

Four Visits

“You didn’t expect to see me,” said the angel, seating himself on the arm of my chair. I knew it was an angel because I had seen paintings of them, and there was Milton’s wonderful description of the Archangel Raphael in *Paradise Lost*. Like them, my celestial visitor was young and beautiful with aureoled golden hair and a pair of iridescent wings and was clad in a loosely flowing robe of dazzling whiteness.

“No, I was not expecting you,” I replied. “After all, I am a Buddhist, not a Christian. If I had been expecting anyone, it would have been a bodhisattva.”

“You used to be quite fond of me and my brethren,” responded the angel. “You may not have been aware of it, but we used to visit you from time to time, and though you could not see us you used to draw pictures of us.”

“That was a long time ago,” I protested. “I could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen, and since then I have been more concerned with bodhisattvas than with angels.”

“That may well be so,” was the beautiful being’s response. “But has it not occurred to you that your bodhisattvas may have been angels in disguise? May not one of us have been your own guardian angel, watching over you and protecting you from harm?”

“I was never conscious of the presence of any such being,” I said, “though some Buddhists have the idea of a *punya devata*, which I suppose is a little bit like the Christian guardian angel.”

“Have you forgotten you once heard a warning voice? And did you not describe it as an angelic voice?”

“I remember it very well,” I admitted, “and I remember thinking how strange it was that I should have described that voice as angelic rather than describing it in Buddhist terms.”

“Well, now you know. It was the voice of your guardian angel.”

“But I heard that voice only once in my whole life, and it spoke no more than one word. Surely my guardian angel, if I have one, should have been more active than that?”

“Your guardian angel takes on many forms, even Buddhist ones, and in the course of your life he has helped and protected you more often than you knew. You have been in quite a few tight corners, and you have always thought that it was your good luck or your good karma that extricated you from them. In fact, it was your guardian angel, working behind the scenes, who did so every time.”

“But why should my guardian angel – if he exists – have intervened on that particular occasion? Surely there must have been a reason for his doing so?”

“There indeed was a reason, and a very good one. He saw that you were about to do something that was not in the line of your natural development, and he wanted to stop

you. Had he not done so, the consequences could have been quite serious, not only for you but for a lot of other people.”

“What other people?”

“I mean people whose line of natural development was the same as yours and who were attracted to the Dharma but were not made welcome in other Buddhist groups. You are the founder of an order and a movement in which people of that nature were made welcome and who could not only practise the Dharma but be open about who they were.”

At this point there came from somewhere to my left the sound of a once-known voice. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” said the voice, “but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation. We have met once or twice before,” the voice continued suavely, addressing me, “but perhaps you have forgotten your old friend.”

“I have not forgotten you,” I retorted. “You are Mara the Evil One, and you are not my friend and never will be. On our first meeting you tried to convince me that there existed nothing except matter, and I gave you a proper reply.”

“Yes, you did,” sighed Mara. “You are always ready with a reply. That is one of your little weaknesses. But I haven’t come to chop logic with you. This is just a friendly visit. I want to tell you something.”

“What might that be?” I enquired, even though I knew that Mara could not possibly wish me any good.

“I want to tell you that things are getting worse, or rather that they are getting better, and that you ought to consider your position.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are aware that I once swore ‘Evil, be thou my Good.’ Since then I have done what you call evil and what I call good.”

“Yes, I know, and you are still doing what I call evil and you call good.”

“Indeed I am,” said Mara complacently. “Just tune into Radio 4 and hear what is going on all over this world of yours. Nothing but violence in one form or another. Dip into the social media and what will you find? Nothing but hatred spreading from mind to mind like a poisonous fog. All this is my work, operating through my chosen human agents. But that is nothing. Think of what happened in your twentieth century. Two world wars. Nazism and Communism. Hundreds of millions of people enslaved, tortured, killed, and imprisoned, and all this at the hands of their fellow countrymen and their own government or party. Your twentieth Christian century was productive of more human suffering than all the previous centuries of human history put together. This is why I told you that things are getting better, which from your point of view means that they are getting worse. I liked the way you stood up to me at that first meeting. I thought you had the making of a really good devil, and that is why I have come to see you.”

At that moment, a tiny red rose fell through the air and landed on Mara's chest, and I noticed that he turned pale. "Forgive me, gentlemen," he stammered, "but I must leave you. Someone is about to arrive whom I am anxious not to meet. We had a little difference of opinion some time ago and I do not want to have to disagree with a lady again. As you know, 'the Prince of Darkness is a gentleman'." With these words Mara disappeared.

"Who is this lady?" I asked the angel. "And why is Mara so afraid of her?"

"She has many names," responded the angel, smiling, "but we call her the Queen of the Angels. She and Mara, as you call him, indeed did have a little difference of opinion a long time ago. It ended when one of her roses gave him a nasty bruise that kept him out of action for quite a while. There is more in those little red roses than one might think."

These words were hardly out of his mouth when I felt something land on my chest just opposite my heart. It was a little red rose, and at its touch I felt a sensation of ineffable bliss pervade my entire being. I closed my eyes to experience it the better, and when I opened them again I saw standing before me a tall figure. She wore a pure white under-robe and over it a mantle of deepest blue. She had long black hair and her arms were crossed on her breast.

"It is a long time since you thought of me," she said, in a low, sweet voice, "but I have not forgotten you. You were only twelve or thirteen years old and you painted me just as you see me now. You copied paintings of me that you had seen but you added a touch of your own: three red roses, one to each side of me and one above my head. Do you remember?"

"I do," I said, "but I cannot remember why I added those three red roses. I just gave them to you. For me you will always be not so much the Queen of the Angels as the Lady of the Three Red Roses."

"But what about the Lady of the White Roses?" came another low sweet voice. And I saw that another tall, stately figure had appeared beside the first. She was clad in a milk-white robe, one corner of which was modestly draped over her chignon. In one hand she held a flask from which she dispensed ambrosia, while in the other she held a bunch of white roses.

"It's the Goddess of Mercy," whispered the angel to me, "whom you Buddhists call Guanyin. She is one of the many forms in which the Lady of the Three Red Roses appears to Buddhists."

Though the angel had whispered, the second lady heard what he had said. "No, young angel," she said mildly. "Your Lady of the Three Red Roses is one of the many forms in which I appear to Christians."

"No, you are one of the forms in which I appear," said the other lady politely.

"This happens whenever they meet," said the angel, smiling, "but it always comes right in the end." As if to confirm his words, the two figures moved towards each oth-

er as though they were about to embrace, but instead, each melted into the other, so that Guanyin wore the red roses and the Queen of the Angels carried the white. The united figures then dissolved into a brilliant white light, tinged with pink and blue, which was soon lost in the deep blue of the sky.

The angel and I were now alone and I saw that his iridescent wings had begun to quiver, as though he was preparing for flight. "Tell me," I said, "before you go. Which of those two ladies was only one of the forms of the other lady?"

"I don't really know," he replied. "I am only an angel. To get an answer to that, you would have to go right up to the top of the celestial hierarchy, to the cherubim, who are filled with wisdom, and the seraphim, who are on fire with love."

"Just one more question before you go," I begged, for I could see that his wings were now half spread.

"Just one," he agreed, "but no more."

"This is my question," I said, hoping that I was not being too personal. "Are angels masculine or are they feminine?"

"They are neither. They are spiritually androgynous, though they generally appear as beautiful young men with iridescent wings like mine."

"And *you*? Was it *you* who said "No" to me at that critical moment? Are *you* my guardian angel?" But he had already disappeared, and I was once more alone.

Sangharakshita

Adhithana

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