

World Peace through Bodhisattva Paths: A Mahayana Perspective

Abstract

This paper examines how the Bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism provides a transformative framework for attaining world peace. The Bodhisattva ideal promotes peace through ethics, inner change, and compassion, instead of using force or surface-level solutions. Drawing on key Mahāyāna texts such as the Lotus Sūtra, Avataṃsaka Sūtra, Bodhicaryāvatāra, and Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, this study analyzes the foundational principles of the Bodhisattva vow, the six perfections (pāramitās), and the doctrine of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda) as the basis for cultivating enduring peace. This research incorporates a qualitative doctrinal analysis to highlight the relevance of Bodhisattva ethics in contemporary global peace-building.

Key Words: Bodhisattva Path, World Peace, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Six Pāramitās, Interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and Inner Transformation

Introduction

The Bodhisattva path, a central doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism, presents a profound ethical and spiritual framework for the realization of world peace. Unlike conventional peace models that rely heavily on political treaties, international diplomacy, or military interventions, the Bodhisattva path promotes a radically different approach: peace begins within. As Paul Williams notes, this path reorients Buddhist values from self-liberation to universal salvation, emphasizing collective responsibility and spiritual transformation (Williams 103–120).

The Bodhisattva is not merely a religious aspirant but an archetype of moral leadership, one who postpones personal Nirvāṇa to work tirelessly for the liberation of all sentient beings (Śāntideva 8.129). This spiritual commitment is encapsulated in the Bodhisattva vow, a pledge to attain enlightenment only for the sake of universal welfare

(Watson 48). Thus, peace in the Mahāyāna vision is not viewed as a political endpoint but as a continuous spiritual practice grounded in selflessness, nonviolence (*ahimsā*), and interdependence (Harvey 106).

This perspective sees peace as dynamic, relational, and deeply rooted in psychological transformation. The cultivation of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) generosity, morality, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom provides the ethical infrastructure for a peaceful mind and a compassionate society (Gethin 212). Drawing from canonical sources such as the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, and *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, this study argues that the Bodhisattva path offers a comprehensive model for sustainable peace, one that integrates the inner and outer, the personal and the collective. In an era marked by climate crisis, social polarization, and violent conflict, the Bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion offer not just philosophical insight but practical guidance for global transformation (Conze 135).

Literature Review

Paul Williams in *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* presents a thorough exploration of the evolution of Mahāyāna thought, with special attention to the Bodhisattva ideal. He highlights the shift from early Buddhism's emphasis on personal liberation (arhatship) to Mahāyāna's collective goal of universal salvation. Williams argues that this represents a deep ethical and ontological transformation. The Bodhisattva ethic reframes spiritual practice as a moral collective endeavor, fostering social responsibility and inter-being, aligning with peace-building and social harmony (Williams 103–120).

Peter Harvey, in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, offers an ethical framework for understanding Mahāyāna's core values of compassion (*karuṇā*) and nonviolence (*ahimsā*). These values are foundational to the Bodhisattva path and crucial for addressing modern issues like war, ecological crises, and injustice. Harvey asserts that Mahāyāna compassion is a rigorous ethical commitment aimed at alleviating suffering, and its cultivation of nonviolence encourages interpersonal harmony and structural

justice—offering ethical tools for conflict resolution and environmental care (Harvey 98–115).

Edward Conze, in his translation and commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, explains how the perfection of wisdom (prajñā) in Mahāyāna is a liberating insight rather than mere intellect. By realizing the emptiness (śūnyatā) of phenomena, practitioners dissolve dualistic views like self/other and friend/enemy. Conze emphasizes that the Bodhisattva path entails both ethical discipline and a shift in perception that undercuts the psychological roots of violence and conflict (Conze 135).

Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Peace Is Every Step*, connects the Bodhisattva ethic to modern activism. He presents mindfulness as a practice that enables compassionate, clear responses to injustice. Drawing from inter-being, he demonstrates how inner and outer peace are interconnected. Hanh’s work bridges classical Buddhist ethics with modern global concerns, making the Bodhisattva ideal practical for personal and social transformation (Hanh 11–19).

Śāntideva, in *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, offers a poetic and philosophical account of the Bodhisattva path. His work is a manual for cultivating the six perfections (pāramitās), especially patience (kṣānti) and altruism. He writes that peace arises from overcoming egoism and seeking others' happiness: “Whatever joy there is in this world comes from desiring others to be happy” (Śāntideva 8.129).

Thomas Cleary, in his translation of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, reveals the metaphysical basis of the Bodhisattva worldview. The sutra portrays the universe as an interconnected whole—Brahmajāla Sutta—where every act affects the entire cosmos. Cleary shows how the Bodhisattva’s peace ethic emerges from understanding this interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), where harming others is harming oneself, and peace comes from recognizing this unity (Cleary 1356).

Dan Lusthaus, in *Buddhist Phenomenology*, discusses the Yogācāra doctrine of mind-only (vijñaptimātra), which teaches that all experience is a projection of consciousness. Transforming perception leads to transforming the world. Lusthaus argues

that peace must come through inner transformation, reinforcing the Bodhisattva principle that true peace begins within (Lusthaus 288).

Statement of the Problem

Modern efforts toward achieving world peace often fail due to their reliance on external agreements, political compromises, or military deterrence. These approaches overlook the psychological, ethical, and spiritual roots of conflict. While global peace initiatives seek material solutions, there is a pressing need for models that emphasize inner transformation and universal compassion. The problem lies in the lack of integration between inner peace and structural peace.

Research Questions

- i. What specific practices and virtues in the Bodhisattva tradition contribute to both inner and outer peace?
- ii. How does the Bodhisattva path conceptualize peace differently from secular peace-building models?
- iii. In what ways can the Bodhisattva ideal be applied to contemporary issues of violence, injustice, and ecological degradation?

Objectives of the Study

- i. To explore the ethical and philosophical foundations of the Bodhisattva path as a framework for world peace.
- ii. To analyze the six perfections and their practical relevance to individual and societal transformation.
- iii. To evaluate the contemporary applicability of the Bodhisattva vow and Mahāyāna doctrines in global peace discourse.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative, doctrinal analysis approach. It closely examines primary Mahāyāna texts, such as the Lotus Sūtra, Avataṃsaka Sūtra, Bodhicaryāvatāra, Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, and the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, alongside secondary scholarly interpretations. The methodology includes textual interpretation, thematic coding of ethical concepts, and comparative analysis with contemporary peace theories.

Significance of the Study

This study highlights the potential of Buddhist ethics, especially the Bodhisattva ideal, in informing contemporary peace-building. The Bodhisattva path provides a holistic model that bridges the personal and political, the inner and outer, by emphasizing spiritual transformation alongside ethical responsibility. It offers an alternative to reactionary or utilitarian peace strategies, promoting a vision grounded in compassion, insight, and interconnectedness.

Limitations of the Study

The study focuses primarily on Mahāyāna textual and philosophical analysis and does not cover sociological or ethnographic data from Buddhist communities practicing Bodhisattva ethics. Additionally, while the study draws connections with modern peace theories, it does not empirically test the impact of Bodhisattva-based interventions in conflict zones. Further interdisciplinary and applied research is needed to expand the practical scope of these teachings.

Peace in Buddhism: A Transformative Inner State

In Buddhism, *peace* is not simply the absence of war, but the presence of wisdom (*paññā*), moral discipline (*sīla*), and mental purity (*samādhi*). True peace emerges when the mind is liberated from the defilements (*kilesas*) that bind beings to the cycle of suffering (*saṃsāra*). The *Dhammapada* emphasizes this internal dimension of peace:

"Natthi rāgasamo aggi, natthi dosasamo gaho;
Natthi mohasamaṃ jālaṃ, natthi santiparaṃ sukhaṃ."

“There is no fire like passion, no crime like hatred, no sorrow like separation, no peace higher than tranquility” (Dhammapada 202).

This verse illustrates that peace is attained not through conquest, but through self-mastery and detachment. The Buddha does not prescribe political structures for peace but teaches the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes right view, right action, and right mindfulness, as the path to liberation from mental conflict (Bhikkhu Bodhi 153).

In *Majjhima Nikāya 19*, the Buddha describes the “Two Kinds of Thought”, distinguishing between thoughts rooted in non-ill-will, non-cruelty, and renunciation, and those rooted in hatred, delusion, and sensual desire. He states:

“Yamhi, bhikkhave, bhikkhuno bahulaṃ viharato vitakkā uppajjanti—ye te vitakkā bahulaṃ anuvicaraṃ anuvitakketi, ayaṃ bhikkhave, bhikkhu tesaṃ vitakkānaṃ vasam-anvādī hoti.” (*Majjhima Nikāya 19*)

“Whatever a monk frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind” (MN 19). This shows that peace must be cultivated intentionally through ethical thought and repeated effort.

In Mahāyāna texts, peace is also presented as compassion in action. The *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* explains in sanskrit: “mahākaruṇācittaḥ kuśalamūlacittaḥ anupalambhacittaḥ”.

“The Bodhisattva’s dwelling is the mind of great compassion, the mind of skillful means, and the mind that does not abide in anything” (Thurman 89).

This means that true peace is not passive withdrawal, but active compassion rooted in wisdom, carried out by the Bodhisattva who seeks to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings. This peace is dynamic, interdependent, and responsive to the needs of others.

Conflict in Buddhism: The Consequence of Mental Defilements

Buddhism identifies the roots of conflict as internal, stemming from the Three Poisons: *greed (lobha)*, *hatred (dosa)*, and *delusion (moha)*. These cause suffering not only at the individual level but also manifest in family feuds, community disputes, and even war.

a.Dhammapada 251 (on Lobha, Dosa, Moha):

The Buddha identifies lust, hatred, and attachment to the aggregates as the deepest sources of suffering:

*“Natthi rāgasamo aggi, natthi dosasamo kali;
Natthi khandhasamā dukkhā, natthi santiparaṃ sukhaṃ.”*

(“There is no fire like lust, no crime like hatred, no suffering like the aggregates, and no bliss higher than peace”) (*Dhammapada* 251; Buddharakkhita).

b.Saṃyutta Nikāya 12.23 – Upanisa Sutta (on Avijjā/Moha):

In the Upanisa Sutta, the Buddha explains dependent origination beginning with ignorance:

*“Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ,
viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ,
saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā,
vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ,
upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti,
jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ...”*

(“With ignorance as condition, volitional formations arise... thus is the origin of this whole mass of suffering”) (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 12.23; Bodhi).

In *Cakkavatti Sīhanāda Sutta* (DN 26), the Buddha traces the rise of societal violence to the failure of leaders to uphold *Dhamma*:

“When poverty becomes rife in the kingdom, widespread theft arises. From widespread theft, violence increases. From violence, the taking of life increases...” (Walshe 408).

Furthermore, in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (MN 2), the Buddha explains that unreflective views and unrestrained behavior lead to mental agitation and interpersonal discord:

“Not knowing the nature of one’s perceptions, one becomes entangled in views and disputation” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 95).

Thus, conflict is not merely interpersonal or political; it is epistemological and existential. It is rooted in ignorance of the self and reality. By contrast, right understanding leads to peace.

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1) goes even further, analyzing 62 types of speculative views that give rise to attachment, debate, and suffering:

“These views... when clung to, lead to conflict, contention, and the bondage of suffering” (Walshe 67).

Here, the Buddha critiques dogmatic views and ego-based identification as sources of ideological conflict. Thus, Buddhism promotes dialogue, introspection, and detachment from rigid identities as means of peace-building.

The Bodhisattva Vow and Its Universal Commitment

The Bodhisattva vow is the cornerstone of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, representing a radical departure from earlier soteriological aims focused primarily on individual enlightenment (arhatship). Rather than seeking personal liberation from the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra), the Bodhisattva makes a solemn pledge (praṇidhāna) to remain within saṃsāra until all sentient beings have been liberated. This vow embodies the highest expression of altruism and compassion (karuṇā), rooted in the realization of non-duality and the interdependence of all life (Williams 120–21).

The logical coherence of the Bodhisattva vow lies in its ethical and metaphysical foundations. Ethically, it arises from the understanding that suffering is universal and interconnected. If one’s liberation is pursued while others continue to suffer, then that

liberation is incomplete and ethically compromised. This is not merely a moral preference but a logical extension of the Mahāyāna insight into emptiness (śūnyatā) and dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). Since there is no inherently existing self apart from others, the idea of achieving complete happiness in isolation becomes incoherent. As Śāntideva articulates in *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, “All the joy the world contains has come through wishing happiness for others; all the misery the world contains has come through wanting pleasure for oneself” (8.129).

This ontological insight leads directly to the Bodhisattva’s commitment to universal liberation. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, Bodhisattvas voluntarily postpone their final entry into nirvāṇa, choosing instead to return again and again to the world of suffering out of deep compassion for others. The sūtra describes this as the supreme path of wisdom and courage, where the Bodhisattva faces the world’s pain not with aversion but with unwavering compassion and resolve (Watson 48). Similarly, the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* presents the Bodhisattva as one who sees the universe as a vast, interconnected web symbolized by Brahmajāla Sutta, where every being reflects and contains every other being. In such a vision, harming others is tantamount to harming oneself, and liberating others becomes inseparable from one’s awakening (Cleary 1292).

The vow is not only a declaration of intent but also a method for transforming the practitioner’s mind and behavior. It serves as a guiding framework for ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. The Bodhisattva practices the six perfections (pāramitās): generosity, ethics, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom, not as personal achievements but as means to benefit all beings. Each pāramitā becomes a vehicle through which the vow is enacted in daily life. For instance, the perfection of patience (kṣānti) enables the Bodhisattva to endure harm and hardship without retaliation, thereby breaking cycles of violence and modeling peaceful coexistence (Thurman 89).

Analytically, the Bodhisattva vow reframes the very meaning of spiritual progress. In contrast to hierarchical or individualistic notions of enlightenment, it introduces a relational and collective model of awakening. The vow presupposes that one’s liberation is deeply interwoven with the liberation of others. As such, spiritual

development is not measured solely by internal states or meditative attainments but by the Bodhisattva's increasing capacity to engage compassionately with the world. This echoes Thich Nhat Hanh's interpretation, where mindfulness and inter-being become practical tools for living the Bodhisattva vow in the context of modern social and political challenges. Hanh writes, "If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace" (*Peace Is Every Step* 14).

The Six Pāramitās: Foundations of a Peaceful Life

The Bodhisattva path is structured around the cultivation of the six pāramitās, or perfections, which form the ethical and spiritual foundation for both personal liberation and social harmony. These are generosity (dāna), ethical conduct (śīla), patience (kṣānti), energy (vīrya), concentration (dhyāna), and wisdom (prajñā) (Gethin 212). Each pāramitā is a practical and transformative virtue fostering inner peace and compassionate engagement with the world.

Generosity (dāna), the first perfection, is viewed as the gateway to spiritual growth. It involves giving material goods, time, or wisdom without attachment. Through this, the Bodhisattva relinquishes self-centeredness and fosters social equity and trust, laying a foundation for peaceful coexistence (Williams 129).

Ethical conduct (śīla) refers to moral discipline that prevents harm and encourages actions benefiting the collective good. Socially, it builds trust and stability. Peter Harvey notes that Buddhist ethics are rooted not just in rules but in compassion aimed at reducing suffering (Harvey 90–93).

Patience (kṣānti) counters anger and hatred. It entails enduring hardship, accepting diverse views, and practicing forgiveness. Śāntideva stresses its importance, stating that anger destroys virtue, while patience strengthens it (Śāntideva 6.2). In conflict situations, it enables understanding over retaliation.

Energy or diligence (vīrya) signifies a determined, disciplined effort to support all beings. It combats apathy and energizes moral resilience and action in the face of difficulty (Gethin 216).

Concentration (dhyāna) develops mental clarity through meditative absorption. It calms emotional turmoil and strengthens the ability to understand and address suffering. This mental discipline fosters equanimity, promoting peaceful interactions (Harvey 170–73).

Wisdom (prajñā), the highest perfection, reveals the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all phenomena, eliminating false dualities like self/other or friend/enemy. Edward Conze highlights how such insight dissolves the roots of conflict and attachment (Conze 135).

These pāramitās are not linear but mutually reinforcing. Generosity requires wisdom to avoid dependency, and wisdom requires compassion to avoid detachment. Together, they offer a holistic path for moral and spiritual growth that transforms individuals and radiates peace into society.

The Bodhisattva Ideal: Resolving Conflict through Compassion

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Bodhisattva embodies the ideal response to suffering and conflict. The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*) illustrates how skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*) allow the Bodhisattva to guide sentient beings to peace without coercion. The verse states: “*Upāyakauśalyena jñātvā sattvān yathābhavet |*
diverse teachings may be given to beings, depending on their capacities.”
Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra, chapter 2

The *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* presents the Bodhisattva as someone who: “*Sarvasattvān putravat paśyati, teṣāṃ hitārthaṃ anuttarāṃ karuṇāṃ janayati.*” which means “Sees all beings as his children and acts with infinite compassion toward those who hate and harm him” (Cleary 299).

This transcends retributive justice and offers a radical ethic of forgiveness, essential for post-conflict reconciliation. The Bodhisattva path integrates wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*), seen as interdependent conditions for achieving lasting peace.

Inner Peace as the Ground of Outer Peace

Buddhist thought asserts that the internal states of individuals condition the external world. The three poisons—greed, hatred, and delusion—are not only causes of individual suffering but also fuel social unrest, war, and ecological degradation (Harvey 162). The Bodhisattva purifies these mental defilements through meditation, ethical living, and insight. According to the Śūraṅgama Sūtra,

“If one does not discipline the mind, then even if one practices generosity, ethical discipline, and patience, one will still be in danger of creating suffering for others” (Lancaster 41).

Peace, therefore, cannot be imposed through legislation or force. It arises organically when individuals transform their minds. This idea aligns with the Yogācāra school’s doctrine that the world is a projection of mind (*viññaptimātra*) change in consciousness results in change in external reality (Lusthaus 288). Hence, world peace is sustainable only when grounded in inner transformation.

The Interconnected Vision of the Bodhisattva Path

The metaphysical foundation of the Bodhisattva’s ethic is the doctrine of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which holds that all phenomena arise in mutual dependence. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra portrays the universe as a net of infinite interpenetration, symbolized by Brahmajāla Sutta, in which each being reflects all others (Cleary 1356).

From this perspective, harming another is equivalent to harming oneself. This interconnected vision grounds an ethics of universal responsibility. As Thich Nhat Hanh affirms, “Peace in oneself, peace in the world” (Hanh 11).

The Bodhisattva as Ethical Model for Peace

The Bodhisattva stands as a moral model of engaged wisdom and boundless compassion. Unlike the Śrāvaka, who seeks individual liberation, the Bodhisattva deliberately remains in the cycle of saṃsāra to guide others (Williams 109). This is not out of obligation but out of spontaneous compassion (anukampā), driven by insight into emptiness and interdependence.

As the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra:

"Mahākaruṇācittaṃ pratiṣṭhitaḥ bodhisattvaḥ, upāyakaṣālyam sevate, sarvadharmānapratiṣṭhito bhavati." explains, "The Bodhisattva's dwelling is the mind of great compassion, the mind of skillful means, and the mind that does not abide in anything" (Thurman 89). Such a being does not differentiate between self and other or between good and bad circumstances. In every situation, the Bodhisattva acts with clarity and love, aiming to reduce suffering and cultivate wisdom in others.

Peace as an Ongoing Vow and Practice

The Bodhisattva vow is infinite. It acknowledges that the suffering of sentient beings is boundless and therefore requires an unlimited commitment. In Śāntideva's words, "Yadi sarvaṃ idaṃ jagat pralīyeta na tyajeyaṃ lokahitārtham" (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* 10.56)

"Even if the world itself were to be destroyed, I would never abandon the awakened mind dedicated to the welfare of all beings." (Śāntideva 10.56). This expresses not futility but moral perseverance is a committed refusal to give up in the face of injustice, violence, or despair.

In Mahāyāna thought, the Bodhisattva renews this vow again and again across lifetimes, never turning away from the world. Peace, therefore, is not a static achievement but a dynamic, continuous act of devotion and effort. The Bodhisattva path reframes

world peace as a spiritual practice that must be cultivated with patience, vision, and skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*) (Thurman 96).

The application of skillful means is essential in navigating the complexity of real-world conditions. The Bodhisattva must adapt teachings to context, respond without rigidity, and operate with profound sensitivity to the diverse needs of beings (Harvey 106).

Findings

1. The Bodhisattva path emphasizes that sustainable world peace originates from inner transformation, where overcoming greed, hatred, and delusion leads to both personal and collective harmony.
2. The cultivation of the six pāramitās (perfections), generosity, ethical conduct, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom forms a comprehensive ethical framework that addresses the root causes of conflict and fosters compassionate social engagement.
3. The doctrine of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda) situates peace as a relational and inclusive process, highlighting that harming others is equivalent to harming oneself, thus grounding ethical responsibility in universal interconnectedness.

Conclusion

The Bodhisattva path presents a rich and multidimensional approach to world peace, rooted in ethical discipline, inner transformation, and the compassionate commitment to liberate all beings. By vowing to remain in saṃsāra until every being is free, the Bodhisattva enacts a peace that is inclusive, relational, and enduring. This path teaches that true peace arises not through external coercion but through the inner development of wisdom, compassion, and interdependence. More than a spiritual ideal, the Bodhisattva path offers a practical framework for global ethics, moral leadership, and transformative activism. It empowers individuals to convert structures of suffering into sources of healing, making peace a present responsibility lived through mindful thoughts, speech, and actions aligned with the Bodhisattva vow.

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