

What Is a Bodhisattva?
The Evolution of a Buddhist Ideal
By Guy Armstrong

Imagine as a spiritual ideal a human being who vows to cultivate in her own heart purity and wisdom to the greatest extent possible, in order to be of the supreme benefit to beings suffering in this and other worlds. Imagine that she then makes her life's (or lives') work the accomplishment of this goal. Is there a more noble or inspiring vision anywhere for the potential of a human being? Is there anyone on the path of Dharma who doesn't feel some degree of resonance with this aim?

This is the ideal of the bodhisattva, an image that has been with Buddhism since its very beginning. The bodhisattva ideal has flowered into prominence in various centuries in the development of the religion and created some of its most vibrant and dynamic teachings. The bodhisattva aspiration has motivated some of the greatest practitioners, writers, and artists in all of Buddhism and, I would venture, in the history of human spirituality. The bodhisattva's combination of profound wisdom and boundless compassion represents a peak in our collective understanding of the human capacity for nobility. The bodhisattva functions as an archetype that speaks out strongly even in a dark and materialistic age such as this one is.

Yet the idea of the bodhisattva is not well understood in circles of dedicated practitioners or even among Buddhist teachers in the West today. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is one of the clearest expressions today of this archetype. Here is his description of the bodhisattva.

What do we mean by *Bodhisattva*? *Bodhi* means enlightenment, the state devoid of all defects and endowed with all good qualities. *Sattva* refers to someone who has courage and confidence and who strives to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Those who have this spontaneous, sincere wish to attain enlightenment for the ultimate benefit of all beings are called Bodhisattvas. Through wisdom, they direct their minds to enlightenment, and through their compassion, they have concern for beings. This wish for perfect enlightenment for the sake of others is what we call bodhichitta, and it is the starting point on the path. By becoming aware of what enlightenment is, one understands not only that there is a goal to accomplish but also that it is possible to do so. Driven by the desire to help beings, one thinks, For their sake, I must attain enlightenment! ... Bodhichitta, then, is a double wish: to attain enlightenment in itself, and to do so for the sake of all beings. (*A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night*, p. 12)

This noble ideal, of course, functions on a very human plane, where it has been understood differently by various schools in a number of eras. These differing views have led to the usual kinds of bitterness that sectarianism is liable to: quarrels, name-calling, verbal abuse, denigration, philosophical sniping, separation, and even physical violence, all carried out in the purported service of wisdom and compassion. The dust kicked up by these old disputes still swirls around the bodhisattva ideal today. As Theravādin practitioners, we tend to inherit a bit of an inferiority complex on this subject from the centuries of Mahāyana sectarianism.

Misrepresentations of the ideal abound, especially in contemporary Western Buddhism. For example, I have heard it said and taught that someone is a bodhisattva because they are selflessly

servicing others. Selfless service alone, noble as it is, does not make one a bodhisattva. The core of the bodhisattva is the resolve for enlightenment coupled with the motivation to become free in order to help others (aspiration); and then of course carrying out that work (application). Service can be a manifestation of the bodhisattva path, but unless service is joined to the path of enlightenment, it is not a bodhisattva activity.

To understand the currents of inspiration and contention that have whirled around the notion of the bodhisattva, we will touch on the evolution of the concept through just a few of its various stages: Early Buddhism, the Nikāya Schools, and the Early Mahāyana. The ideal was also influenced by developments of the Later Mahāyana, the Vajrayana, and Chinese Buddhism (especially Ch'an and therefore later Zen in Japan), but those are beyond the scope of this paper. Let's begin our historical survey where all these stories tend to begin, with the birth of the one who became our Buddha.

Early Buddhism

Early Buddhism is considered to be the time that the Dharma flourished during the Buddha's life and up to a hundred years after his death, before the sectarian divisions began. The term *bodhisatta* (Pali; Sanskrit *bodhisattva*) appears in the core Pali suttas a number of times, but in a surprisingly limited way. It refers only to the life of Siddhattha Gotama before he became enlightened as the Buddha and to his one life immediately prior to that one. In recounting his spiritual development, for instance, the Buddha says in MN 26: "Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, I too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth." In MN 123 Ānanda recounts, "I heard and learned this, venerable sir, from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Mindful and fully aware, Ānanda, the Bodhisatta appeared in the Tusita heaven. ... mindful and fully aware the Bodhisatta remained in the Tusita heaven ... mindful and fully aware the Bodhisatta passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb,'" there to be born as the young Siddhattha Gotama.

Nowhere do the discourses mention any other specific past lives or any long-ago intention for Buddhahood that motivated the journey through what must have been a considerable period of practice before the bodhisatta could enter Tusita heaven "mindful and fully aware." Nor is it explicit anywhere in the suttas that the bodhisatta's motivation for taking birth as Siddhattha Gotama or for awakening as the Buddha was out of compassion for others. Rather to the contrary, after his awakening, the Buddha's first impulse is not to teach, though he is dissuaded from this, thankfully, by Brahmā Sahampati (MN 26).

A subtle note of aspiration is couched in rather general terms: "there is one person whose arising in the world is for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, who comes out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans ... it is the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One." (AN I, xiii; 1). And compassion is certainly a key message throughout the Buddha's teachings, as in the emphasis on moral conduct, on *karuna* as a *brahma vihāra*, and in his injunction to the first sixty arahants after the first rains retreat: "Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way." (SN 4:5).

We note moreover the extreme scarcity of Tathāgatas. It is said that two never arise in the same era, much less at the same time. Before the next Tathāgata can arise – said to be the Buddha Metteya (Pali; Skt. Maitreya) – the teachings of our Buddha must have disappeared from the world. Thus the bodhisattva is one who has presumably traveled countless lifetimes of development in order to have the power of mind to discover anew the teachings for himself (or herself), to be fully *self*-awakened (*sammā sambuddho*), to bring the teachings back into a world from which they have become extinct. This is a powerful cosmic vision of the bodhisattva.

Thus when we look to the suttas themselves, generally considered the closest approximation we have to the actual teachings of the Buddha, the image of the bodhisattva that emerges is awesome yet restrained. We must be in awe of the power and purity of mind required to penetrate the deepest truth of the Dhamma by oneself with no one pointing the way, and in fact with many eagerly pointing in the wrong direction. The contribution of such an achievement to the benefit of humankind is incalculable, touching millions of lives over thousands of years. Yet the presentation in the suttas of the bodhisattva ideal is very restrained, one might say understated, because the aspiration and vast journey are touched on so lightly and infrequently.

The presentation also seems restrained because even though the Buddha had followed it to fruition, there is no record in the suttas of his ever recommending the bodhisattva path to anyone else. Isn't that curious? I have a theory as to why this is so, but that can wait for the next section. The only bodhisattvas mentioned in the suttas to my knowledge are the one who made the journey to become our Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama; and Metteya in Tusita heaven. Though the bodhisattva way is not explicitly encouraged in the Pali suttas, still these texts show us three clear and distinct goals: arahant, paccakabuddha (one who is self-awakened but doesn't teach), and Buddha.

The Nikāya Schools

For about one hundred years after the Buddha's death, the Sangha lived in relative harmony, proclaiming the same Dhamma and observing the same Vinaya. Then things changed as disputes arose around questions of both doctrine and discipline. These led over the next, say, three hundred years to the splintering of the Sangha into what are called the Eighteen Schools of Nikāya Buddhism, so called because while about eighteen sects formed, all agreed that the Nikāyas (Dīgha, Majjhima, Samyutta, Anguttara, Khuddaka) constituted the basis for the Dhamma, though each school's collection no doubt differed somewhat from the others.

One book added to the Khuddaka during this period was the *Buddhavamsa* (History of the Buddhas), which includes the story purporting to relate how our bodhisattva began his journey. Long ago the ascetic Sumedha made a vow in the presence of Dipankara Buddha to one day become a Buddha himself. (For a fuller account of that story, see an earlier DPP reading, "The Paramis: A Historical Introduction.") One notices in the Sumedha story that no words were actually exchanged between Dipankara Buddha and the ascetic. Sumedha was awed by the Buddha's character and vowed silently to become a Buddha; Dipankara Buddha read his mind and noted silently that his aspiration would bear fruit. Then Sumedha left without instruction to pursue his vow, which he realized needed to be accomplished through the development of the ten pāramis. This is the first instance I know of in the history of Buddhism where these ten qualities are collected in a group, named the pāramis, and defined as the bodhisattva's path. This is a significant embellishment of the bodhisattva concept.

Sumedha's story may also explain why Gotama Buddha is not known to have taught the bodhisattva path. Perhaps he believed that a bodhisattva must be so self-motivated from the very beginning of his path, like Sumedha, that no teacher would need to encourage him. Perhaps there were one or more practitioners who took a bodhisattva vow during the life of Gotama Buddha; perhaps he recognized and confirmed them; but perhaps the interchanges were in private or in silence and none of the other monks was aware of them. Perhaps some of these bodhisattvas are alive and practicing right now ... maybe even in the human realm.

Another late addition to the Khuddaka was the Jataka tales, a series of folk tales adapted from Indian lore to portray the heroic journey of our bodhisattva through many lifetimes in animal and human forms. The themes of the Jatakas center around the bodhisattva's conduct as exemplifying the pāramis, often in terms of service and self-sacrifice. The classic tale in this regard may be the one where the bodhisattva throws himself off a cliff so that his dead body will provide sustenance for a famished tigress below whose two nursing cubs were starving to death.

The Jatakas brought a number of new elements into the bodhisattva ideal. First, they attempted to sketch out some of the vastness of the journey that the path to Buddhahood requires. While the collection recounts some 550 tales, these are purported merely to scratch the surface of the number of lives it took the bodhisattva to reach his goal. Second, they clearly implied that a life not strictly devoted to renunciation and meditation could still be on the path to Buddhahood. Third, they showed that such a life could be centered on compassionate service. Fourth, by humanizing (and animalizing) the bodhisattva, the Jatakas brought him down to earth and much more within the reach of the ordinary householder. They made the bodhisattva's path seem accessible.

It would be interesting to know what role the Jatakas played in the monastic community of the time and whether they were taken as anything more than amusing folk tales for the "uninstructed worldlings." My hunch is that they were not. However, they have definitely played a popularizing role for Buddhism in many cultures throughout its history.

Early Mahāyana

Around 100 BCE the first strains of the Mahāyana school start to be clearly heard. They foreshadow the most momentous shift since the origin of Buddhism. In place of the Buddha's advice that his disciples strive to become arahants, the new motivating ideal became the bodhisattva as it was considered that the attainment of Buddhahood, not arahantship, was the best way to help others. The Noble Eightfold Path receded into the background, replaced by a new emphasis on the pāramis, generally called *pāramitā* in the Mahāyana, as the guidelines for the bodhisattva. The very motivation to practice should come, it was now taught, from deep compassion for all beings suffering in the bondage of ignorance. Compassion was thus elevated above mettā as the primary brahma vihāra and placed on an equal footing with wisdom. In place of the emphasis on the three characteristics and Nibbāna as the proper focus for liberating insight, the new school instead put emptiness (*suññatā*; Skt. *shunyatā*) at the center of the domain of wisdom (*paññā*; Skt. *prajñā*). Teachings on emptiness were articulated in the brilliant *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* in considerably more philosophical detail than the pragmatically oriented Nikāyas had ever dreamt of.

None of these elements alone needed to be revolutionary. All the elements of the Early Mahāyana can be found, more subtly stated, in the teachings of the Buddha or Nikāya Buddhism. But one might

say that their combination and the strength of emphasis placed on emptiness, compassion, and the bodhisattva, served to create a new school, which soon took on sectarian colorings.

At first the new school called itself the *Bodhisattvayana* and referred to the Nikāya schools as the *Shravakayana*, literally, the school of “hearers,” an ancient word for the disciples of the Buddha, who came to know the Dhamma by hearing it from his lips. One doctrine of the new school proclaimed that the greatest act of compassion for others would be for the bodhisattva to postpone her own enlightenment until all others had become enlightened first, even if she was already deeply developed in wisdom and capable of entering Nirvāna. This became a kind of extension of the self-sacrifice described in the Jatakas: the bodhisattva remains in the midst of the turbulent waves of Samsara alongside all suffering beings in order to help them, while at the same time deepening the insight into emptiness required for Buddhahood.

From the viewpoint of one who was willing to give up her own entrance into Nirvana to help others, the path of the arahant, who worked to become enlightened and end the cycle of rebirths, began to seem too self-centered. Soon the relatively neutral terms of *Bodhisattvayana* and *Shravakayana* were replaced with the charged terms Mahāyana and Hināyana. The Mahāyana took for itself the name Great Vehicle because it believed that its mission to work for the enlightenment of all made it the widest and most encompassing of all paths. The old way was obviously the Lesser Vehicle. But “lesser” is a charitable euphemism to translate the word “hina”. Here is the *Pali-English Dictionary* on the meaning of that word: “inferior, low; poor, miserable; vile, base, abject, contemptible, despicable” (Pali Text Society, 1998, p. 733). The sectarian blasts continued in the Mahāyana sutras, where esteemed elders from the Pali suttas like Sariputta and Kassapa were routinely mocked and humbled in debate.

What began to color the bodhisattva ideal at this point in time was a smug moral superiority on the part of many of its proponents which looked down on those who strove simply for liberation as selfish, uncaring, and removed from the world. Sadly this smugness is widespread in Mahāyana schools even today. One esteemed living Tibetan teacher wrote: “The *shravaka* [disciple of Early Buddhism] is not concerned with other sentient beings’ potential for enlightenment and therefore does not feel inclined to even attempt to benefit other beings.” Other Tibetan teachers, however, are trying to end this sectarianism. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche suggested that the earliest school be called the Root Yana. Another influential Tibetan admonished his students, “Because of our petty Mahāyana influence, I am sure that many of us look down on the *shravakas*, but we should not even attempt to do this. . . . Our compassion [today] is like dew in the grass, and compared to us, the compassion of the *shravakas* is like the four oceans.”

One other detail that should be mentioned is the different understanding of the goals of the arahant and bodhisattva paths. We’re familiar with the arahant’s goal of the attainment of Nibbāna and the end of greed, hatred, and delusion. The goal of the bodhisattva is Buddhahood. In Early Buddhism and Nikāya Buddhism, Buddhahood meant that one discovered the truth by oneself and there could only be one such person in any era. Clearly such a mind was exceptionally strong. The Buddha is considered to have had powers that no other arahant had, including some ability to know whatever he turned his mind to, a quality called omniscience.

With the Early Mahāyana, the concept of Buddhahood changed. It had to be possible for there to be more than one person in an era in a state of buddhahood. (I use the word uncapitalized for this new understanding.) Otherwise no one would be able to reach the goal so long as the Dharma of Gotama Buddha was extant. Similarly, practitioners of that era had already heard the teachings, so they were not going to discover them on their own, they could not be self-awakened. The Mahāyanists maintained, however, that practitioners could still develop their minds to the same strength as that of the historical Buddha. What remained of the early view of the Buddha's attainment was the quality of omniscience.

To indicate this, a new measure of development was needed. The four stages of enlightenment were replaced by the ten *bhumis*, a different series of graduated attainments. At the tenth bhumi, the practitioner would acquire the quality of omniscience. It was said that if an arahant wanted to come over to the bodhisattva path, they would enter at the level of the seventh bhumi. The bhumis became another point of contention that the Mahāyanists used to establish the superiority of their system.

Our Current Situation

What are we to make of all this bickering? How can we put this sectarian split into perspective? While it is wonderful to include compassion in the teachings wherever possible, I believe that a lot of the noise in this discussion for two millennia has been based on little more than attachment to views and opinions and is too far removed from practical considerations. If we step back for a moment from the lofty summit of philosophical posturing and examine what we choose to do with our human life, we see that we may choose a very similar course of action whether our intent is to achieve the liberation of an arahant or to work expeditiously toward buddhahood. As the scholar Edward Conze put it, "They [the two schools] had much common ground on the middle ranges of the path where the ascetic strove for emancipation in a quite rational and businesslike manner." (*Buddhist Thought in India*, p. 201)

The fact is that very few of us are close to having to choose not to enter Nirvāna when it beckons every time we sit down. So: arahant path or bodhisattva path? How can we hold these two ideals? One helpful way to think of it is around the factor of bodhicitta described by the Dalai Lama above. Rather than attach a position of moral superiority around having the altruistic motivation of bodhicitta, we can ask instead if this might be a valuable skillful means. Could the cultivation of bodhicitta be an additional support for our practice and for our development as humans?

I've been practicing with bodhicitta for nearly fifteen years through contact with Tibetan teachers, who in my experience have consistently stressed its importance at the outset of any teachings. There are four things about bodhicitta that I find very helpful. The first is that, like our Theravādin practices of mettā and compassion, working to develop bodhicitta helps lift our gaze out of our usual self-centered view and extend our practice to the wider world of beings. It is a connecting practice that reveals our link to all sentient life through our common wish to be happy and not to suffer. Second, like our practices of mettā and compassion, it cannot help but soften the heart and make us happier people. So it gives an immediate benefit in our own life. Third, the attitude of bodhicitta can sustain our motivation and therefore our practice right through to the very end of whatever path we are on. As we progress in our meditation and understanding, we can come to some fairly peaceful and happy states that could be comfortable resting places. It is easy for intermediate practitioners to become self-satisfied and stop practicing. This has happened to a number of vipassana students. If

we continue to remind ourselves of the need to be more highly developed so that we can better help others, we are less likely to settle for a comfortable resting place. Finally, bodhicitta is the most elegant motivation for those times in practice (rare though they may be) when the ego has truly fallen away and working for one's own benefit no longer makes sense. Bodhicitta is the motivation that sustains practice through the fading away of ego to the very end of self-centeredness.

I don't see any drawbacks to adding a bodhicitta aspiration to our own path of practice. Some may feel uncomfortable with the idea that it commits us to an endless series of rebirths as we wait for all other sentient beings to become enlightened first. While that is one way to understand the bodhisattva vow, it is clearly not the only way within the Mahāyana. There are many stories of Mahāyana practitioners from India and Tibet who reached the end of their path and are no longer subject to rebirth. Tibet's most-loved yogi, Milarepa, is profoundly inspiring to many because he is said to have attained buddhahood in just one human life. (A further wrinkle in the bodhisattva ideal is that one can continue to benefit beings even after one's last birth; but that is another story.) As I understand the way the ideal is held in Tibetan teachings, a bodhisattva may attain enlightenment before other sentient beings, along with other sentient beings, or after all other sentient beings, according to one's disposition. There is no moral judgment that I know of on any of these three ways.

If you would like to add a practice that develops the attitude of bodhicitta, you might begin every sitting with this recitation from the Tibetan tradition:

From now until becoming enlightened,
I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.
By the merit of generosity and other virtues
May I achieve buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings.

At the end of your sitting, you could dedicate the merit in this simple form:

May the merit of this practice be shared with all beings everywhere.

Don't be surprised if the motivation to practice for the benefit of others doesn't come easily or is only a rare flicker. Even the Dalai Lama doesn't find it easy: "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is, that is all." (*A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night*, p. 97)

And if you are drawn to the vision of the bodhisattva who waits for all others to become enlightened first, you might like to reflect on this passage, a favorite of the Dalai Lama:

For as long as space endures,
And as long as living beings remain,
May I too abide
To dispel the misery of this world.