

## The *Paramis*: A Historical Background

by Guy Armstrong

### The ascetic Sumedha

Four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age - which is to say a very, very, very long time ago - an ascetic named Sumedha was practicing the path to arahantship when he received word that a fully self-awakened one, a Buddha named Dipankara, was teaching in a town nearby. He traveled there and found Dipankara Buddha being venerated in a long procession attended by most of the townspeople. Sumedha was immediately touched with deep reverence upon seeing the noble bearing and vast tranquility of the Buddha. He realized that to become an arahant would be of great benefit to humankind, but that the benefit to the world of a Buddha was immensely greater. At that very moment, in the presence of Dipankara Buddha, he made a vow to become a Buddha in a future life. This marked his entry into the path of the bodhisattva, a being bound for buddhahood.

Just then Sumedha noticed that the Buddha was about to walk through a patch of wet mud. Spontaneously, out of great devotion, he threw his body down in the mud and invited the Buddha and his Sangha to walk over him rather than dirty their feet. As the great teacher passed, Dipankara Buddha read Sumedha's mind, understood his aspiration, and predicted that the ascetic Sumedha would fulfill his vow to become a Buddha at a time four incalculables and a hundred thousand eons in the future.

It was also revealed to Sumedha that had he not made the aspiration to become a Buddha, he would have realized full enlightenment that day by listening to a discourse from Dipankara Buddha. This would have ended Sumedha's own suffering and also his chain of rebirths. But the bodhisattva chose instead to devote inconceivable lifetimes of practice to gain the ultimate goal, buddhahood.

Having resolved on this goal, Sumedha then retired to his cave to reflect. "How can I make this vast journey?" he wondered. "What aspects of mind and heart do I need to develop in order to become a Buddha?" As he reflected, he saw that there were ten wholesome qualities that he would need to brought to strength and maturity. The factors came into his mind one by one. Generosity (*dana*). Virtue (*sila*). Renunciation (*nekkhamma*). Wisdom (*pañña*). Energy (*viriyā*). Patience (*khanti*). Truthfulness (*sacca*). Determination (*aditthana*). Lovingkindness (*metta*). Equanimity (*upekkha*).

He called this set the *paramis*, which has usually been translated as the "perfections." He then began the journey of innumerable lifetimes to develop the perfections of heart and mind that finally unfolded in his full enlightenment as Gotama Buddha under the bodhi tree in Northern India more than 2500 years ago.

### The *paramis* in Theravadin literature

The story of Sumedha and the *paramis* is related in the *Buddhavamsa*, which is found in the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, or Minor Collection, in the *Sutta Pitaka* of the Pali Canon. The stories in the *Buddhavamsa*, like those in the Jatakas (stories of the many lives of our bodhisattva), are viewed by scholars as later additions to the Canon and somewhat apocryphal. They do not carry the authenticity of the Buddha's voice as do the other four *Nikayas* (*Digha*, *Majjhima*, *Samyutta*, and *Anguttara*), *Sutta Nipata*, *Dhammapada*, *Udana*, and *Itivuttaka*.

Interestingly, although the Buddha spoke often of these ten qualities, to my knowledge the list of the *paramis* does not appear even once in the above texts which we may consider to be the most authentic words of the Buddha. Still it is clear that from the early days of Theravada Buddhism, the *paramis* were viewed as the essential elements of the path to buddhahood

