

Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance

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Shōbōgenzō Bodhisattva shishō-hō by Eihei Dōgen, translated by Lew Richmond and Kazuaki Tanahashi

The bodhisattva's four methods of guidance are giving, kind speech, beneficial action, and identity-action.

1

"Giving" means nongreed. Nongreed means not to covet. Not to covet means not to curry favor. Even if you govern the Four Continents, you should always convey the correct teaching with nongreed. It is to give away unneeded belongings to someone you don't know, to offer flowers blooming on a distant mountain to the Tathagata, or, again, to offer treasures you had in your former life to sentient beings. Whether it is of teaching or of material, each gift has its value and is worth giving. Even if the gift is not your own, there is no reason to keep from giving. The question is not whether the gift is valuable, but whether there is merit.

When you leave the Way to the Way, you attain the Way. At the time of attaining the Way, the Way is always left to the Way. When treasure is left just as treasure, treasure becomes giving. You give yourself to yourself and others to others. The power of the causal relations of giving reaches to devas, human beings, and even enlightened sages. When giving becomes actual, such causal relations are immediately formed.

Buddha said, "When a person who practices giving goes to an assembly, people take notice." You should know that the mind of such a person communicates subtly with others. Therefore, give even a phrase or verse of the truth; it will be a wholesome seed for this and other lifetimes. Give your valuables, even a penny or a blade of grass; it will be a wholesome root for this and other lifetimes. The truth can turn into valuables; valuables can turn into the truth. This is all because the giver is willing.

A king gave his beard as medicine to cure his retainer's disease; a child offered sand to Buddha and became King Ashoka in a later birth. They were not greedy for reward but only shared what they could. To launch a boat or build a bridge is an act of giving. If you study giving closely, you see that to accept a body and to give up the body are both giving. Making a living and producing things can be nothing other than giving. To leave flowers to the wind, to leave birds to the seasons, are also acts of giving.

King Ashoka was able to offer enough food for hundreds of monks with half a mango. People who practice giving should understand that King Ashoka thus proved the greatness of giving. Not only should you make an effort to give, but also be mindful of every opportunity to give. You are born into this present life because of the merit of giving in the past.

Buddha said, "If you are to practice giving to yourself, how much more so to your parents, wife, and children." Therefore you should know that to give to yourself is a part of giving. To give to your family is also giving. Even when you give a particle of dust, you should rejoice in your own act, because you correctly transmit the merit of all buddhas, and for the first time practice an act of a bodhisattva. The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change. You should keep on changing the minds of sentient beings, from the first moment that they have one particle, to the moment that they attain the Way. This should be started by giving. For this reason giving is the first of the six paramitas. Mind is beyond measure. Things given are beyond measure. Moreover, in giving, mind transforms the gift and the gift transforms mind.

2

"Kind speech" means that when you see sentient beings you arouse the mind of compassion and offer words of loving care. It is contrary to cruel or violent speech. In the secular world, there is the custom of asking after someone's health. In Buddhism there is the phrase "Please treasure yourself" and the respectful address to seniors, "May I ask how you are?" It is kind speech to speak to sentient beings as you would to a baby.

Praise those with virtue; pity those without it. If kind speech is offered, little by little virtue will grow. Thus even kind speech which is not ordinarily known or seen comes into being. You should be willing to practice it for this entire present life; do not give up, world after world, life after life. Kind speech is the

basis for reconciling rulers and subduing enemies. Those who hear kind speech from you have a delighted expression and a joyful mind. Those who hear of your kind speech will be deeply touched—they will never forget it. You should know that kind speech arises from kind mind, and kind mind from the seed of compassionate mind. You should ponder the fact that kind speech is not just praising the merit of others; it has the power to turn the destiny of the nation.

3

"Beneficial action" is skillfully to benefit all classes of sentient beings, that is, to care about their distant and near future, and to help them by using skillful means. In ancient times, someone helped a caged tortoise; another took care of an injured sparrow. They did not expect a reward; they were moved to do so only for the sake of beneficial action.

Foolish people think that if they help others first, their own benefit will be lost; but this is not so. Beneficial action is an act of oneness, benefiting self and others together. To greet petitioners, a lord of old three times stopped in the middle of his bath and arranged his hair, and three times left his dinner table. He did this solely with the intention of benefiting others. He did not mind instructing even subjects of other lords. Thus you should benefit friend and enemy equally. You should benefit self and others alike. If you have this mind, even beneficial action for the sake of grasses, trees, wind, and water is spontaneous and unremitting. This being so, make a wholehearted effort to help the ignorant.

4

"Identity-action" means nondifference. It is nondifference from self, nondifference from others. For example, in the human world the Tathagata took the form of a human being. From this we know that he did the same in other realms. When we know identity-action, others and self are one. Lute, song, and wine are one with human being, deva, and spirit being. Human being is one with lute, song, and wine. Lute, song, and wine are one with lute, song, and wine. Human being is one with human being; deva is one with deva; spirit being is one with spirit being. To understand this is to understand identity-action.

"Action" means right form, dignity, correct manner. This means that you cause yourself to be in identity with others after causing others to be in identity with you. However, the relationship of self and others varies limitlessly with circumstances.

The Guanzi says, "The ocean does not exclude water; that is why it is large. Mountain does not exclude earth; that is why it is high. A wise lord does not exclude people; that is why he has many subjects."

That the ocean does not exclude water is identity-action. Water does not exclude the ocean either. This being so, water comes together to form the ocean. Earth piles up to form mountains. My understanding is that because the ocean itself does not exclude the ocean, it is the ocean, and it is large. Because mountains do not exclude mountains, they are mountains and they are high. Because a wise lord does not weary of people, his subjects assemble. "Subjects" means nation. "Wise lord" means ruler of the nation. A ruler is not supposed to weary of people. "Not to weary of people" does not mean to give no reward or punishment. Although a ruler gives reward and punishment, he does not weary of people. In ancient times when people were uncomplicated, there was neither legal reward nor punishment in the country. The concept of reward and punishment was different. Even at present, there should be some people who seek the Way without expecting a reward. This is beyond the understanding of ignorant people. Because a wise lord understands this, he does not weary of people.

People form a nation and seek a wise lord, but as they do not know completely the reason why a wise lord is wise, they only hope to be supported by the wise lord. They do not notice that they are the ones who support the wise lord. In this way, the principle of identity-action is applied to both a wise lord and all the people. This being so, identity-action is a vow of bodhisattvas. With a gentle expression, practice identity-action for all people.

Each of these four methods of guidance includes all four. Thus, there are sixteen methods of guiding sentient beings.

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