

## "Delivering the last blade of grass": Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal in the Mahayana

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Doers of what is hard are the Bodhisattvas, the great beings who have set out to win supreme enlightenment. They do not wish to attain their own private *nirvana*. On the contrary. They have surveyed the highly painful world of being, and yet, desirous to win supreme enlightenment, they do not tremble at birth and death. They have set out for the benefit of the world, for the ease of the world, out of pity for the world. They have resolved: 'We will become a shelter for the world, a refuge for the world, the world's place of rest, the final relief of the world, islands of the world, lights of the world, leaders of the world, the world's means of salvation. (*Prajñāparamita Sutra*)

### Introduction

The unfolding of the Mahayana marked a decisive phase in the history of the Buddhist tradition. Against earlier forms of Buddhism the Mahayana represented a metaphysical shift from a radical pluralism to an absolutism anchored in the doctrine of *sunyata*; epistemologically, through Nagarjuna's Madhyamika, the Mahayana moved from a psychologically-oriented empiricism to a mode of dialectical criticism; ethically the centre of gravity shifted from the *arhat* ideal of private salvation to that of the Bodhisattva, one attuned to the universal deliverance of all beings "down to the last blade of grass". It has often been remarked that the two pre-eminent contributions of the Mahayana to the spiritual treasury of Buddhism are the metaphysic of *sunyata* and the Bodhisattva ideal. To these might be added the Mahayanist doctrine of the *Trikaya*, the Three Bodies of the Buddha who now appears as a cosmic and metacosmic figure.

After some prefatory remarks about the emergence of the Bodhisattva ideal this article focuses on its significance within the spiritual economy of the Mahayana, and its relationship to the pivotal Mahayanist doctrines centering on *karuna* (compassion), *prajña* (wisdom) and *sunyata* (voidness). The latter part of the article takes up some subsidiary questions relating to the Bodhisattva's "status" *viz* the Buddha, the issue of "self-power" and "other-power", and the popular appeal of the Bodhisattva ideal.

Although our knowledge of early Buddhism is somewhat sketchy there is some evidence to suggest that by about the second century AD the pre-Mahayanist tradition

was affected by a kind of dogmatic constriction and possibly by certain pharisaic currents within the *sangha*. From the (later) Mahayanist perspective there had developed an exaggerated reliance on the Abhidharma (the systematic explication of the doctrines) and the Vinaya (the disciplinary rules of the monastic community), and an undue emphasis on the ideal of private salvation. Dr Har Dayal has herein located the source of the Bodhisattva ideal:

They [the monks] became too self-centered and contemplative...The Bodhisattva doctrine was promulgated by some Buddhist leaders as a protest against this lack of true spiritual fervour and altruism among the monks of that period. [1]

This suggests rather too narrow a view of the impulses behind the ideal. Leaving aside the exigencies of the historical period in which it emerged, it can be said that the blossoming of the Bodhisattva conception, in one form or another, was inevitable. Frithjof Schuon has elaborated the "spiritual logic", so to speak, which made it so:

In considering the Bodhisattva ideal, account must be taken of the following fundamental situation: Buddhism unfolds itself in a sense between the empirical notions of suffering and cessation of suffering; the notion of compassion springs from this very fact and is an inevitable or necessary link in what might be called the spiritual mythology of the Buddhist tradition. The fact of suffering and the possibility of putting an end to it must needs imply compassion unless a man were living alone upon the earth. [2]

We are not here concerned with either the early Theravadin-Mahayanist disputations on the issues raised by the emergence of the Bodhisattva ideal except to say that some polemical excesses perhaps answered to certain necessities insofar as they were "defensive reflexes" to preserve or affirm the integrity of the spiritual outlook in question. Be that as it may, one is still exposed in the scholarly literature to certain prejudices and over-simplifications which discolour any overview of the Buddhist tradition. Edward Conze, for instance, is guilty of the charge when he makes a claim as imprudent and as astonishing as the following:

The rationalist orthodoxy of Ceylon has a vision of Buddhism which is as truncated and impoverished as the fideism of Shinran, and it is no accident that they are both geographically located at the outer periphery of the Buddhist world. [3]

Such asseverations betoken a failure to grasp the principle that under the canopy of any great religious tradition there will inevitably emerge a variety of spiritual perspectives answering to different needs.

In some of the literature on the Bodhisattva ideal one finds a good many wasted words on the "selfishness" of the *arhat* ideal in the Theravada - another polemical abuse. On such indiscretions nothing need to be added to Schuon's salutary remarks that

...if there is the Mahayana an element which calls for some caution from a metaphysical point of view it is not, of course, the vocation of the Bodhisattva as such but, what is quite different, the Bodhisattvic ideal in so far as this is polemically opposed to the "non-altruistic" spirituality of the pure contemplative, as if, firstly, all true spirituality do not necessarily include charity, and secondly, as if the consideration of some contingency or other could enter into competition with pure and total Knowledge. [4]

Finally, by way of prefatory remarks, it should be noted that the Bodhisattva conception is not exclusively Mahayanist. For all Buddhists the Buddha himself was a Bodhisattva before his complete enlightenment. The Theravadin perspective generally restricts itself to this understanding of the term although the Sarvastivadins had elaborated a fairly full-bodied ideal before the time of the Mahayana. [5] The decisive contribution of the Mahayana was to "unfold to its furthest limits all that was to be found in the ideal" [6], to give it its richest and most resonant expression.

### **The Bodhisattva Ideal and the Path to its Attainment**

There is no shortage of either traditional accounts or scholarly explications of the Bodhisattva ideal and of the path to be followed by its adherents. Let us state the matter briefly. The Bodhisattva is one who voluntarily renounces the right to enter *nirvana*, who, under certain inextinguishable vows, undergoes countless rebirths in the samsaric realm in order to devote his/her energies, in a spirit of boundless compassion, to the deliverance of all beings down to "the last blade of grass". The Bodhisattva is committed to the practice of the six *paramitas* (perfections), particularly the all-encompassing ideal of *prajña* (wisdom). The Bodhisattva advanced on the path becomes an exemplar of sacrificial heroism and moral idealism as well as an aspirant to complete enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva path can be summarized this way. Firstly there is the awakening of the thought of enlightenment which matures into a decisive resolve to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. After making the Great Resolves, marked by the taking of many vows, the Bodhisattva (for such he/she now is, although still on the early part of the path) perfects the six *paramitas* and progresses through ten *bhumis* (levels or stages). A crucial transformation takes place at the seventh *bhumi* by which stage the Bodhisattva has fully penetrated the nature of *sunyata* and has thus perfected the *paramita* of wisdom. The Bodhisattva is now "eligible" for entry into *nirvana* which he/she has perpetually renounced. However, the Bodhisattva now takes on the nature and functions of a celestial or transcendent figure and assumes a dharmic body - the *monomayakaya*, a mind-made body of wonder-working powers whereby he/she can manifest anywhere, anytime. The Bodhisattva is now beyond the terrestrial limitations of time and space, and is free from all karmic determinations having now entered a realm of pure, effortless compassionate activity, of spiritual action undefiled by any of the contaminations of ignorance (dualistic notions, for instance). The Bodhisattva's

compassionate wisdom (or, more strictly, wisdom-in-its-compassionate-aspect) is now a super-abundance and universal in its applications. On completion of the tenth and final *bhumi* the Bodhisattva becomes *Tathagata*, fully Perfect Being. [7]

The importance of the initial vows cannot be over-estimated. They take many different forms but are always variations on a theme, as it were. Here we shall note one such form which sounds the keynote of all the vows:

I take upon myself...the deeds of all beings, even of those in the hells...I take their suffering upon me... I bear it, I do not draw back from it, I do not tremble at it, I do not lose heart...I must bear the burden of all beings, for I have vowed to save all things living, to bring them safe through the forest of birth, age, disease, death and rebirth. I think not of my own salvation, but strive to bestow on all beings the royalty of supreme wisdom. So I take upon myself all the sorrows of all beings...Truly I will not abandon them. For I have resolved to gain supreme wisdom for the sake of all that lives, to save the world. [8]

The similarity to the sacrificial ideal incarnated in Christ is striking. We can also discern a parallel with Christian doctrine in the idea of the transference of suffering and of merit. This was a bold doctrinal innovation within Buddhism, and was integral to the Mahayanist conception of both the Buddha and the Bodhisattva. Nevertheless one must be wary of attempts to explain the Bodhisattva ideal in terms of "borrowings" from Christianity. The differences are no less striking. We note, for instance, the emphasis in the Buddhist vow on the attainment of wisdom which assumes a secondary place in the Christian perspective, addressed as it is primarily to man's affective and volitional nature.

The vows set before the Bodhisattva the goal for all time, and direct all spiritual development. Furthermore, and this point is fundamental in the Mahayana,

Man becomes what he wills...Spiritual realisation is a growth from within, self-creative and self-determining. It is not too much to say that the nature of the resolve determines the nature of the final attainment. [9]

Lama Anagarika Govinda articulates the same Mahayanist principle when he writes

If...we take the view that consciousness is not a product of the world but that the world is a product of consciousness...it becomes obvious that we live in exactly the type of world we have created...and that the remedy cannot be an "escape" from the world but only a change of "mind". Such a change, however, can only take place if we know the innermost nature of this mind and its power. [10]

It is, of course, a change of "mind", a transformation of consciousness, that the Bodhisattva envisages in the original vows. The vows are re-affirmed during the ninth *bhumi* by which time they are no longer statements of intent but pure spiritual acts with incalculable effects. [11]

The six *paramitas* to be actualized in the Bodhisattva are charity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), forbearance (*ksanti*), vigour (*virya*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*prajña*). In some schools these six *paramitas* are linked with the first six *bhumis*, the correspondence first being postulated by Candrakirti in the *Madhyamakavatara*. [12]

However, the practice of the six *paramitas* is simultaneous, all of them being informed by the all-embracing ideals of *karuna* and *prajñā*. Indeed, the first five *paramitas* cannot be separated from *prajñā* of which they are secondary aspects, each destined to contribute in their own way to the attainment of liberating knowledge.

During the early *bhumis* the Bodhisattva's energies must be dedicated in the first place to the realisation of *sunyata* without which the perfection of *prajñā* is not possible. Recall the incident in the *Life of Milarepa* when the great Tibetan sage is asked by his disciples whether they should engage in an active life of good deeds. His reply:

If there is not attachment to selfish aims, you can. But that is difficult. Those who are full of worldly desires can do nothing to help others. They do not even profit themselves. It is as if a man, carried away by a torrent, pretended to save others. Nobody can do anything for sentient beings without first attaining transcendent insight into Reality. Like the blind leading the blind, one would risk being carried away by desires. Because space is limitless and sentient beings innumerable, you will always have a chance to help others when you become capable of doing so. Until then, cultivate the aspiration toward Complete Enlightenment by loving others more than yourselves while practising the Dharma. [13]

In considering the later stages of the Bodhisattva's spiritual trajectory we enter realms where any verbal articulation of the realities in question becomes problematical. Any formulation must be in the nature of a suggestive metaphor, a signpost fashioned out of the limited resources of human language. Much of the Mahayanist literature concerning this subject, especially in the Himalayan regions, resorts to a densely symbolic mythology and its accompanying iconography. [14]

The attainment of insight into *sunyata* makes possible the compassionate mission of the Bodhisattva, unhindered by dualistic misconceptions. Once in the seventh *bhumi*, with the assumption of the *monomayakaya*, the Bodhisattva can appear in manifold guises, each one appropriate to the spiritual necessities of the case. Thus the Bodhisattva can appear in forms fierce and gruesome as well as benign and attractive - as we see in the resplendent and sometimes startling iconography of the Vajjarana. Before reaching the seventh level the Bodhisattva remains in the phenomenal realm and his compassionate acts partake of "strain and strenuousness", but now the Bodhisattva leaves behind all terrestrial and karmic constraints and enters the realm of spontaneous, effortless, and pure spiritual action. The *Dasa-bhumika* explains the transition to effortlessness thus:

It is like a man in a dream who finds himself drowning in a river; he musters all his courage and is determined at all costs to get out of it. And because of these efforts and desperate contrivances he is awakened from the dream and when thus awakened he at once perceives that no further doings are needed now. So with the Bodhisattva... [15]

This does not mean that the Bodhisattva settles into quietistic inertia but rather that his/her being has been transformed into compassionate wisdom radiating through the

universe. It might be compared to the Christian conception of God's love which is universal, non-discriminating, indifferent, making the sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and sending rain on both the just and the unjust. [16] Murti speaks of the Bodhisattva being "actuated by motiveless altruism...his freedom is full and complete by itself; but he condescends to raise others to his level. This is a free phenomenalizing act of grace and compassion." [17]

If we return to Schuon's claim that the Bodhisattva ideal is implicit in the Buddhist vision which turns on the two poles of suffering and deliverance, we can now, perhaps, see more clearly what is meant by this claim. Schuon elaborates the claim in writing that the Bodhisattva

incarnates the element of compassion - the ontological link as it were between Pain and Felicity - just as the Buddha incarnates Felicity and just as ordinary beings incarnate suffering; he must be present in the cosmos as long as there is both a *Samsara* and a *Nirvana*, this presence of his being expressed by the statement that the Bodhisattva wishes to deliver "all beings". [18]

### **The Bodhisattva Ideal and the Metaphysic of Sunyata**

The Bodhisattva enterprise is oriented towards enlightenment, as the etymology of the term itself makes clear:

*Prajña* informs and inspires the entire spiritual discipline; every virtue and each act of concentration is dedicated to the gaining of insight into the real. The stress has shifted [*viz* earlier Buddhist practices] from the moral to the metaphysical axis...all the other *paramitas* are meant to purify the mind and make it fit to receive the intuition of the absolute. It is *prajña* that can make of each of them a *paramita* - a perfection. [19]

We have already noted, in the cautionary advice of Milarepa, the emphasis on *prajña*. Without the guidance of insight, would-be compassion is often no more than sentiment, all too easily conscripted by what Chögyam Trungpa has called "the bureaucracy of the ego" and turned, unwittingly, to destructive and futile ends.

In the Mahayanist perspective *karuna* (compassion) is inseparable from *prajña* - insight into *sunyata* which, for the moment, we can translate in conventional fashion as "emptiness" or "voidness". The relationship is stated by Milarepa in this characteristic formulation:

If ye realize Voidness, Compassion will arise within your hearts;  
If ye lose all differentiation between yourself and others,  
fit to serve others ye will be... [20]

*Karuna* arises out of insight into *prajña*. Compassion, at least in its full amplitude, cannot precede *prajña*; it is a function of *prajña*. On this point the Mahayanists are unyielding. As Herbert Guenther has pointed out, *karuna* means not only compassion

but also action. [21] This anticipates the point at issue here: *karuna* is the action attending an awareness of *sunyata*. However, even this formulation implies a dualism not to be found in the reality itself. Compassion, it might be said, is the dynamic aspect of knowledge or awareness and as such, is a criterion of its authenticity. To recast this in moral terms more characteristic of the Occidental religious traditions we can say that virtue is integral to wisdom. As Schuon has remarked, "a wisdom without virtue is in fact imposture and hypocrisy...". [22] At this juncture an interesting comparison with Christianity arises. Buddhism insists that *karuna* without *prajña* is a contradiction in terms, a chimera, the blind leading the blind. Christianity, with its more "bhaktic" orientation, alerts us, in the first place, to the illusoriness of a wisdom bereft of *caritas* - a "sounding brass" or a "tinkling cymbal". [23] Ultimately, of course, the principle at stake is the same, but the different accents are illuminating.

In the Mahayana *karuna* and *prajña* come to be seen not only as inseparable but as identical: reference to one or the other signifies the same reality when viewed from a particular angle. The fully-fledged Bodhisattva is simultaneously fully enlightened and boundlessly compassionate. The compassionate aspect of the Bodhisattvas is stressed not because they are in any sense deficient in wisdom but because their cosmic function is to highlight and to radiate this dimension of wisdom-awareness. Ultimately *karuna* is identified not only with *prajña* but with *sunyata* itself. This is so because the duality of knower and known must be transcended. Further, because the universe itself is of the nature of *sunyata*, *karuna* also comes to be identified with the universe itself. Heinrich Zimmer put it this way:

Within the hearts of all creatures compassion is present as the sign of their potential Bodhisattvahood; for all things are *sunyata*, the void - and the pure reflex of the void...is compassion. Compassion, indeed, is the force that holds things in manifestation - just as it with-holds the Bodhisattva from *nirvana*. The whole universe, therefore, is *karuna*, compassion, which is also known as *sunyata*, the void. [24]

The same principle is approached from a different angle in this formulation:

...the Mahayana under its sapiential aspect aims at maintaining its solidarity with the heroic ideal of the Bodhisattva, while nonetheless referring back that ideal to a strictly metaphysical perspective. It first declares that compassion is a dimension of Knowledge, then it adds that one's neighbour (and one's self) is non-real...there is no one whom our charity could concern, nor is there a charity which could be "ours". [25]

Now this, to say the least, is somewhat perplexing to the ratiocinative mind. There is no gainsaying the fact that, at least on the level of mundane experience and "common sense", we are here faced with several conundrums. What is the meaning of the Bodhisattva's mission in the face of *sunyata*? If all is "emptiness" is this much ado about nothing? Is the Bodhisattva's enterprise somewhat akin to the monkey trying to take hold of the moon in the water? [26] What are to make of such characteristic claims

as "Where an attitude in which *sunyata* and *karuna* are indivisible is developed, there is the message of the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*"? [27] And then too, we must ask, in what sense should we understand the Bodhisattva's refusal to enter *nirvana* until all beings are saved? How be it that an enlightened being is not thereby "in" *nirvana*? And what of the well-known formulation that "*Samsara* is *nirvana*", and vice versa, or, similarly, that "Form is void, Void is form"?

Such questions can only adequately be answered through an understanding of the term *upaya*, usually translated as "skilful means" but perhaps more adequately rendered as "provisional means which have a spiritually therapeutic effect" or, to use Schuon's more poetic term, "saving mirages". Buddhism is directed in the first place to our most urgent spiritual needs, the soteriological purpose everywhere informing and shaping the means of which the tradition avails itself. In other words, Buddhism, like all religious traditions, resorts to certain mythological and doctrinal "accommodations" which

...are objectively inadequate [ie. in the light of a pure metaphysic] but which are none the less logically appropriate to the religious axiom they serve and justified by their effectiveness *pro domo* as well as by their symbolic and indirect truth. [28]

Of course, Buddhism is not peculiar in dealing with "partial truths" in respect of its formal elements but the Madhyamika-based traditions have been conspicuously alert to the dangers of identifying Truth or Reality with any dogmatic or conceptual forms which can never be more than markers guiding the aspirant. Nagarjuna's whole dialectic (nearly two millennia before our own much vaunted post-modernists!) is directed towards demonstrating the inadequacy and self-contradiction of all mental and conceptual formulations. Indeed, the Mahayanists speak of Reality itself only in apparently negative terms reminiscent of the Upanisadic *neti neti*. Nevertheless, certain truths can be brought within the purview of the average mentality through "therapeutic errors". It is therefore important to make the necessary discriminations in considering myths and doctrines which might be situated on different levels and which may answer to varying spiritual needs and temperaments.

With these considerations in mind let us return to the questions before us. Clearly any adequate understanding of the Bodhisattva ideal rests on an understanding of *sunyata*. Unhappily the conventional English translations - "emptiness", "voidness" - often carry negative implications and associations which can only blur our understanding of *sunyata*. We cannot here recapitulate the Nagarjunian dialectic nor explore the ramifications of the doctrine of *sunyata*. However, it is useful to note Guenther's remark that "openness" is at least as helpful a pointer as "emptiness". In similar vein, Lama Govinda stresses that an understanding of *sunyata* heightens our awareness of the "transparency" of phenomena. *Sunyata*, he writes,

is not a negative property but a state of freedom from impediments and limitations, a state of spontaneous receptivity...*sunyata* is the emptiness of all

conceptual designations *and* at the same time the recognition of a higher, incommensurable and indefinable reality which can only be experienced in the state of perfect enlightenment. [29]

The penetration of *sunyata* allows the Bodhisattva to experience the phenomenal realm as it actually is and not under the illusory aspects it assumes when experienced in a state of ignorance. Understanding *sunyata*, the Bodhisattva does not repudiate the world of suffering beings as an utter non-reality; to do so would be to succumb to what the Mahayanists call *ucchedadarsanam* - ie. a kind of nihilism. As D.T. Suzuki has pointed out,

That the world is like a mirage, that it is thus empty, does not mean that it is unreal in the sense that it has no reality whatsoever. But it means that its real nature cannot be understood by a mind that cannot rise above the dualism of "to be" (*sat*) and "not to be" (*asat*). [30]

The Bodhisattva's *karuna* issues from the overcoming of this dualism. As one translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra* has it,

The world transcends (the dualism of) birth and death, it is like the flower in the air; the wise are free from (the ideas of being and non-being); yet a great compassionate heart is awakened in them. [31]

The mission of the Bodhisattva, far from being "invalidated" by *sunyata*, actually derives from it. T.R.V. Murti has explicated this in commanding fashion, especially in the light of the *sunyata-prajña-karuna*-universe equation already discussed:

*Sunyata* is *prajña*, intellectual intuition, and is identical with the Absolute. *Karuna* is the active principle of compassion that gives concrete expression to *sunyata* in phenomena. If the first is Transcendent and looks to the Absolute, the second is fully immanent and looks down towards phenomena. The first is the...universal reality of which no determinations can be predicated; it is beyond the duality of good and evil, love and hatred, virtue and vice; the second is goodness, love and pure act...the Bodhisattva...is thus an amphibious being with one foot in the Absolute and the other in phenomena. [32]

*Prajña* perceives the emptiness, openness and indivisibility of the Absolute while *karuna* sees the diversity of the phenomenal realm. But these aspects of awareness are inseparable: the Bodhisattva is the living embodiment, the "personification" of this truth.

The Bodhisattva appreciates the lack of any self-existent reality in the phenomenal world and understands the impermanent and fugitive nature of all things within the world of time and space. Simultaneously the Bodhisattva takes account of the relative reality of manifested beings and thus sets out to eradicate evil on the samsaric plane and to help deliver all beings from the Round of Existence. In other words, the Bodhisattva experiences whatever measure of reality belongs to the phenomenal world while being immune to dualistic misconceptions and their karmic effects. "The Bodhisattva weeps with suffering beings and at the same time realizes that there is one who never weeps, being above sufferings, tribulations and contaminations." [33] Because of his

identification with all beings the Bodhisattva suffers; because of his wisdom he experiences the blissful awareness of the full plenitude of the Void. [34]

What of the Bodhisattva's "location" in *samsara/nirvana*? In the Mahayanist literature we can find different formulations of the Bodhisattva's "whereabouts": he remains in *samsara*; he is "on the brink" of *nirvana*; he is in *nirvana* because *nirvana* is *samsara*. Here we are in a realm not amenable to factual exactitude and will only succeed in tightening the "mental knots" if we approach these expressions in the either/or mode of rationalist, analytical and empiricist philosophy; rather, we need to understand the truths enshrined in these different formulations.

The first expression, as well as signalling various truths which we have already discussed, suggests that enlightenment is possible within the *samsaric* realm:

The condition of the gnostic Bodhisattva would be neither conceivable nor tolerable if it were not a matter of contemplating the Absolute in the heart and in the world at one and the same time. [35]

The second symbolizes the truth that time and eternity, phenomena and the Void, do not exist as independent opposites but are aspects of the one reality, all of the nature of *sunyata*. The Bodhisattva is a link or axis that joins the apparently separate realms of the phenomenal, the celestial and the metacosmic. (In this context the Bodhisattva conception is closely related to the doctrine of the *Trikaya*.) Thirdly, from the enlightened "point of view" the opposition between *samsara* and *nirvana* is seen to be illusory, all dualities having been transcended in the light of the supreme unitive knowledge. Thus there can be no question of the Bodhisattva being either "here" or "there".

When the *Prajñāparamita Sutra* and other scriptures tell us that "Form is void and Void is form" this must be understood in the sense of what *is* before we project our conceptualisations and designations onto it. The formulation cannot be fully understood prior to the intuition of *sunyata*. Once the liberative knowledge has been attained then, and then only, will the duality of *samsara* and *nirvana* disappear. Thus the *Lankavatara Sutra* speaks in one and the same breath of the Bodhisattva both being and not being "in" *nirvana*:

The Bodhisattvas, O Mahatmi, who rejoice in the bliss of the *samadhi* of cessation are well furnished with the original vows and the pitying heart, and realizing the import of the inextinguishable vows, do not enter *nirvana*. They are already in *nirvana* because their views are not at all beclouded by discrimination. [36]

Many of these considerations are synthesized in a magisterial passage by Frithjof Schuon, one which can stand as a conclusion to this part of our inquiry:

If the Bodhisattva is supposed to "refuse entry into *Nirvana* so long as a single blade of grass remains undelivered" this means two things: firstly (this is the cosmic viewpoint) it means that the function of the Bodhisattva coincides with what in Western language may be termed the permanent "angelic presence" in the

world, a presence which only disappears with the world itself at the final reintegration, called "apokatastasis" in the language of Western gnosticism; secondly (this is the metaphysical viewpoint) it means that the Bodhisattva, realizing the "emptiness" of things, thereby realizes on the same showing the nirvanic quality of *Samsara* as such... expressed in the sentence "Form is void and Void is form." The *Samsara* which seems at first to be inexhaustible, so that the Bodhisattva's vow appears to have something excessive or even crazy about it, becomes "instantly" reduced - in the non-temporal instantaneity of *prajña* - to universal Enlightenment (*Sambodhi*); on this plane, every antinomy is transcended and as it were consumed. "Delivering the last blade of grass" amounts, in this sense, to beholding it in its nirvanic essence or to apprehending the unreality of its non-deliverance. [37]

### **The Bodhisattva and the Buddha(s)**

In keeping with its cosmic perspective, the Mahayana, unlike the Theravadin tradition, sees the Buddha as the embodiment of a spiritual principle, one who "acted out" his life for the benefit of all sentient beings still lost in the "forest of birth, disease, old age, death and rebirth", his own enlightenment, in the words of the *Sadhamapundarika Sutra*, having been attained "inconceivable thousands of millions of world ages" ago. [38]

The Theravadins had recognized three ultimate spiritual possibilities: Self-Buddhas (*Paccekebuddha*), the perfected saint (*arhat*) and the Complete Perfect Buddha (*Sammāsambuddha*). The *arhat* ideal occupied the pivotal position, it being the possibility open to the ordinary human being who was prepared to tread the path mapped by Sakyamuni. This ideal rested on an austere monastic asceticism. The Mahayana, on the other hand, established the Perfect Buddha as an ideal whose realisation was open to all and equated it with the aspirations of the Bodhisattva. It also elaborated a conception of a host of transcendent Buddhas and celestial Buddha-Lands - Pure Lands or Paradises, of which Amitabha's Western Paradise has been, historically, the most important. The celestial Buddhas and Paradises, as well as the Bodhisattvic figures such as Avalokitesvara, Mañjusri, Vajrapani and Tara, have played a particularly important part in the iconography of the Tibeto-Himalayan branches of the Mahayana.

The most significant Mahayanist distinction between the Buddha and the Bodhisattva is not determined by "degrees" of enlightenment but by function. That of the Bodhisattva is a dynamic and salvatory one implying a perpetual "descent" into *samsara* (thus recalling the Hindu conception of the *avatar*). From one point of view it might be said that "the Buddha represents the contemplative aspect and the Bodhisattva the dynamic aspect of *nirvana*", or that "the former is turned towards the Absolute and the latter towards contingency". [39] As the Bodhisattva and the Buddha are of the same nature there is no rigid distinction between them but a subtle relationship which appears in different guises under different lights. It is said in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, for instance, that the Bodhisattvas are incapable of reaching their final goal without the

"other-power" (*adhithana*) of the Buddha, without his all-pervading power. [40] However, it is also sometimes said in the Mahayanist texts that it is by virtue of the compassion of the Bodhisattva that the Buddhas come into the world. In the *Sadharmapundarika Sutra*, for instance, we find this: "From the Buddhas arises only the disciples and the *Pratyekabuddhas* but from the Bodhisattva the perfect Buddha himself is born." [41]

### **Self-Power, Other-Power and the Bodhisattva**

The question of self-power and other-power has generated a good deal of reckless and polarizing polemic within nearly all of the major religious traditions. Buddhism is no exception. Edward Conze has remarked that the ineffable reality of salvation can be viewed from three distinct vantage points: (a) as the product of self-striving under the guidance of an infallible teacher, (b) as the work of an external and personified agent accepted in faith, and (c) as the doing of the Absolute itself. From a metaphysical point of view doubtless the third represents the least restricted outlook. However, the relative merits of these perspectives are not at issue here; rather we must consider this question in the context of our primary concern, the Mahayanist understanding of the Bodhisattva.

The Theravadins, by and large hold to the first of these views. Take this from an eminent contemporary Theravadin:

...man has the power to liberate himself from all bondage through his own personal effort and intelligence...If the Buddha is to be called a "saviour" at all, it is only in the sense that he discovered and showed the path to Liberation, *Nirvana*. But we must tread the path ourselves...according to the Buddha, man's emancipation depends on his own realization of the Truth, and not on the benevolent grace of a god or any external power... [42]

In the Mahayana we find a less monolithic attitude. The Zen schools, in the main, also emphasize self-power (*jiriki*) rather than other-power (*tariki*) while the Jodo and Shin branches of Buddhism place overwhelming importance on both faith and grace. [43] Taken overall the Mahayana encompasses all the points of view posited above. The precise way in which the saving power of the Buddha(s) and Bodhisattvas is envisaged varies according to the prevailing spiritual climate and the proclivities of the peoples in question. However, the Bodhisattva conception can provide a meeting-place for the truths which underlie the different attitudes under discussion. Lama Govinda, by way of example, pays due respect to both the "other-power" of the Bodhisattva and the "self-power" of the aspirant which, so to speak, "collaborate":

The help of a Bodhisattva is not something that comes from outside or is pressed upon those who are helped, but is the awakening of a force which dwells in the innermost nature of every being, a force which, awakened by the spiritual influence or example of a Bodhisattva, enables us to meet fearlessly every situation... [44]

Before leaving this question we might profitably remind ourselves of a general point, one highly pertinent to the discussion at hand and best laid bare by further recourse to the writings of Frithjof Schuon, the most profound of contemporary exponents of the *sophia perennis*:

All great spiritual experiences agree in this: there is no common measure between the means put into operation and the result. "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible", says the Gospel. In fact, what separates man from divine Reality is the slightest of barriers: God is infinitely close to man, but man is infinitely far from God. This barrier, for man, is a mountain: man stands in front of a mountain which he must remove with his own hands. He digs away the earth, but in vain, the mountain remains; man however goes on digging, in the name of God. And the mountain vanishes. It was never there. [45]

Despite its theistic vocabulary this has a certain Buddhist resonance and recalls the man drowning in the river. The multivalent spirituality of the Mahayana certainly takes full account of the spiritual possibilities latent in the principle.

No doubt Buddhism as a whole is founded upon "self-power" but since "other-power" is a spiritually efficacious possibility it was bound to appear somewhere within the orbit of the tradition. In the Tibeto-Himalayan area, where the Bodhisattva ideal is pre-eminent, we find a happy and judicious blend of the two elements. In the everyday life of the common people there was unquestionably a great deal of emphasis on the miraculous effects flowing from a faithful devotion to the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. As Conze has observed, the Madhyamika dialectic and the doctrine of *sunyata* has exercised a potent appeal for Buddhists of a "jñanic" disposition. However, the popular appeal of the Mahayana is, in good measure, to be explained by the "spiritual magnetism" of the Bodhisattva ideal which could "stir the hearts of all" and provide "the basis for immediate action". [46] Furthermore, the Bodhisattva ideal helped introduce into Buddhism a more explicitly religious element, particularly through "bhaktic" practices, as well as a cosmic perspective without which Buddhism might easily have degenerated into what Murti calls "an exalted moral naturalism". [47] In the popular teachings much is made of the unlimited merits and "boundless treasury of virtues" (*gunasambhava*) of the Bodhisattvas. It is worth noting that the three principal virtues - Merit, Compassion, Wisdom - correspond analogically with the paths of *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga* and *jñana yoga* in the Hindu tradition. [48] The Bodhisattva ideal also provided fertile ground for the flowering of Buddhist mythology and iconography, particularly in the Vajjarana and in the Far East where the cult of Kuan-Yin remains pervasive to this day. [49]

## **Conclusion**

The Bodhisattva ideal has been of incalculable importance in the Mahayana, although it has not everywhere received the same emphasis. It gathered together in a vivid, living

ideal the principles of *prajña* and *karuna* and tied them firmly to the metaphysic of *sunyata*. The conception found its most luxuriant expression in the Vajyana where it played an integrative role for many different aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice. On the popular level the Bodhisattva provided an exemplar of the spiritual life and a devotional focus. Cosmologically, the Bodhisattva was an axial figure running through terrestrial, celestial and transcendental realms. Metaphysically considered the Bodhisattva conception, rooted in the doctrine of *sunyata*, provided a resolution of dualistic conceptions of *samsara* and *nirvana* and provided a bridge between the Absolute and the relative. In its reconciliation of all these elements in the Bodhisattva Mahayana Buddhism finds one of its most characteristic and elevated expressions. Let us leave the final word with Saraha, reputedly the teacher of the Mahayana's greatest metaphysician, Nagarjuna:

He who clings to the Void  
And neglects Compassion  
Does not reach the highest stage.  
But he who practises only Compassion  
Does not gain release from the toils of existence.  
He, however, who is strong in the practice of both,  
Remains neither in *Samsara* nor in *Nirvana*. [<sup>50</sup>]

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[<sup>1</sup>] DAYAL, HAR (1970) *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (New Delhi, Motilal Barnisidass, reprint; first published 1932), pp. 2-3.

[<sup>2</sup>] SCHUON, FRITHJOF (1968) *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (London, Allen & Unwin), p. 132. See also SUZUKI, D.T. (1973) *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Third Series* (London, Rider), p. 78.

[<sup>3</sup>] CONZE, EDWARD (1967) *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Oxford, Bruno Cassirer), p. 40.

[<sup>4</sup>] SCHUON, op. cit., p. 139.

[<sup>5</sup>] See CONZE, EDWARD (1959) *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York, Harper & Row), pp. 125-126.

[<sup>6</sup>] SUZUKI, op.cit., p. 79.

[<sup>7</sup>] This adumbrated version of the ideal and the path is derived from several sources; it is an unexceptional account which follows the traditional sources. For a detailed discussion of the significance of the *Tathagata*, not canvassed in this article, see MURTI, T.R.V. (1980) *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, Allen & Unwin). For a detailed account of the ten *bhumis* see DUTT, N. (1976) *Mahayana Buddhism* (Calcutta, Firma KLM), Chapters 4 & 5.

[<sup>8</sup>] Taken from BASHAM, A.L. (1967) *The Wonder that was India* (London, Collins Fontana), pp. 277-278. For an extended version of the Bodhisattva's vows see SANTIDEVA (1979) *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhisattvacharya-vatara)*, trans. BATCHELOR, STEPHEN (Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works & Archives), pp. 29-34.

[<sup>9</sup>] MURTI, op. cit., pp. 266-267.

[<sup>10</sup>] GOVINDA, ANAGARIKA (1969) *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (London, Rider), p. 274. This passage might suggest the Yogacarin view of "mind-only" but as Lama Govinda makes clear in the same work, this is not the intention of the passage above. For a similar statement but one protected by the appropriate qualifications see GOVINDA, ANAGARIKA (1974) *The Way of the White Clouds* (London, Rider), p. 123.

[<sup>11</sup>] See CONZE (1967), op. cit., pp. 42-43.

[<sup>12</sup>] See MURTI, op. cit., p. 269.

[<sup>13</sup>] LHALUNGPA, LOBSANG, translator (1977) *The Life of Milarepa* (New York, E.P. Dutton), p.171.

[<sup>14</sup>] For an illuminating discussion of the often-misunderstood nature, in a traditional context, of both "symbol" and "myth", see essays on these subjects in RAINE, KATHLEEN (1985) *Defending Ancient Springs* (Cambridge, Golgonooza; first published 1967).

[<sup>15</sup>] Quoted in SUZUKI, op. cit., p. 225. See also SHURMANN, HANS W. (1973) *Buddhism: An outline of its teaching and schools* (London, Rider), pp. 112-113.

[<sup>16</sup>] See ST. MATTHEW 5:45.

[<sup>17</sup>] MURTI, op. cit., p. 263.

[<sup>18</sup>] SCHUON, op. cit., p. 132.

[<sup>19</sup>] MURTI, op. cit., p. 267.

[<sup>20</sup>] This translation from EVANS-WENTZ, W., ed (1951) *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa* (London, Oxford University Press) trans. DAWA-SAMDUP, KAZI, p. 273.

[<sup>21</sup>] GUENTHER, H.V. & TRUNGPA, CHÖGYAM (1975) *The Dawn of Tantra* (Berkeley, Shambala), p. 31.

[<sup>22</sup>] SCHUON, FRITHJOF (1991) *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, World Wisdom Books), p. 86.

[<sup>23</sup>] 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1.

[<sup>24</sup>] ZIMMER, HEINRICH (1951) *The Philosophies of India* ed. CAMPBELL, JOSEPH (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 553.

[<sup>25</sup>] SCHUON (1968), op. cit., p. 130.

[<sup>26</sup>] A traditional metaphor referred to, in this context, in SUZUKI, op.cit., p.215.

[<sup>27</sup>] Quoted in GUENTHER & TRUNGPA, op. cit., p. 32.

[<sup>28</sup>] SCHUON, FRITHJOF (1969) *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London, Perennial Books), p. 70. See also SCHUON, FRITHJOF (1976) *Understanding Islam* (London, Allen & Unwin), pp. 144ff.

[<sup>29</sup>] GOVINDA, ANAGARIKA (1976) *Creative Meditation and Multi-Level Consciousness* (Wheaton, Quest), p. 11. On the "transparency" of *sunyata* see also p. 51.

[<sup>30</sup>] SUZUKI, op.cit., p. 215.

[<sup>31</sup>] Sung translation, quoted by SUZUKI, D.T., op. cit., p. 215.

[<sup>32</sup>] MURTI, op. cit., p. 264.

[<sup>33</sup>] SUZUKI, op. cit., pp. 229 & 216.

[<sup>34</sup>] See PALLIS, MARCO (1960) *The Way and the Mountain* (London, Peter Owen), p. 182. See also Pallis's remarks in a footnote on the parallels with the doctrine of the Two Natures of Christ.

[<sup>35</sup>] SCHUON (1968), op. cit., p. 136.

[<sup>36</sup>] LANKAVATARA SUTRA, ed. SUZUKI, D.T. (1973) (Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 184.

[<sup>37</sup>] SCHUON (1968), op. cit., p. 156.

[<sup>38</sup>] SADHARMAPUNDARIKA SUTRA (*Lotus of the Good Law Sutra*), cited in SHURMANN, op. cit., p. 99.

[<sup>39</sup>] SCHUON (1968), op. cit., p. 144.

[<sup>40</sup>] See SUZUKI, op. cit., pp. 202-205.

[<sup>41</sup>] See *Tattvasangraha* per ZIMMER, op. cit., pp. 552. For discussion of some recent scholarly debate about the relationship of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas see WILLIAMS, PAUL (1989) *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London, Routledge), pp. 204-214.

[<sup>42</sup>] RAPOLA, WAHULA (1978) *What the Buddha Taught* (London, Gordon Fraser), pp. 1-2.

[<sup>43</sup>] A great deal of ink has been spilt on the question of Buddhist attitudes to faith and grace. For a salutary corrective to overheated polemics on this subject see PALLIS, MARCO (1980) *A Buddhist Spectrum* (London, Allen & Unwin), pp. 52-71.

[<sup>44</sup>] GOVINDA (1969), op. cit., p. 233.

[<sup>45</sup>] SCHUON, FRITHJOF (1961) *Stations of Wisdom* (London, John Murray), p. 157.

[<sup>46</sup>] CONZE (1967), op. cit., p. 54.

[<sup>47</sup>] MURTI, op.cit., p. 263. On the place of the Bodhisattvas in devotional practices see WILLIAMS, op. cit., pp. 215-276.

[<sup>48</sup>] SCHUON (1968), op. cit., p. 135. See also ZIMMER, op. cit., p. 535.

[<sup>49</sup>] See BLOFELD, JOHN (1977) *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin* (Boston, Shambala).

[<sup>50</sup>] From SARAHA *Treasury of Songs*, quoted in PERRY, WHITALL (1971) *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London, Allen & Unwin), p. 607