

Green Tārā and the Fourth Lakṣaṇa

Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche was an old man at the time, and did not have much longer to live, but on 24 October 1957, despite failing health, he initiated me into the Mañjughoṣa Stuti *sādhana*. As his name indicated, he was an embodiment of Mañjughoṣa (Jamyang), the Bodhisattva of Transcendental Wisdom, and friends had urged me to ask him to initiate me into the *sādhana* of the bodhisattva. It would be a source of great blessing to me and my disciples, they assured me. I accordingly made the request, which the guru granted. He would not only give me the *sādhana* of Mañjughoṣa, he told me, but also the *sādhana*s of Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, and Green Tārā. I have described the initiation in *Precious Teachers* and I do not propose to repeat what I said there.

That was sixty years ago, and for many years the Mañjughoṣa Stuti *sādhana* was my main spiritual practice, together with the *sādhana* of Green Tārā which I had received earlier from Chatrul Sangye Dorje. For a short while I practised the Avalokiteśvara *sādhana* that I had received from Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, though I must confess that for one reason or another I never got around to practising the Vajrapāṇi *sādhana*. Recently a Mañjughoṣa Stuti *sādhana* retreat led by Subhuti, Mahamati, Sanghadevi, and Paramabandhu was held at Adhithana, and I was delighted that what I had received from Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche was being passed on within the Triratna Buddhist Order. Fifty or more people took part in the retreat, some of whom had received the *sādhana* from me and had been practising it regularly for many years. Similar retreats devoted to the *sādhana*s of Avalokiteśvara and Green Tārā have also been held at Adhithana, and I very much hope that retreats of this kind will continue to be held here.

After my initiation by Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche a friend procured for me a copy of the four *sādhana*s I had received from him, and I perceived that the four formed a set. I also saw that the four bodhisattvas were in a relationship of ‘correspondence’ (in the hermetic sense) with the *lakṣaṇas*, the *samādhis*, and the *vimokṣas*. Concentrating

on the insubstantiality of things, one enters into the *sūnyatā samādhi* and ‘sees’ the bodhisattva Mañjuḥṣa. He is golden yellow in colour and wears the jewels and silks of a prince. Concentrating on the unsatisfactoriness of things, one enters into the wishless (*apraṇihita*) *samādhi* and ‘sees’ the figure of Avalokiteśvara, pure white in colour. Concentrating on the impermanence of things, one enters into the signless (*animitta*) *samādhi* and ‘sees’ Vajrapāṇi . He is dark blue in colour, like indigo or lapis lazuli. Concentrating on the repulsiveness of conditioned things, one enters into the *samādhi* of pure beauty, and ‘sees’ Green Tārā, who has the colour of emeralds or jade. All four bodhisattvas are young and beautiful and radiate light. Meeting them, one, in a sense, meets the Buddha, for they are all embodiments of this or that aspect of the Buddha’s enlightened nature.

The connection between a particular bodhisattva and a particular *samādhi* is not arbitrary. As I have said, they are in correspondence. In other words, the Unconditioned is to be found or encountered in the depths of the conditioned. In Mañjuḥṣa’s *sūnyatā samādhi*, what is true of the individual becomes through wisdom true of all things. In Avalokiteśvara’s wishless *samādhi*, there is no will of one’s own, no preferences, one simply responds with compassion to the needs of others, especially those who are in distress. That compassion may be likened to a perfect sphere, which the lightest touch can set rolling in any direction. In Vajrapāṇi’s signless *samādhi*, there are no ideas or concepts, all of which have been eliminated by the power of insight. In Green Tārā’s *samādhi* of pure beauty, the perception of the repulsive (*aśubha*) has been transformed into the perception of pure beauty.

The *samādhis* are also known as ‘doors of liberation’ (*vimokṣa-mukhas*), for it is through them that one passes to the liberation that is Enlightenment. They thus mark the passage from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, although just where the one ends and the other begins it is difficult to say. The door is a universal symbol, marking as it does the passing from a lower to a higher state of existence. Thus William Blake speaks of the golden string which, when wound into a ball, ‘will lead you in at Heaven’s gate, Built in Jerusalem’s wall ...’ Using Blake’s language, we may say that the *samādhis* are the golden string of which he speaks, while the winding of the string into a ball represents

the spiritual discipline that eventually takes one to the end of the conditioned and the beginning of the Unconditioned.

Though I have spoken of four *samādhis* or *vimokṣas*, Buddhist tradition speaks of only three. There are, however, reasons for reckoning the *samādhis* as four in number, not the least of which is that Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche seemed to put the Green Tārā *sādhana* on the same level as the three other *sādhana*s, the four in fact forming a set. Another reason is that besides *duḥkha*, *anitya* (Pali *anicca*), and *anātman* (Pali *anattā*), there is a fourth *lakṣaṇa* i.e. the ugly or repulsive (*aśubha*). Moreover, there is the reflection on the ten stages in the decomposition of a body, a standard Buddhist practice which not only helps free one from the attachment to the body but also opens one up to the perception of the pure or beautiful (*śubha*). This opening up may go through several stages, as we learn from the well-known story of Nanda and the heavenly nymphs. After seeing the divine beauty of the heavenly nymphs Nanda compares his earthly beloved to a monkey with ears and nose cut off. Not that his beloved is really ugly but only that she is less beautiful than the heavenly nymphs. Thus there are degrees of beauty from the sensuous to the spiritual, and from the spiritual to the Transcendental.

Historically speaking, Buddhism has not developed a spiritual path in which the goal is envisaged in terms of ideal beauty and the path in terms of increasing love for that beauty. There is no reason, however, why such a path should not be developed within the general framework of Buddhist practice, especially as we have models for such an approach within the Western spiritual tradition. The *locus classicus* of such an approach is to be found in the *Symposium* of Plato (427-347 BCE), one of the most sublime works of Western literature. In this celebrated dialogue, known to me since my teens, Socrates represents himself as being instructed in the art of love by Diotima. In her instruction, the object of love is beauty, both human and divine. A similar approach is to be found in the writings of Plotinus (204/5 – 270 CE). In his tractate ‘On Beauty’, he says, ‘Beauty is mostly in sight, but it is to be found too in things we hear, in combinations of words and also in music, and in all music [not only in songs]; for tunes and

rhythms are certainly beautiful: and for those who are advancing upwards from sense perception, ways of life and actions and characters and intellectual activities are beautiful, and there is beauty of virtue. If there is any beauty prior to these, it itself will reveal it.'

Over the centuries poets and mystics have been inspired by Plato and Plotinus and their influence can be seen in some forms of Christian and Islamic mysticism. It would be surprising therefore if that influence was not to extend, sooner or later, to Western Buddhism. Indeed, such an influence is already being felt in some quarters. As I wrote in 1950:

It is not love that seeks to bind
Two bodies in a fierce embrace;
Nor love, true love, that dreams to find,
The highest beauty in a face.

Love soars beyond the scathe of hands,
Outstrips a face, and is employed
Where it both sees and understands
A Beauty without form and void.

Sangharakshita,
Adhisthana
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