

Vows or aspirations from the Mahayana tradition

The general bodhisattva vows known in East Asian Buddhism may have come from these lines from the Avatamsaka Sutra.

May I purify an ocean of realms,
May I liberate an ocean of sentient beings,
May I see an ocean of truths,
And may I realize an ocean of wisdom.

May I perform an ocean of perfect deeds,
May I perfect an ocean of prayers,
May I revere an ocean of Buddhas Avatamsaka Sutra, chapter 39 near the end.

One version of the vows, from around or before 800 CE, has five vows instead of the four known today.

Beings are countless. I vow to liberate them all.
Merit & wisdom are boundless. I vow to accumulate them.
The Dharma of the Buddha is boundless. I vow to master it.
The Tathagatas are infinite in number. I vow to serve them.
I vow to realize full Buddhahood.

The Bodhisattva Vow nowadays is generally some version of the following:

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them.
However inexhaustible the defilements are, I vow to extinguish them.
However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them.
However incomparable enlightenment is, I vow to attain it.

Various versions of The Bodhisattva Vow

As used in daily prayers

The Bodhisattva is a being who has taken the Bodhisattva Vow to help save all sentient beings, before going into full Nirvana or enlightenment. There are in Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics a whole cosmology full of heavenly Bodhisattvas. The term is also used for human beings who have taken the Bodhisattva Vow to heart to such an extent that they will keep it, even in their next lives.

The Bodhisattva Vow is essential to Mahayana Buddhism, and thus also to Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. Various forms are current. The essence is:

May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Or in the [Pema Chodron](#) formulation ([The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times](#) (Shambhala Classics), p. 122):

Few of us are satisfied with retreating from the world and just working on ourselves. We want our training to manifest and be of benefit. The bodhisattva-warrior, therefore, makes a vow to wake up not just for himself but for the welfare of all beings. (p. 122)

Here follow a few other ways of saying the same thing with a few more words (mostly found on the internet).



[Bodhisattva Giclee Print Hsu, Yenhuei](#)

1. I vow to save innumerable sentient beings.
2. I vow to eliminate endless afflictions/delusions.
3. I vow to learn innumerable doctrines.
4. I vow to accomplish the unsurpassed Buddha Way.

With a wish to free all beings
I shall always go for refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha,
Until I reach full enlightenment.
Enthused by wisdom and compassion,
today in the Buddhas' presence I generate
the Mind for Full Awakening
For the benefit of all sentient beings.
As long as space remains,
As long as sentient beings remain,
Until then, may I too remain
And dispel the miseries of the world.

The version of the Bodhisattva Vow that [the Dalai Lama](#) often uses when giving it to people in ceremony.

The vow of the Bodhisattva is that she will not go into Nirvana until every single suffering being has entered Nirvana. One has to understand what this means. Our awakening is not a personal triumph. We do not have to win a spiritual sprint. We are one mind. Awakening is to penetrate more and more deeply into this truth. The world is alive. And as long as there is suffering then this living whole is shattered. Whether it is my suffering or the suffering of another, when seen from the perspective of the Bodhisattva makes no difference, because, seen from this perspective there is no 'me' or 'another.' In the Diamond Sutra, "Although the Bodhisattva saves all sentient beings, there are no sentient beings to save."

[Albert Low](#)

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them.

However inexhaustible the defilements are, I vow to extinguish them.

However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them.

However incomparable enlightenment is, I vow to attain it.

All beings, without number, I vow to liberate
Endless blind passions I vow to uproot
Dharma gates beyond measure I vow to penetrate
The way of the Buddha I vow to attain

Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken with them.
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
Buddha's way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.

I take refuge in The Buddha The Dharma and The Sangha
I take refuge in The Guru The Yidam and the Dakini
I take refuge in The Bodhisattvas The Protectors and The Tantras
Homage to all of you

As long as there is suffering
As long as there are sentient beings in the 6 realms
May I never attain Enlightenment
And never cross over into Nirvana

The passions of delusion are inexhaustible.
I vow to extinguish them all at once.

The number of beings is endless. I vow to help
save them all.

The Truth cannot be told. I vow to tell it.

The Way which cannot be followed is unattainable.
I vow to attain it.

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road;
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.



Gold Painted Bodhisattva in Contemplation, China Photographic Print
Su, Keren

May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall,
And a lamp for those who long for light;
For those who need a resting place, a bed,
For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power, and the supreme remedy.
May I be the trees of miracles,
And for every being, the abundant cow.

Like the great earth and the other elements,
Enduring as the sky itself endures,
For the boundless multitude of living beings,
May I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives,
In number like the boundless reaches of the sky,
May I be their sustenance and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering

Countless sentient beings, I vow to help to cross the ocean of existence.
Eternal Sufferings, I vow to end.
Innumerable spiritual methods, I vow to study and comprehend.
The buddha's unsurpassable supreme dharma, I vow to realize.

[adapted from Kim Dieu's translation from the Vietnamese]

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Two sets of Buddhist vows

There are mainly two specific sets of vows that Buddhists take in formal settings nowadays, although every Mahayana aspirant is encouraged to make individual vows too.

One set is from the Brahma Net Sutra and followed in China, Japan & Korea & the rest of East Asia.
<http://www.purifymind.com/BrahmaNetSutra.htm>

The other is used as an expanded set of rules for those aspiring to become Bodhisattvas, by the Tibetan & Mongolian Mahayanists of Central Asia:

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/practice_material/vows/bodhisattva/root_bodhisattva_pledges.html