

# On Justifying the Choice of Mahāyāna among Multiple Paths in Buddhist Teachings: Based on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*

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## Introduction

This paper takes as its central concern the Buddhist paths of cultivation. The so-called paths of cultivation are not what are usually known as religious denominations, groups, sects, or schools; rather, they are mainly about setting and approaching religious goals through constant and vigorous cultivation. The approach is not unlike walking on an ordinary pathway where one needs to first identify the destination. Then one will continue following the chosen path in order to progressively reach the destination.

Browsing through Buddhist scriptures, one quickly notices that there seems to be more than one way of Buddhist cultivation. As can be found in Buddhist scriptures in their broadest sense, the goals of cultivation include liberation from cyclic life and death and all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment. Among these, the cultivation of becoming liberated from cyclic life and death, the *vimukti-mārga*, can be further differentiated into the *śrāvākayāna*, which aims at *śrāvaka* nirvana, and the *pratyekabuddhayāna*, which aims at *pratyekabuddha* nirvana. If one aims at all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment while helping sentient beings and contributing to the purification of the world along the way, then the *mahāyāna*, *bodhisattvayāna*, *buddhayāna*, or *samyaksambuddhayāna* can be categorized as the *bodhi-mārga* or *bodhi-patha*.

On the surface, Buddhism provides two paths of cultivation, the *vimukti-mārga* and the *bodhi-mārga*, or three paths, the *śrāvākayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna*. Since Buddhism claims to be a religious teaching system, at the very least the following two clarifications must be given regarding the choice to be made among these multiple paths of cultivation. On the one hand, from the standpoint of an educator,

two aspects need explanation in terms of education, especially in achieving the goals: the propriety of the multiple paths of cultivation, and the intrinsic reasoning involved in each path. On the other hand, from the standpoint of a practitioner-to-be or an active practitioner, when facing multiple choices certain issues require clarification: How can one gain a wider perspective? How does one make a proper decision? And how does one maintain proper relationships with other practitioners who choose to take other paths? If these two major concerns are not addressed, the instructor might be accused of teaching some things that are internally contradictory, or of teaching in an entirely haphazard manner. As a result, this could cause unnecessary difficulty to the practitioners and leave them baffled. Of these two major concerns, I have dealt with the former elsewhere;<sup>1</sup> the latter issue is the focus of this paper.

There are many possible ways to obtain a wide spectrum of understanding of the multiple paths of cultivation. One approach most worth attempting is to focus on Buddhist scriptures to determine what has been said regarding the multiple paths of cultivation. Obviously, the number of Buddhist scriptures is not small, and each text focuses on particular aspects or major themes. There are different discourses and guiding principles on how to take different paths of cultivation, such as how practitioners stay on their own paths, or how they get along with each other. A thorough reading of relevant texts will uncover various statements on the issues mentioned above, yet an underlying thorough rationale can be found in the discussions and their principles.

In order to focus more closely on textual studies of Buddhist doctrines, this paper will mainly rely on two texts, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā* in the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras translated by Xuanzang from 660 to 663.<sup>2</sup> While these two texts expound the issue of the paths of cultivation in great detail, due to space limitations this paper will examine only the opening sections of both texts. The number of pages analyzed in this study is significantly small in comparison to the entire scripture. However, the opening sections of the two texts are quite representative, even of the whole Prajñāpāramitā sūtras and, consequently, the main points presented in this paper cannot be accused of overemphasis or bias.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, this paper focuses on the issues of how to perceive, choose, and abide in the paths elucidated in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā* of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras. The perceived clues, guiding principles, and main doctrinal themes found in the texts contribute to understanding why Buddhism offers a beacon for so many

pathways for cultivation. In addition, it will also provide useful references for those who encounter diverse modern adaptations of Buddhism and various religious advocates.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section is the introduction. The second and the third sections focus respectively on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā* to discuss the basic principles to be followed when choosing from multiple Buddhist paths. The last section is the conclusion of this paper.

### **On How to Choose from Multiple Buddhist Paths as Expounded in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā***

The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is also referred to as the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, or the *Short Prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>4</sup> The text begins with Śākyamuni Buddha asking Venerable Subhūti to explain *prajñāpāramitā* to bodhisattvas so that bodhisattvas can embark on and promote the cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā*. This request made by Śākyamuni entails a series of profound discourses: the core of the *prajñāpāramitā* assembly is the cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā*, which is the main task of bodhisattvas; Śākyamuni and all other buddhas have already completed their cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā*, while Ven. Subhūti is a *śrāvaka* in terms of Buddhist cultivation. Therefore, the text reports that a *śrāvaka* was requested to explain *prajñāpāramitā*, the most central practice of bodhisattvas, to bodhisattvas by the Buddha, one who had completed the full course of the practice in question.

If the professional identities of *śrāvakas* and bodhisattvas are of two different categories, then the request made at the beginning of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* represents a cross-category performance. This would not have been surprising if explicating *prajñāpāramitā* was the speciality of *śrāvakas*. But what has been requested—that the most celebrated skill of bodhisattvas will be delivered by a *śrāvaka*—is very unusual. Such a seemingly contradictory situation cannot be explained simply with superficial guesswork. It will require a detailed textual reading to inquire into the relationship among the *prajñāpāramitā* that allows practitioners to access other categories and all possible paths, as well as the choices that *śrāvakas* have when choosing from multiple paths of cultivation.

#### **Four Quotes from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā***

As briefly described above, after being asked by Śākyamuni Buddha, Ven. Subhūti began to explore the *prajñāpāramitā* in four aspects. For the

sake of clarity, the passages are listed below, followed by analysis and further discussion.

1. Whether one wants to train on the level of disciple, *pratyekabuddha*, or bodhisattva, one should listen to this perfection of wisdom, take it up, bear it in mind, recite it, study it, spread it among others, and in this very perfection of wisdom one should be trained and exert oneself. In this very perfection of wisdom all dharmas that constitute a bodhisattva, and in which he should be trained and exert himself, are indicated in full detail.<sup>5</sup>

2. Those, however, who are certain that they have gotten safely out of this world (i.e., arhats who have reached their last birth) are unfit for full enlightenment [because they are not willing to go, out of compassion, back into birth-and-death.] And why? The flood of birth-and-death hems them in. Incapable of repeated rebirths, they are unable to aspire to full enlightenment. And yet, if they also will aspire to full enlightenment, I confirm them also. I shall not obstruct their wholesome root. For one should uphold the most distinguished dharmas above all others.<sup>6</sup>

3. Whatever the Lord's disciples teach, all that is to be known as the Tathāgata's work. For in the dharma demonstrated by the Tathāgata they train themselves, they realize its true nature, they hold it in mind. Thereafter nothing that they teach contradicts the true nature of dharma. It is just an outpouring of the Tathāgata's demonstration of dharma. Whatever those sons of good family may expound as the nature of dharma, they do not bring that into contradiction with the actual nature of dharma.<sup>7</sup>

4. This is the Lord's Absolute, the essence of the disciples who are without any support, so that, in whatever way they are questioned, they find a way out, do not contradict the true nature of dharmas, nor [do they] depart from it. And this is because they do not rely on any dharmas.<sup>8</sup>

In the spirit of doctrinal reasoning, the following analysis will start with the first quotation. The focus of this quote is the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*, which not only welcomes but also accommodates practitioners from the *śrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, or *bodhisattvayāna*. In other words, all practitioners cultivating any of these paths can benefit from practicing *prajñāpāramitā* and they will progressively reach their intended destinations on their chosen paths.

An analysis of the second quotation leads to the following four points. First, when practitioners on the *śrāvakayāna* or *pratyekabuddhayāna* attain *samyaktva-niyāma*, they achieve a state so far beyond the novice level that they are assured of continual progress on the right path. As a result, on the one hand, even though one is still in the cycle of birth and death, the

entrances to the lower three realms of the cycle of birth and death are closed. On the other hand, at this point, as long as one continues to practice he or she will be certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to be heading toward their planned destination.<sup>9</sup>

Second, since there is no chance of falling into the lower three realms of the cycle of birth and death, with the help of constant practice one will with certainty eventually be free from the cycle of birth and death. As a result, on a pragmatic basis, there is no need for *śrāvakas* or those on the way to become a *pratyekabuddha* to switch to another path. Consequently, it does not seem to be necessary to set an intention to achieve utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment, which is required to enter the bodhisattva path.

Third, for lofty practitioners who aim high, the more advanced practice should be undertaken.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, even after having obtained *samyaktva-niyāma*, *śrāvakas* or those on the way to becoming a *pratyekabuddha* can still set an intention to achieve utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment. Finally, the intention to achieve utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment will still arise in the minds of those *śrāvakas* or those on the way to becoming a *pratyekabuddha* who have already obtained *samyaktva-niyāma*. Ven. Subhūti says that this would not cause any trouble to their practice at all, and he feels happy for them from the bottom of his heart.

The third quotation is not unlike a narrative uttered by Ven. Subhūti, which unfolds the following three points. First, Ven. Subhūti has been listening to Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings and practicing vigorously. As a result, it is fair to say that he has realized reality as it really is (*tām dharma-tām sākṣāt-√kr*). Second, after realizing reality as it really is, he is then qualified to talk to the assembly about *prajñāpāramitā* and is able to connect with the Buddha's majesty (*buddhānubhāvena*) without going against the Dharma. Third, as a disciple of the Buddha, Ven. Subhūti is modest and claims that his skillful utterance is the effect of the Buddha's majesty rather than his own eloquence.

The fourth quotation works closely with the third to emphasize that Ven. Subhūti is not the only exception in which a *śrāvaka* may expound the *prajñāpāramitā*. In fact, all disciples of the Buddha, in principle, can discuss and answer any question regarding *prajñāpāramitā*, regardless of their upbringing or the current path of practice they have taken. As long as they fulfill all the prerequisites of practice—not to rely on (*a-niśrita*) any conception of or attachment to any dharma, not to contradict (*na vi-√rudh*) the nature of reality, not to depart from (*na vy-ati-√vrt*) the nature

of reality—they can do exactly as Ven. Subhūti did and expound the *prajñāpāramitā*.

### Summary of the Basic Points

To summarize the above four quotes from the learner's point of view, the basic principles in choosing from multiple paths of cultivation are as follows:

1. The bodhisattva path that employs cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā* as the main focus, and is also known as the *mahāyāna*, i.e., the great path of cultivation, encompasses all the practices of the *śrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattoayāna*. In addition, it welcomes any practitioner who chooses to practice any of the three paths.

2. If one's goal is to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, then it is perfectly fine to choose to practice the *śrāvakayāna* or the *pratyekabuddhayāna*. After studious practice, once one reaches a junction where he or she must follow either the *śrāvaka-samyaktva-niyāma* or the *pratyekabuddha-samyaktva-niyāma*, they will not fall into the lower three realms in their future process of life and they will eventually be free of the cycle of birth and death. After a certain period of practice, and having already achieved a certain level of cultivation, this promise of nonretrogression can be considered as a guarantee from a certain aspect. To switch to another path of practice at this point might be considered by some sentient beings as a bad choice or one that creates unnecessary trouble.

3. The practice of the bodhisattva path is not limited to liberation from the cycle of birth and death—it goes beyond this. There are so many advanced goals in life, such as unfolding limitless wisdom until one ultimately becomes a buddha, providing unconditional liberation to sentient beings, and contributing one's efforts and ability to make this world better, to name but a few. Consequently, at the junction of obtaining either the *śrāvaka-samyaktva-niyāma* or the *pratyekabuddha-samyaktva-niyāma*, one might wish to achieve a greater goal, beyond mere liberation from the cycle of birth and death. In this case, the higher and more advanced aspiration will entail setting the intention to achieve utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment. After reaching the turning point of setting this intention there will be no difficulty in switching one's cultivation from the *vimukti-mārga* to the *bodhi-mārga*.

4. All disciples of the Buddha, including those who have switched from the *vimukti-mārga* to the *bodhi-mārga*, will be able to continue practicing on the bodhisattva path to fulfill all kinds of required cultivation, such as learning, practicing vigorously, and realizing the nature of reality.

In addition, they will construct an interconnected system of cultivation manifested by the paths, dharmas, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and sentient beings to make extended contributions such as teaching, explaining, or discussing *prajñāpāramitā* in Buddhist assemblies.

To sum up, from the learner's point of view, the three different paths of cultivation in Buddhist teachings offer various practitioners different learning choices, institutions, or systems, rather than a single one-size-fits-all solution. In addition, it is possible to switch to other paths during one's course of practice, not unlike transferring to another school while pursuing higher education. In other words, this mechanism is not at all rigid—no one has to remain stuck in the path on which he or she started.

With great convenience, learners or researchers may respond with one of the following two different approaches. The first involves a thorough understanding of all the different paths in Buddhist cultivation so that one can make a good decision when the time comes, whether it is choosing a path or seriously evaluating all the pros and cons before switching to another path. However, this mechanism does not provide a standardized answer that is appropriate for everyone. On the contrary, each segment in the whole process will challenge the reasoning, aspirations, and decisions of the learners or researchers.

An alternative response might be haphazard and may throw one into disarray. The practitioner might grasp some fragmented appearances of the three paths of cultivation and then proudly hold on to those fragments, without any doubts. Or one might even stir up quarrels, fractious disputes, or confrontations among followers of different paths. One can use this mechanism to reflect on oneself, especially on how average beings mistake, abuse, waste, or miss the opportunity to choose from multiple paths of cultivation.

### **On Choosing from Multiple Paths of Cultivation in the *Suivkrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā***

The *Suivkrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā*, the *Questions of Suivkrāntavikrāmin*, also known as the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra in 2,500 Lines*, is the last but certainly not least assembly in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, and it is indeed the high point of the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings.<sup>11</sup> The *Suivkrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā* is essential to understanding how profound the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings can be. However, the main theme of this paper is not the profundity of the *prajñāpāramitā* but the inquiry of how to recognize multiple paths of

cultivation and how to choose the most suitable path once one has decided to embark on Buddhist practice.

#### **Four Passages from the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā***

The text begins with a series of questions asked by Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva on the practice of the *prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>12</sup> Before replying to the bodhisattva, Śākyamuni Buddha asks him about the reasoning behind the series of questions.<sup>13</sup>

Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva seems to be well prepared and gives a long and detailed answer, which reveals the characteristics of the expected reader of this text and even of the entirety of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras. On the one hand, there is the issue of what kind of sentient beings attend *prajñāpāramitā* assemblies. On the other hand, the text also specifies the kind of sentient beings who are capable of embarking on the earnest practice of the systematic cultivation unfolded in the *prajñāpāramitā* assemblies. Suvikrāntavikrāmin's answer addresses exactly the focus of this paper, so it will be the reference for the contextual analysis and interpretation of this section.

Suvikrāntavikrāmin's response can be essentially divided into four parts. The first part provides an outline of how the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings encompass the education of all the *śrāvākayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna* paths of cultivation. The second part points out the mentalities that are not suitable for practicing *prajñāpāramitā*. The third part focuses on the characteristics of the mentalities of the expected attendees of the *prajñāpāramitā* assembly. The fourth part explains what brings Suvikrāntavikrāmin to inquire into the series of issues related to the *prajñāpāramitā* practice. A more detailed discussion of these main points is offered below.

#### **The Major Themes of the First Part**

The first part is an outline of how the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings encompass the education of the *śrāvākayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna* of cultivation and those who practice them. Since this section has not been well discussed, the entire passage is given here.

We question the Tathāgata about this matter for the sake of all beings, for the welfare of all beings, out of pity for all beings. And why? The perfection of wisdom comprises all dharmas, i.e., the dharmas of disciples, of *pratyekabuddhas*, of bodhisattvas, and of fully enlightened buddhas. Therefore, O Lord, do expound the sphere of a tathāgata, the cognition of a tathāgata! When they have heard it, beings who are fixed on the disciple vehicle will



quickly realize the stage that is without outflows. Those who are fixed on the vehicle of the *pratyekabuddhas* will go forth quickly by means of the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle. Those who have set out for utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment will quickly fully know utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment. But those who have not yet entered with any certainty on the path by which they will win salvation, who are not fixed on any of the three levels, will raise their heart to utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment. And much merit will be created for all beings by the Tathāgata's reply to this question about the perfection of wisdom.<sup>14</sup>

What Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva explains reveals the basic capacity and vision. The discourse on multiple paths of cultivation can be summed up in the following five main points.

First, the all-encompassing nature of the *prajñāpāramitā* practice makes it possible not only for those of the *śrāvākayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna* to take part in it, but also includes the path to all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment. This point warrants further discussion. If one recognizes the three paths as the result of a ramified sectarian movement or as three totally different claims, then there seems to be segregation among different paths. However, if one focuses on the *prajñāpāramitā* in terms of emptiness and nonduality, or even the proposition of the three paths as being derived from penetrating wisdom, then it is easier to comprehend that the *prajñāpāramitā* comprises all three paths.

Second, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings remain open to those sentient beings who will remain fixed on the disciple path (*ye sattvā niyatāḥ śrāvāka-yāne bhaviṣyanti*). It is interesting to note that, to some extent, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings will also help those who are already fixed on the disciple path to achieve their goals.<sup>15</sup>

Third, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings remain open to those sentient beings who will remain fixed on the path of the *pratyekabuddhas* (*ye pratyekabuddha-yāne niyatāḥ bhaviṣyanti*). Again, to some extent, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings will also help those who are already fixed on the *pratyekabuddha* path to achieve their goals.

Fourth, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings are especially suitable, even indispensable, for those who have set out for utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment (*ye 'nuttarāṃ samyak-sambodhiṃ samprasthitāḥ*). Therefore, to some extent, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings will help those who aim at utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment to achieve their goals.

Fifth, the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings remain open to those who are not fixed (*a-niyata*) on any of the three paths and are undecided about which

learning path they will follow. Furthermore, it is hoped that after receiving the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings, these sentient beings will raise their hearts to utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment, and perhaps even opt for the *bodhi-mārga* as their first choice.

### The Major Themes of the Second Part

The second part points out the mentalities that are not suitable for practicing *prajñāpāramitā*. Even though the *bodhi-mārga* champions the openness of the cultivation path and focuses on helping ordinary sentient beings, employing *prajñāpāramitā* as the main path of cultivation does not mean recruiting just anyone merely for the sake of gaining more members. Obviously, in terms of the context and requirements, there is a difference between the concept of the ordinary sentient beings it will help and the concept of a qualified practitioner of the path. Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva clearly declares that the reason he asks the series of questions on the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings is not unlike forming a measuring ruler. He not only refuses to go with the flow and follow fashion blindly, but also will guard the gate strictly by identifying those whose temperament is incompatible with cultivation and excluding them.

We do not question the Tathāgata for the sake of beings of inferior resolve, nor for those with weak hearts or poor minds, who are lazy or overcome by sloth . . . who exalt themselves and deprecate others, who attach weight to gain and honor, or are bent on food and robes . . . cheats, boasters, hinters, bullies, keen on making a profit. We do not question the Tathāgata for the sake of beings of that kind.<sup>16</sup>

Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva then lists thirty characteristics that are not suitable for practicing *prajñāpāramitā*, starting from inferior resolve (*hīnādhimuktika*) and ending at being keen on making a profit (*lābhena lābha-cikīrṣuka*). Any qualities related to these are not appropriate for the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*. In other words, those to whom any of these characteristics pertain will not be suitable to practice *prajñāpāramitā*, at least for the time being. On reviewing the list, we see that none of these characteristics is personal—they are not about the religious preferences, religious identity, social status, ethnographic group, economic status, or political preferences of sentient beings. Furthermore, whether or not the practitioner is a layperson or a celebrity is totally irrelevant. All that matters is whether the would-be practitioners' attitudes, views, livelihoods, or habits are suitable for embarking on a path of cultivation.

The thirty characteristics listed by Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva can be regarded as the insistence that Buddhism will not lower the bar

merely to become popular, so as not to corrupt its purity and professionalism in cultivation. At the same time, it strives to provide those sentient beings that encounter choices of multiple paths of cultivation a mirror to inspect or reflect on their characteristics that are either revealed in their mentalities or steeped in habitual attributes. If there is serious damage or huge digressions, it is doubtful whether one can even continue as an ordinary person, let alone take on advanced and profound religious cultivation. As it turns out, the real opponents or obstacles to entering a path of cultivation are the ugly characteristics in the mentalities or habitual attributes of the would-be participants. As a result, the foundation of religious practice lies in the development of an upright character and the establishment of right views.

### The Major Themes of the Third Part

The third part focuses on the characteristics of the mentalities of those who are the expected attendees of the *prajñāpāramitā* assembly. In addition to passively eliminating inappropriate characteristics, Suvikrāntavikrāmin also lists in two paragraphs the appropriate characteristics one should have toward sentient beings in general, and toward bodhisattvas.

1. But we question him for the sake of beings who strive after the cognition of the all-knowing, the nonattached cognition, the cognition of the self-existent, the unequaled cognition, the utmost cognition; . . .<sup>17</sup>
2. They do not apprehend even dharma, or feel inclined toward it, how much less that which is not related (adharma). They . . . attain to the highest perfection in all dharmas and have great skill in removing all kinds of uncertainty. For the sake of such beings, O Lord, of bodhisattvas, of great beings, do we question the Tathāgata.<sup>18</sup>

In the passage discussing sentient beings' practice, Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva lists seven characteristics, beginning with striving for cognition of the all-knowing (*sarvajña-jñāna*), nonattached cognition (*asaṅga-jñāna*), cognition of the self-existent (*svayaṃ-bhū-jñāna*), unequaled cognition (*asama-jñāna*), and utmost cognition (*anuttara-jñāna*). On reviewing the list, it is not difficult to conclude that the family background and social status of the practitioners are irrelevant to *prajñāpāramitā* cultivation. The only important characteristics are those that are beneficial to the actual practice.

These seven characteristics proposed by Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva as helpful in cultivating *prajñāpāramitā* cannot be easily or offhandedly dismissed. On the contrary, they are meaningful factors in

retrospection, high standards, and correctional procedures. Some important characteristics are that one must really enjoy acquiring supreme wisdom through practicing *prajñāpāramitā*; one will not, in any case, be snobbish or despise the *prajñāpāramitā* practice and will continue in practice with a thoroughly constant modest mentality; one will eradicate all harmful or afflictive sentiments on life and death; and one will become accustomed to recognizing all things and events from the perspective of their important components, the perspective of equality based on emptiness.

In the context of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, especially in regard to the topic of how to cultivate *prajñāpāramitā*, it is clear that these seven qualities are not merely lumped together randomly, nor are they insignificant. Every characteristic is crucial, and one's ability to continue practicing depends on them.

Regarding the bodhisattvas' practice, *Suvikrāntavikrāmin* emphasizes that "they do not apprehend even dharma, or feel inclined toward it, how much less that which is not related" (*ye dharmam api nōpalabhante nābhiniśante, kutaḥ punar adharmam*) that unfolds sixteen characteristics for bodhisattvas. While the path of cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā* is open to all sentient beings, most practitioners on this path are bodhisattvas. Examining them closely, we find that these sixteen characteristics do not include any quality that is irrelevant to practicing *prajñāpāramitā*, to the point that factors of family background or upbringing that most average people highly value are ignored. Yet the characteristics required for bodhisattvas are more extensive and advanced than those for ordinary sentient beings.

Since bodhisattvas form the majority of those who cultivate *prajñāpāramitā*, these sixteen characteristics can be regarded as a testimonial to the fact that *prajñāpāramitā* is an advanced practice. These sixteen characteristics can be grouped concisely and to lucid effect into four categories on how bodhisattvas should practice. First, bodhisattvas should maintain the mental purity required for decent practitioners of religious inquiry, and consistently overcome the various perplexities and obstacles with which they may be confronted. Second, bodhisattvas should continue working on the cultivation supported and motivated by a genuine undertaking and indomitable perseverance.<sup>19</sup> Third, bodhisattvas should be determined to accomplish *prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>20</sup> Fourth, bodhisattvas should act out their compassion and equality to guide sentient beings on the ways of life experience and paths of cultivation. Skillfully employing their merits, virtues, wisdom, and unsurpassed powers, bodhisattvas are

dedicated to the world. In sum, bodhisattvas' strenuous practice in the *bodhi-patha* merges all of the four factors described above.

### The Major Themes of the Fourth Part

The fourth part explains what has brought Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva to inquire into the series of issues on the *prajñāpāramitā* practice. When the focus shifts from ordinary sentient beings to bodhisattvas, Suvikrāntavikrāmin, as one of the most brilliant bodhisattvas in the assembly, cannot, so to speak, hide behind the curtain. Even though there are only three factors, Suvikrāntavikrāmin directly expresses his reflections, which not only summarize the four parts from the beginning of the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā*, but also entail the following highly specialized discussion on cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā*.

We question the Tathāgata in the interest of the welfare of all beings, for their benefit, happiness, and pacification, bearing in mind the happiness of nirvana, the happiness of the buddhas, the unconditioned happiness. We therefore question the Tathāgata in order to remove the uncertainties of all beings. We ourselves, O Lord, want to be freed from uncertainty and then, freed from uncertainty, we wish to demonstrate the dharma to all beings, so that they also might lose their uncertainties. For all beings, O Lord, want happiness, but outside of wisdom we do not see, O Lord, any happiness for any being. Outside of the vehicle of the bodhisattvas, the great beings, there is nowhere any happiness for any being.

Thereupon, considering this sequence of thought, we who wish to bear in mind the happiness of beings ask about the perfection of wisdom, and seeing this advantage to the bodhisattvas, we have asked the Tathāgata about this matter.<sup>21</sup>

All three factors elucidated by Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva are useful in examining the intentions of Buddhist practitioners. At the very beginning, Suvikrāntavikrāmin, by implication, challenges the practitioners' intentions as to whether they have any hidden agenda, tend to create confrontation, or are inclined to denounce their opponents. The answer to this is a basic one: it is necessary to eliminate all negative scruples. In a positive sense, one can further scrutinize the following two issues based on these principles. First, what is the self-image promoted by these questions? Second, what is being questioned regarding the practitioners' intentions?

Regarding the first issue, the self-image promoted by these questions, if we recognize that the questions from the beginning of the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā* are the self-description of most of the attendees of the

assembly, then the portrayal, either truthful or idealized, can be discussed in two further aspects. On the one hand, what is the impression that is projected by cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā* to the world? Simply put, in principle, the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā* is always open to sentient beings who are ready to take spiritual practice seriously, and it encompasses all paths of Buddhist cultivation. In addition, it aims high at the unsurpassed states with the constant effort to make breakthroughs, leave all attachments behind, and reach the goal.

On the other hand, when ordinary sentient beings, practitioners in the *vimukti-mārga*, and bodhisattvas face the paths or the world unfolded from the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*, what positions do they take on? Which path or world can they expect? Once they embark on the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*, how much room for maneuver is there when choosing from multiple paths and approaches? What kind of result can be expected from the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*? And what kind of contribution can be expected from the professional cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*?

In essence, ordinary sentient beings, practitioners in the *vimukti-mārga*, and bodhisattvas can expect the following as the result of the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*: to find and put into practice their own positions in life experiences and life practices; to be ready to start cultivating life practices and to actively expect themselves to do so, too; that there will be no limit at all in choosing from multiple paths and approaches, and even switching to another path is possible; to proceed until the goal is reached once the decision has been made, regardless of one's chosen path or approach; and to improve, solve, facilitate, and develop the thorough liberation of all sentient beings including oneself, so that all sentient beings can find their own tracks in their life paths, escape from their predicaments, and find their way out.

Regarding the intentions of the practitioners, this issue can be discussed further in terms of format and content. In terms of format, in addition to the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā*, many other scriptures are also structured as a set of questions and answers. There are many topics such as levels, clues, details, and mentalities to be discussed and comprehended further in regard to cultivation of the *prajñāpāramitā*. As a result, if the question about intention is framed properly, it will help bring out deeper levels of discussion and develop pertinent comprehension.

In terms of content, the discussion offers a perfect opportunity to clarify any concerns or confusion, and to correct any diversions from the intention to practice *prajñāpāramitā*, so as to come up with more appropriate approaches or performances. As a result, regardless of

whether one has already started practicing Buddhist cultivation or not, he or she will certainly benefit from any engagement with the following: to realize the importance of intention in Buddhist practice, to comprehend the required intention in *prajñāpāramitā* practice, and to make a more appropriate decision in choosing one's path of cultivation. In other words, if it is necessary to assess the differences among different paths of cultivation in a broad view when choosing from multiple paths, then, by the same token, it is also necessary for one to honestly scrutinize one's intentions.

### Summary of the Basic Points

In response to Śākyamuni Buddha's question, Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva delineates in his opening remarks the outlines of the *prajñāpāramitā* practice, ordinary sentient beings, practitioners in the *vimuktīmārga*, and bodhisattvas. Based on Buddhist scriptures and through this discourse, practitioners will have clear principles in mind when choosing from multiple paths of cultivation.

From the standpoint of learners, the basic principles on how to choose from multiple paths of cultivation delivered by Suvikrāntavikrāmin in the opening section can be grouped into the following four arguments.

1. The all-encompassing nature of *prajñāpāramitā* practice makes it possible that not only those of the *śrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *bodhisattvayāna* may take part in it, but the path to all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment is also included within it. On any chosen cultivation path, regardless of one's level of familiarity with the practice, one can certainly embark on the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*. In addition, the *prajñāpāramitā* practice can in fact help one to review their choice among multiple feasible paths of cultivation, and further help practitioners reach their chosen goal. In short, through the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*, there will be many options in the paths of cultivation providing practitioners their own choice of ways to reach ultimate enlightenment.

2. While the *prajñāpāramitā* practice is all encompassing, this does not mean that it is suitable for all sentient beings. In principle, none of the differences in one's religious preference, religious identity, social status, ethnographic group, economic status, or political preference is relevant in *prajñāpāramitā* practice. However, if too much agitation contaminates one's mentality, viewpoint, activities, or habits, such as inferior resolve or keenness on making a profit, then that particular sentient being is not suitable for such an advanced practice as *prajñāpāramitā*. Therefore, when choosing the path of cultivation, one should honestly evaluate

the compatibility of their own mentality with the practice of *prajñāpāramitā*, as well as any obstructions they may have in unfolding a cultivation path in the future.

3. Again, while the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā* is all encompassing, it is only suitable for certain particular sentient beings to practice. Those sentient beings or bodhisattvas who really enjoy acquiring supreme wisdom, and who are constantly in the state of cultivation, compassion, equality, perseverance, and responsibility, are great candidates for cultivating such an advanced practice as *prajñāpāramitā*. Therefore, when choosing a path of cultivation, one can also evaluate one's suitability for the *prajñāpāramitā* practice and explore the path to which *prajñāpāramitā* practice leads.

4. In every Buddhist cultivation path there are numerous exemplary professionals; Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva is one such professional in both the *prajñāpāramitā* practice and the *bodhi-mārga*. As a result, a practitioner can employ Suvikrāntavikrāmin Bodhisattva as a mirror, a reference, or an exemplar to reflect on whether he or she is suitable for practicing *prajñāpāramitā* or the *bodhi-mārga*.

### Conclusion

The cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā* offers at least three paths, that of the *śrāvakayāna*, the *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and the *bodhisattvayāna*, to accommodate, ripen, and offer more choices to sentient beings in choosing cultivation paths. How to choose an appropriate or better path from multiple alternatives depends on the particular sentient being's beliefs, attitudes, ambition, courage, comprehension, and rationale concerning his or her perspective on life, the world, values, and practice.

However, when facing multiple choices of cultivation paths, the decision is not so rigid that each sentient being can choose only one. For example, if one chooses to practice the *bodhisattvayāna*, then it is best to stay on that same path thereafter. Nevertheless, all-encompassing and thorough enlightenment cannot be achieved without the following measures: all the crucial dharmas in the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna* are also required for practicing the *bodhisattvayāna*; all the abilities learned in the *śrāvakayāna* and the *pratyekabuddhayāna* are also to be learned for practicing the *bodhisattvayāna*; all the cognitions acquired in the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna* must be excelled by the more thorough perspectives of emptiness and nonduality; and the levels of *śrāvakas* and those on the way to becoming a *pratyekabuddha* will be transcended by the notion of nonappropriation. The *bodhisattvayāna* as such not only incorporates



both the *śrāvakayāna* and the *pratyekabuddhayāna*, it also far surpasses dualistic opposition to the *śrāvakayāna* or *pratyekabuddhayāna*.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of choosing an appropriate cultivation path is not only important to the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras but is also prevalent in many other scriptures. When faced with the moment of choosing a cultivation path, it is possible to choose a particular path, to choose a path that incorporates others, or to choose all of the paths. For example, a passage in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* reads:

Śāriputra: Goddess, do you belong to the disciple vehicle, to the solitary vehicle, or to the great vehicle?

Goddess: I belong to the disciple vehicle when I teach it to those who need it. I belong to the solitary vehicle when I teach the twelve links of dependent origination to those who need them. And, since I never abandon the great compassion, I belong to the great vehicle, as all need that teaching to attain ultimate liberation.<sup>23</sup>

As this text is not within the scope of the major sources of this paper, I offer the quotation above simply as an important Buddhist reference without further textual analysis.

For some time within academia there has been a flood of papers on the *mahāyāna* or *bodhi-mārga* that focus mainly on such issues as disparities among sectarian groups, varied objects of worship, and whether or not the followers are laity. Furthermore, most papers tend to address only the oppositions, collisions, adaptation, or disputes between Mahāyāna and others. As a result, the important issue of the basic principles in choosing an appropriate path when faced with multiple paths of cultivation is overwhelmed by discourses emphasizing only the many oppositions and disputes.

This paper employs two texts, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and the *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-pariṣcchā* from the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, to focus on the basic principles for choosing the right path and moving in the right direction when faced with multiple paths of cultivation. From the above referencing, analysis, and discussion of these two texts, it is clear that the multiple paths of cultivation offered in Buddhist scriptures are not meant to foster hostile disagreement or confrontation. On the contrary, they are presented in order to help lead sentient beings to Buddhist paths of cultivation with wider capacity, more choices, and higher development. The Prajñāpāramitā sūtras are without doubt among the major Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures. In light of the number of scholarly papers that are

devoted to Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is important not to neglect the doctrinal themes of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras.

In summary, this paper is concerned with one underlying theme: the cultivation of *prajñāpāramitā*. Through *prajñāpāramitā*, there are multiple choices in the paths of Buddhist cultivation entirely accessible all the way to their destinations. In addition, it is possible for practitioners to switch between paths even at the midway point on a certain path. Moreover, when choosing an appropriate path, the practitioner's mentality plays a major role. Therefore, the keywords for this underlying theme could be presented as wisdom, path, multiplicity, choice, mentality, switch, and thoroughgoing.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Yao-ming Tsai, "Bodhisattva-niyāma in the Context of the Three Pathways as Depicted in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*," *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica* 7/1 (March 1997): 109–142; "The Formation of Vehicles and the Proposition of the Three Vehicles in the Sūtras of the Perfection of Wisdom," *Special Edition of the 11th International Conference on Buddhist Education and Culture* (Taipei: Huaan University Press, 2000), pp. 130–164; "Teaching in Accordance with the Students' Aptitudes and the Distinction between Oneself and Others according to the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Āgamas*, and the *Sūtras of the Perfection of Wisdom*," *Journal of the Center for Buddhist Studies, National Taiwan University* 5 (July 2000): 37–78.

On multiple religious paths, see Stephen Kaplan, *Different Paths, Different Summits: A Model for Religious Pluralism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

On Buddhist paths of cultivation, see Robert Buswell, Jr. and Robert Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992); Geshe Lhundub Sopa, *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment*, 3 vols. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004–2007); Joshua Cutler and Guy Newland, eds., *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, 3 vols. Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2000–2004).

- <sup>2</sup> Textual sources are mainly from P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā: With Haribhadra's Commentary Called Āloka* (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1960); "Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāmipariṣṭhā Nāma Sārdhadvisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā," in *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgraha* (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1961), pp. 1–74.
- <sup>3</sup> Lewis Lancaster, "The Dialogue Sūtras: A Study in Textual Structure," in Mano Ryūkai Hakushi Shōju Kinen Ronbunshū Kankōkai hen, ed., *Hannya Haramitta shisō ronshū: Mano Ryūkai Hakushi shōju kinen ronbunshū* (Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1992), pp. 3–7.
- <sup>4</sup> On different editions and translations in various languages of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, see Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (Tokyo: The Reiyukai, 1978, second ed.), pp. 46–55.

- <sup>5</sup> T.220(4).7:764a; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, pp. 3–4; Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Abhisamayālaṅkāra'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyaḅhyā: The Work of Haribhadra Together with the Text Commented On* (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 1932), pp. 41–43; Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (Bollinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1975), p. 84.
- <sup>6</sup> T.220(4).7:769c; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 17; Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyaḅhyā*, pp. 131–133; Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 96.
- <sup>7</sup> T.220(4).7:763b; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, pp. 2–3; Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyaḅhyā*, pp. 28–30; Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 83.
- <sup>8</sup> T.220(4).7:769a; Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, p. 15; Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyaḅhyā*, pp. 123–124; Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 94.
- <sup>9</sup> On *samyaktva-niyāma* see Tsai, “Bodhisattva-niyāma in the Context of the Three Pathways,” pp. 109–142.
- <sup>10</sup> T.220(4).7:767b (Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 91):  
The Lord speaks of the “great vehicle.” Surpassing the world with its gods, men, and *asuras* that vehicle will go forth. For it is the same as space, and exceedingly great. As in space, so in this the great vehicle of the bodhisattvas, the great beings. One cannot see its coming or its going, and its abiding does not exit. Thus one cannot get at beginning of this great vehicle, nor at its end, nor at its middle. But it is self-identical everywhere. Therefore one speaks of a “great vehicle.”
- T.220(4).7:778c (Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 111):  
It is from the great ocean of the perfection of wisdom that the great jewel of the all-knowledge of the Tathāgatas has come forth.
- T.220(4).7:847c–848a (Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, p. 252):  
When he trains in the perfection of wisdom, a Bodhisattva trains in that which is the highest possible degree of perfection for any being. For his merit is the greatest possible.
- <sup>11</sup> On the transmission of different recensions and translations in different languages, see Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, pp. 56–58.
- <sup>12</sup> T.220(16).7:1066a.
- <sup>13</sup> T.220(16).7:1066a.
- <sup>14</sup> T.220(16).7:1066a; Edward Conze, trans., “The Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin,” in *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts* (Totnes, U.K.: Buddhist Publishing Group, 1993), p. 2; Ryusho Hikata (干瀾龍祥), ed., *Suvi-krāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra* 梵文善勇猛般若波羅蜜多經. 序論文付 (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1983), pp. 4–5; Vaidya, “Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāmaparipṛcchā Nāma Sārdha-dvi-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,” p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> What is the benefit for those who stay on their original *śrāvakayāna* or *pratyekabuddhayāna* paths after receiving the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings? There are many major discussions and discourses in Buddhist assemblies. Among those, the

- most worthy of notice is the systematic way of learning to liberate oneself through perspectives on issues such as emptiness, devoid of visual representation, nonduality, and absence of apprehension. Compare with the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā*, T.220(9).7:981a–b.
- <sup>16</sup> T.220(16).7:1066b–1067a; Conze, “The Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin,” pp. 2–3; Hikata, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, p. 5; Vaidya, “Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāniparipṛcchā Nāma Sārdha-dvi-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,” p. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> T.220(16).7:1067a; Conze, “The Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin,” p. 3; Hikata, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, p. 5; Vaidya, “Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāniparipṛcchā Nāma Sārdha-dvi-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,” p. 2.
- <sup>18</sup> T.220(16).7:1067a–b; Conze, “The Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin,” p. 3; Hikata, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, pp. 5–6; Vaidya, “Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāniparipṛcchā Nāma Sārdha-dvi-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,” pp. 2–3.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, the fifth factor out of the sixteen reads: “They carry the great burden, have mounted the great vehicle, live for the great task”; T.220(16).7:1067a.
- <sup>20</sup> For example, the twelfth factor out of the sixteen reads: “They . . . attain to the highest perfection in all dharmas”; T.220(16).7:1067b.
- <sup>21</sup> T.220(16).7:1067b–c; Conze, “The Questions of Suvikrāntavikrāmin,” pp. 3–4; Hikata, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi-Paripṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, p. 6; Vaidya, “Chapter 1: Suvikrāntavikrāniparipṛcchā Nāma Sārdha-dvi-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā,” p. 3.
- <sup>22</sup> See Tsai, “The Formation of Vehicles and the Proposition of the Three,” pp. 130–164; “Teaching in Accordance with the Students’ Aptitudes,” pp. 37–78.
- <sup>23</sup> Robert Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 60. Taishō Daigaku Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūjo Bongo Butten Kenkyūkai, ed., *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa: A Sanskrit Edition based upon the Manuscript Newly Found at the Potala Palace* (Tōkyō: Taishō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2006), p. 70: *āha: kiṃ tvaṃ devate śrāvaka-yānikā pratyekabuddha-yānikā mahā-yānikā vā / āha: śrāvaka-yānikāsmi śrāvaka-yāna-sūcanatayā, pratyekabuddha-yānikāsmi pratītya-dharmāvātāreṇa, mahā-yānikāsmi mahā-karuṇānutsrjanatayā /*

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- . “Teaching in Accordance with the Students’ Aptitudes and the Distinction between Oneself and Others according to the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Āgamas*, and the *Sūtras of the Perfection of Wisdom*,” *Journal of the Center for Buddhist Studies, National Taiwan University* 5 (July 2000): 37–78.
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