

2. The bodhisattva

The bodhisattva as an ideal

A bodhisattva is a being (*sattva*) who has dedicated themselves to the attainment of Enlightenment (*bodhi*) for the sake of the material and spiritual welfare of all living beings. They are prepared to undergo any hardship, and make any sacrifice, to achieve this.

The spirit that motivates an advanced bodhisattva is known as the *bodhicitta* (which literally means Enlightenment-mind). In the sevenfold puja the *bodhicitta* is translated as the "Will to Enlightenment" to emphasise that it is more like an active force from an indefinable source than a "thing" that can be owned.

Usually the term 'bodhisattva' is applied in one of two ways. It is used to refer to:

(1) Historical people in whom the "Will to Enlightenment" (ie. the *bodhicitta*) has "taken possession". [This does not mean that such people no longer experience their individuality or uniqueness, or that they no longer think for themselves. Far from it! It means they are inspired by something far greater and wider than their "individual self", the "individual mind". They are inspired by a greater reality that, in a sense, is beyond space and time. This inspiration is a force of ineffable good and love.] Among the historical bodhisattvas are great teachers from the Buddhist tradition such as Nagarjuna, Milarepa, Tsongkhapa, Hui Neng, and Kukai. Some of them are so advanced as to be indistinguishable from fully Enlightened Buddhas.

(2) 'Archetypal' bodhisattvas such as Manjusri, Avalokitesvara, Vajrapani and Tara. These are not historical personages. Rather, they symbolize different aspects of the Buddhahood. Through familiarity with their external forms, their mantras etc, we may be able to relate to one or another of the different aspects of Enlightenment.

Sometimes there is overlap between these two types of bodhisattva, as in the case of Padmasambhava who was an historical figure that became heavily mythologized and took on archetypal forms, a mantra, etc.

Common misunderstanding

In some popular representations bodhisattvas are said to postpone their entry into Nirvana/Enlightenment until such time as all other beings in the universe

have become Enlightened. Although this communicates something of their generous attitude, Sangharakshita points out that it can be misleading, and should not be taken literally. A bodhisattva does not go about helping others to the detriment of helping him- or herself. They do not devote themselves to the spiritual good of others in a way that neglects of their own good.

Although bodhisattvas see very deeply that a self-centred attitude to spiritual life is counter-productive, they also see that a self-negating attitude to spiritual life is counter-productive. To them, self-interest and the interests of others have become indistinguishable and interchangeable. They realise that aware self-interest and the well-being of others go hand-in-hand.

Taking the bodhisattva as a practical ideal

An ideal only has real meaning to the extent that it can be embodied in life. The bodhisattva ideal is something to be lived rather than admired in a detached way. Its practical implications need to be worked out in our individual lives. So, for example, when Sangharakshita did a study seminar on the Bodhicaryavatara (from which the sevenfold puja is adapted), he discussed topics of practical interest such as:

- the difference between "disgruntlement" and "disillusionment",
- the rival claims of discipline and spontaneity,
- our attitude towards our parents,
- whether Buddhism is escapism,
- the importance of gratitude,
- the value of enemies, and
- the importance of heroic virtues.

A quote: "We can start on the bodhisattva path not by thinking 'I shall lead all beings to Nirvana', but by resolving 'I shall try to see beings as they are in themselves, and see what their real needs are, rather than looking to see how they can fulfil my own needs'. This is the essential resolution called for by the Bodhisattva Vow."

The bodhisattva in Buddhist literature

Early Buddhist literature (ie., the Pali canon, which is accepted by followers of the Theravada) regards Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, as a bodhisattva who became a Buddha at the time of his Enlightenment. In the later Mahayana literature, the theme of the bodhisattva came to be developed and emphasised much more strongly.

The seven-fold puja that is chanted in the FWBO, is quite Mahayana in flavour with its ornate language, a particular intensity of emotion and its praise of the bodhisttvas. (However, the chanting of the 'Refuges and Precepts' after the third verse is Pali and dates back to early Buddhism.) The sevenfold puja was adapted from a work called the "Bodhicaryavatara" by Shantideva. Reciting the sevenfold puja is a practice for developing the spirit of a bodhisattva.

There are many illustrations of bodhisattvas in Mahayana sutras. They are usually portrayed as beautiful, extremely wise and kind, heroic and accomplished in various worldly skills such as the arts. The following excerpt from the Astasahasrika sutra uses a simile to convey the heroic flavour of a bodhisattva:

Buddha: *Suppose, Subhuti, there was a great hero, very vigorous...in possession of the very highest virtues.....morality, learning, renunciation and so on.....Now suppose this person, so greatly accomplished, should take his family on a journey; his mother and father, his sons and daughters. And suppose that by some circumstance they find themselves in a great wild forest. In this wild forest the family feels fright, terror and hair-raising fear. But this hero person says to his family: "Do not be afraid! I shall soon take you safely out of this terrible and frightening forest. I shall soon set you free."*

If then more and more hostile and inimical forces should rise up against him in that forest, would this heroic person abandon his family, and take himself alone out of that terrible and frightening forest - he who is not one to draw back, who is firm and vigorous, who is wise, tender, compassionate, courageous and a master of many resources?

Subhuti: *No, O Lord. That person would not abandon his family. He has at his disposal powerful resources, both within and without..... He is able and competent. He would take out of that forest both his family and himself. Securely and safely they would reach a village, a city or market town.*

The Buddha: *Similarly, Subhuti, is the heroic activity of a bodhisattva, who is full of kindness for all beings.*

The bodhisattva in art

There are many styles of Mahayana painting - from Chinese monochrome brush painting through to

ornate Tibetan thangkas painted on cloth scrolls.

In some Chinese art, arahants are depicted as old and often jaded; one can see that they have practised strenuously and lived an often difficult life—yet in good quality paintings, some ineffable radiance seems to shine through their wrinkled faces. The bodhisattvas are generally depicted as eternally young, glowing, and graceful. They certainly don't appear to be beings from the world as we know it. This contrast could be interpreted as an emphasis on the inherent superiority of the bodhisattva. However Sangharakshita has offered another interpretation: He suggests the arahant figures represent the spiritual ideal as embodied under the conditions and limitations of ordinary human life, and the bodhisattva figures represent the same spiritual ideal in its perfection, as it exists in another world or on another plane, 'beyond' space and time. In the book "the realm of the lotus", Sangharakshita goes on to say: "for time and space are limitations; when the ideal becomes embodied in actual life it cannot exhibit the full perfection it has in a higher, more ideal realm".

Tibetan thangkas usually depict a bodhisattva and/or buddha in archetypal form, and often have other archetypal bodhisattvas/buddhas around the margins. The following lecture excerpt provides an initial introduction.

Lecture excerpt (edited): Symbols of Tibetan Buddhist Art

Thangkas are painted in accordance with tradition; and the tradition derives ultimately from somebody's meditation. At some time a great mystic, in their meditation, saw a particular archetypal form and described it to their disciples. The mystic might have written about it. If he or she was an artist they may have tried to paint it. Then anybody else who wants to meditate upon that particular figure, that aspect of Reality, does so by means of a painting deriving from that tradition, which goes back to the original experience of the mystic.

Thangkas often have really brilliant, jewel-like colours, especially the traditional ones that have been painted with natural pigments such as ground up semi-precious stones. Although they can have brilliant colours there is nothing harsh - it is a soft, gentle brilliance. Their brilliant colouring is connected with the purpose for which thangka s are intended - as an aid to visualization meditation. Their purpose is to help the practitioner get in-touch with Reality (the

Dharmakaya), or at least with a wider, more comprehensive level of consciousness.

The colour of a figure is often a key to the significance of that particular bodhisattva. If you know what colour the form is, then you have a rough idea of its general spiritual significance.

To give an example of a thangka depicting a bodhisattva I will briefly describe the figure of Green Tara, one of the most beautiful figures in Mahayana Buddhism. The colour green represents peace, and it represents salvation from dangers. Tara's left hand holds a lotus and that the lotus has three blossoms, blue in colour. One is quite open, one is half open, and one is just a bud. These three represent the Buddhas of the three periods of time (past, present and future). It's as though Green Tara manifests herself as the Buddhas throughout time. The Buddha of the past is fully opened - he's gone, as it were, he has reached perfection. The Buddha of the present half open, because his dispensation, his teaching, is still in force; and then the bud represents the Buddha of the future, who has not yet come. Green Tara wears a tiara of five skulls or sometimes five jewels, representing the "five wisdoms". She has two legs. (It might sound a little odd to say she has two legs - you say 'well why not?' Well, there are some archetypal bodhisattvas that have ten legs, or sometimes more.) One leg is in the lotus posture which means she is always in meditation, always immersed in Reality. The other foot is hanging down at a loose angle, meaning she's always ready to step out into the world through compassion.

Some related questions to think about

- Do I admire the bodhisattva ideal?
- How would I answer someone who says: "there is no point in trying to help others because my contribution will be insignificant in comparison with all the suffering in the world"?
- Normally people think of themselves and others as separate units. Are there times when the sense of separation seems less? If so what sort of times?
- If compassion and love is a central plank of Buddhism why are solitary retreats so popular amongst Buddhists?

Some quotes from Sangharakshita's seminar on the Diamond Sutra:

1. If you are observing silence or celibacy or fasting or indeed any practice, it is absolutely crucial to the practice that it be performed in a cheerful and easy-going manner.

2. The spiritual life is a common, even a co-operative venture, undertaken in unbroken association with other beings.

3. Bodhisattvas have the same perceptions, the same sense impressions, as everyone else; only they do not mistake them for Reality....Just as when you see a ruler inserted in water you know it's straight even when it appears to be bent.