

Practicing The Extraordinary Aspiration of Samantabhadra
By Tenzin Jesse

"Thus have I heard. At one time the Bhagavan was at Sravasti in the Jeta grove, in the Anathapindada garden within a magnificent estate. He was with Samantabhadra, Manjushri and five thousand other bodhisattvas who had all undertaken the bodhisattva practice and aspirations of all-embracing good, Samantabhadra.¹"

There, at Sravasti, begins the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, whose final pages are *The Extraordinary Aspiration of the Practice of Samantabhadra*. Originally written in Sanskrit and translated into Tibetan by the renowned early translator Vairocana, the sutra is revered by virtually all schools of Mahayana practitioners throughout the world. In China, the Hwa Yen school of Buddhism was devoted almost entirely to its study.

The *Sutra* tells the story of the young pilgrim, Sudhana, and describes the process of an individual's development of wisdom and skillful means through Sudhana's experience of fifty-two spiritual guides. Sudhana sets out on his quest to learn the ways of a bodhisattva under the guidance of Manjushri, who had himself come from the presence of the Buddha at Sravasti. At the very end of Sudhana's journey to receive teachings from these diverse teachers, Samantabhadra addresses *The Extraordinary Aspiration* to Sudhana as his culminating advice.

During his journey, Sudhana visits a succession of spiritual guides who teach by describing their own practice of the bodhisattva path and the methods they use to guide sentient beings. Each teacher sends Sudhana onward to another teacher until Sudhana meets Samantabhadra, the quintessential bodhisattva. In a magnificent vision, Sudhana sees the body of Samantabhadra from which radiate visions of all worlds throughout the universe in every eon past, present and future. He sees the birth and destruction of world systems throughout time, all the beings of those worlds and all the activities of bodhisattvas within those worlds.

Joyful, ecstatic, Sudhana looks still more closely with the increased clarity of the bliss of seeing reality, and sees within each and every pore of Samantabhadra's body infinite Buddha lands occupied by infinite Buddhas teaching and developing beings. In the midst of this vision, Sudhana becomes equal to Samantabhadra in all aspects of a bodhisattva's wisdom, compassion and activity. Having removed all limiting projections and conceptions, Sudhana himself pervades the universe to benefit beings. Samantabhadra then recites the *Extraordinary Aspiration* summarizing all the practices and views of a bodhisattva, the teachings of these fifty-two teachers.

Given to us to recite as our own thought, *The Extraordinary Aspiration* is ours to absorb and emulate on our own journey to complete awakening. We can use the aspiration as part of our daily practice. Geshe Sonam Rinchen tells a story of meeting a monk who recited the *Extraordinary Aspiration* as part of his main practice: "His room in Darjeeling was quite small, but every available space was full of waterbowl offerings and other offerings, like flowers etc. This monk would prostrate while reciting this prayer of aspiration. He had done so many prostrations that he had a big lump on his forehead. When he was tired from doing prostrations, he would sit down and recite the prayer of aspiration. When he was rested, he would resume prostrations. He kept reciting the prayer nonstop. Thus he made four practices at the same time: 100,000 prayers, prostrations, water bowls and mandala offerings."²

We can practice the *Aspiration* in many specific ways as well:

¹ Phal Chen, vol. cha, Lhasa edition

² unpublished transcript of a teaching on the King of Prayers by Geshe Sonam Rinchen in 1993

- As a dedication of our meditation practice at the day's end, on retreat, or after any practice
- As a recitation for one who has died
- As a dedication of a virtuous project or activity to benefit others
- As an in-depth seven-part practice to accumulate positive energy and purify
- As a means to inspire ourselves and ignite our joyous effort
- As a review of the practices and paths of a bodhisattva
- As a dedication for our own rebirth in the presence of Buddhas

Dedicating the positive potential of my meditation practice with this aspiration, I consider the tranquility and stability that form the basis of a bodhisattva's perseverance. Insight into the nature of reality melts away illusory categories and limitations, permitting a bodhisattva to see infinite Buddhas within one atom, to hear all past, present and future teachings in one moment of thought and to emanate countless bodies throughout the universe to guide all beings to enlightenment.

Reciting this aspiration for one who has died, I contemplate the being I have known as imbedded in an infinite continuity of previous lifetimes, now journeying onwards in the universe, progressing toward awakening. My fervent wish for their happiness will serve as a circumstance for their meeting with truth and teachers in future lives and as energy to speed the ripening of their positive potential. Reflecting that they await my Buddhahood, I aspire to practice for their benefit. Similarly, awaiting their Buddhahood, I aspire to see all beings as bodhisattvas. All of us dwell within the vast interconnectedness and unending closeness of all beings.

Dedicating a beneficial activity with this aspiration, I let a vast mind arise and see the effects of my action rippling out into space and time, touching and healing all distraught beings beyond my imagination. My mind fills with the joy that arises upon benefiting beings with whom I am so closely connected.

As a seven-part practice of purification and of creating positive energy, I contemplate that this very practice will be the cause to meet spiritual guides for lifetimes to come. For lifetimes it will propel me into the presence of Buddhas and will bring about my own awakening and the end of all suffering.

Using this aspiration to lift my mind to my own highest aspirations, my recitation fires my heart with the energy of a bodhisattva's happiness, redoubles my commitment to the wish to free myself and all beings from suffering, and inspires me to live my life for that most extraordinary purpose.

Reviewing all the practices of a bodhisattva with this aspiration, I wish to be free from the deceptive appearances of cyclic existence. Because bodhicitta reveals our notion of being isolated individuals to be a lie and wisdom releases us from all limits of space and time, I vow to meet and honor all beings who practice this path of unified bodhicitta and wisdom.

Making this aspiration to be born in the presence of Amitabha, I determine that this aspiration will ripen at the moment of my death, transforming that instant into a joyful and momentous event in the continuity of my mindstream.

May all Dharma communities be one with the Sravasti of the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, filled with Buddhas and bodhisattvas, with Manjushris and Samantabhadras emanating into the world to guide many Sudhanas. May all practitioners, like the beings of the *Gandavyuha*, be instantly free from the conditioning of cyclic existence and roam the reaches of the universe to instill the bliss of wisdom and interconnectedness in all beings.