal something of the underlying structure in this text, the ‘thirty-seven factors of enlightenment’ are numbered accordingly and appear in bold.

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