

‘The bodhisattvas are also necessary’

I have told this story before, but never mind, I will tell it again. It was told me by my teacher, the venerable Jagdish Kashyap, and it was about himself. Born into a Hindu family in Bihar, he had converted to Buddhism and had been ordained as a bhikkhu in Sri Lanka. Though a scholar in Sanskrit and Pāli, he was a gentle, unassuming man who did not mind telling a story against himself. Soon after his ordination he was invited to Penang by a group of Chinese Buddhists, he once told me. They were excellent hosts, looking after his every need and showing him around their temples, in which there were images of both Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Being a Theravādin, Kashyap-ji related, he had saluted the Buddhas but he had not saluted the bodhisattvas. The following day he was served a lunch consisting only of rice, which had surprised him a little, and this happened for a few more days. Eventually, without actually complaining, he drew his hosts' attention to the fact, saying ‘No doubt rice is the main thing, but the vegetables are also necessary.’ ‘Yes,’ agreed his hosts, ‘that is very true. Similarly, the Buddha is the main thing, but the bodhisattvas are also necessary.’ ‘Thereafter,’ concluded Kashyap-ji, with a smile, ‘I was careful to salute the bodhisattvas as well as the Buddhas.’ The fact that Kashyap-ji, as a Theravādin, did not salute the bodhisattvas did not mean that the bodhisattva, in the Pāli form of bodhisatta, was not known to the Theravādin tradition. In the tradition, however, bodhisatta referred to Gotama up to the time of his attainment of supreme, perfect Enlightenment, though it was also applied to him in his many previous lives. The bodhisattvas of Chinese Buddhism, as well as the bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna generally, are purely ideal figures and have no historical existence. As I have written elsewhere, they are represented as beautiful young princes. ‘Gem-studded tiaras sparkle on their brows, while their nobly proportioned limbs are clad in light diaphanous garments of coloured silk. They wear gold bracelets and strings of jewels, and around their necks hang garlands of fragrant flowers.’ [This is from chapter 16, ‘The Glorious Company of Bodhisattvas’, in *The Three Jewels*.]

In recent years there has been a good deal of discussion among Buddhist academics about the historical origin of the bodhisattva ideal. Originally it was thought that it arose among the Buddhist laity, who were looking for a simpler and easier way of practising the Buddha's teaching. More recently, however, it has been claimed that the ideal arose among a group of more serious practitioners who lived near stupas containing body relics of the Buddha. To my mind, the two positions are not contradictory. The bodhisattva ideal has, in fact, a double aspect, neither of which precludes the other. On the one hand we have those who actually try to live the life of the bodhisattva and practise the *pāramitās* or perfections for the benefit of all beings, while on the other there are those who worship the bodhisattvas in the hope of obtaining worldly blessings. In the Theravāda, broadly speaking, neither monks nor lay people worship the Buddha for the sake of worldly benefits, and in the absence of bodhisattvas such as those found in the Mahāyāna, the Theravāda laity have tended to appeal for help to a variety of lesser divinities. In Sri Lanka for instance they worship the Hindu god Vishnu, who is in fact seen as a follower of the Buddha and a protector of his Dhamma. Similarly, Burmese Buddhists worship the Nats, the spirits of wood and water, which is not seen as incompatible with the practice of Buddhism. In the Mahāyāna the number of bodhisattvas is incalculable, but in the course of centuries certain bodhisattvas assumed a

more and more individual character. By some they were worshipped as embodiments of the ideal, while others depended upon them for worldly benefits.

Once I too, like Kashyap-ji, was invited by a group of Chinese Buddhists to visit Penang, whence I visited Buddhists in other parts of Malaysia. Once I found myself spending the night at an Avalokiteśvara temple run by a community of nuns. In the morning I saw that women were arriving with offerings and I asked one of the nuns what they wanted from the bodhisattva. 'They want babies,' she replied. This was not the kind of thing I associated with the practice of the Avalokiteśvara sādhana that had been given to me by Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche. Neither was it associated with any of the other sādhanas that I had received, beginning with the Green Tārā sādhana, which had been given me by Chatrul Sangye Dorje, the first of my Tibetan teachers.

Well do I remember receiving that sādhana and what the receiving of it meant to me at the time, now sixty years ago. I was then thirty-two, had been a monk for nine years and since even before that time I had been practising the mindfulness of breathing and the *mettā bhāvanā*. I practised them according to the Theravādin tradition, so that by accepting the Green Tārā initiation from Chatrul Sangye Dorje I had passed from the practice of the Theravāda to the practice of the Mahāyāna and even the Vajrayāna. Not that I had left the Theravāda behind or that I was unfamiliar with the teachings of the Mahāyāna. I had, however, reached something of an impasse in my personal spiritual development. For some time I had been preoccupied with the question of 'getting beyond the ego', and had even written an article on the subject, but how could the ego getting beyond the ego? That was the question. As it happened, I had, at around this time, become acquainted with Dinshaw Mehta, a Parsee mystic who believed that while he was in a state of trance, he received a direct guidance from God. 'Guidance' was the keynote of his teaching. There were three kinds of guidance, he told me. There was guidance received direct from God in a state of trance, such as he himself experienced, and there was guidance received from the person guided by God, which was the guidance received by his disciples from him. There was also what he called 'guidance by circumstances'. I had no desire to be 'guided' by Dinshaw Mehta, much as he would have liked to guide me, but I could see that he had a point. One could get beyond the ego only with the help of something or someone that was itself beyond the ego. What was that something? Perhaps it was one's *ishta devata* or *yidam*.

When I met Chatrul Sangye Dorje I therefore asked him to tell me who my *ishta devata* was, for his very presence had inspired me with confidence. He thereupon told me that my *yidam* was Green Tārā, adding that she had been the *yidam* of many of the great pandits of India and Tibet. One of these, as I knew, was Atiśa (CE 980 – 1054). On his being invited to Tibet he had consulted Tārā, who told him that if he accepted the invitation his life would be shortened by several years but that his visit would be of great benefit to the Dharma. He therefore accepted the invitation, and became the founder of the Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism.

It was at about this time, too, that I came to see that the act of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha was central to the Buddhist life. It was what made one a Buddhist and it was naturally followed by the practice of five, or eight, or ten moral precepts.

This was the path that underlay all forms of Buddhism, whether Theravāda or Mahāyāna. It was a path of self-effort and self-development, in which one relied on self-power to attain liberation from suffering. It should also be noted that although each precept is observed by the individual for his or her own benefit, each has an other-referential or even altruistic dimension. Observing the first precept, one abstains from injuring other living beings and especially from killing them. This refers, in my view, not only to the killing of other human beings but to the killing of animals, whether for sport or food. The precept could also refer more generally to the protection and preservation of all forms of life and even cover concerns of an environmentalist nature. Observing the second precept, one abstains not only from stealing but from taking from others what has not been freely given. This implies abstaining from all sorts of economic exploitation. Observing the third precept, one behaves mindfully and sensitively in one's sexual relations. Neither does one traffic in sex. Observing the fourth precept, one abstains from false, harsh, useless or slanderous speech, and neither does one sponsor misleading advertising or help to spread fake news. Observing the fifth precept, one abstains from drinks and drugs that cloud the mind and from dealing in any of them, including so-called recreational drugs, whether indulged in on one's own or with others. Besides the outward observance, there is the inner attitude. One therefore also abstains from covetousness and hatred, as well as from wrong views. Thus there is an altruistic dimension to the whole path of self-effort and self-development, from the act of Going for Refuge onwards. This aspect finds its fullest expression in the bodhisattva ideal, which I see as the altruistic dimension of the act of Going for Refuge.

I cannot claim that Tārā ever spoke to me in the way that she spoke to Atiśa, but doing her sādhanā must have made me kinder and more considerate than I naturally was. Be that as it may, there were certainly times when I felt that a higher power was acting through me. This usually happened when I was communicating the Dharma. The words that came from my lips were not really mine and I listened to them as though someone else was speaking. In later years there was a certain amount of discussion in the Order about the nature of this supra-personal force, as it was sometimes called; and as far as I know, the discussion continues.

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