

## THE SECOND HEROIC PRACTICE

### THE PERFECTION OF ETHICS

#### *A Virtuous Life*

*The precepts of compassion roar like thunder,  
The kind heart is wondrous as great clouds,  
Pouring Dharma rain of sweet dew.*

—*Lotus Sutra*

**B**ODHISATTVA ETHICAL PRECEPTS are ultimately beyond words. Out of great compassion, the buddhas return from silence and stillness and give us precepts in words to help us realize the true precepts. In this chapter we will offer words for the sake of realizing the bodhisattva precepts that words cannot reach. While we do this, we also remember that the true precepts are living together with us right now in silence and stillness.<sup>1</sup>

All the Great Vehicle teachings of the buddhas are given in order to inspire, encourage, and illuminate the ethical responsibility of bodhisattvas. The ethical responsibility of bodhisattvas is to realize unsurpassed, complete, and perfect awakening for the welfare of all living beings. These precepts are the way we are truly living together with all beings. The bodhisattva precepts are the source of all buddhas and the origin of all bodhisattvas. They include and promote all six heroic practices. Our thoroughness in the practice of bodhisattva precepts realizes perfect wisdom, which is the liberation of all beings.

In order to awaken to the complete significance of the bodhisattva precepts, it is necessary to understand the teaching of the Two Truths, first elaborated by the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*) school of Buddhism in ancient India. These two truths are known in Buddhist teaching as conventional truth (*samvriti satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramartha satya*).

Conventional truth refers to our everyday, commonsense understanding of the existence of things. From this point of view, the precepts seem to be primarily concerned with doing good and not doing evil. Being grounded in the conventional meaning of the precepts is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient, for realizing their ultimate meaning. Ultimate truth is not circumscribed by our ideas. The ultimate meaning of the precepts transcends ordinary, conventional reality, and it is beyond our understanding. When we have given our thorough attention to the literal and conventional import of these great precepts, we are then able to step forward and enter into the realm of their ultimate meaning.

In the tradition that I have inherited, we have a form of ethical discipline called the Sixteen Great Bodhisattva Precepts. My current understanding is that this version of the precepts originated in thirteenth-century Japan with Old Buddha Eihei Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen in Japan.<sup>2</sup> In his "Essay on Teaching and Conferring the Precepts" (*Kyōjukaimon*), Dogen Zenji says, "These precepts have been protected and maintained by all buddhas and have been mutually entrusted from buddha to buddha and mutually transmitted from ancestor to ancestor. Receiving the precepts goes beyond the three times; confirming these precepts penetrates throughout past and present [and future]."<sup>3</sup>

In this way, these precepts have been transmitted down to the present. Now we perform formal initiation ceremonies giving these Sixteen Great Bodhisattva Precepts to assist and guide people who aspire to the bodhisattva path. Thus we offer a ceremonial process for formally entering the buddha way.

All these words and rituals are for the purpose of awakening to the highest truth of the buddhadharma. These words and ceremonies are provisional truths in service of realizing ultimate truth. By wholeheartedly opening to and embracing provisional truth, the ultimate is revealed. Within this revelation, we see provisional and ultimate as one and the same. Then, we can let go of the ultimate and reenter the provisional. We join hands with all beings and walk together through birth and death on the endless path to buddhahood.

