

The Undercover Bodhisattva

Part 1: Loving-kindness

Being an Ally to All

By Mary Jaksch

Introduction:

Practice on the mat poses a question: how can it be embodied in everyday life? Since ancient times the ideal of the *bodhisattva* invites Buddhists to embody the Way through acts of friendliness and compassion. As ‘undercover *bodhisattvas*’ we take up this work as a secret mission in life. We conspire together to make this world a happier place.

Before exploring the practice of being an ‘undercover *bodhisattva*’, let’s take a look where the ideal of the *bodhisattva* is located within the history of Buddhism and the matrix of its teachings.

Historical background

The term *bodhisattva* is often translated as ‘enlightened being’ or ‘enlightening being’. *Bodhi* means enlightened and *sattva* means ‘being’ or ‘essence’. The ideal of the *Bodhisattva* arose with the *Mahāyāna* during the first century CE in India.

The advent of the *Mahāyāna* was a significant development in the history of Buddhism because it entailed a radical change in attitude. Followers of the earlier schools, such as the *Theravāda*, aimed to liberate themselves from *samsāra* (the round of rebirth) as quickly as possible by becoming *arhats*, or Buddhist saints, and entering into *nirvāna*. However, practitioners within the *Mahāyāna* regarded the *arhat* ideal as having insufficient compassion, for it involved leaving other beings to their fate within *samsāra* with all its suffering.

The *Mahāyāna* came up with six innovations. The first one was that it adopted the *bodhisattva* path as the highest practice ideal. A second one was the view that the Buddha is still in existence and hence able to give inspiration. New *sūtras* and Dharma talks were now regarded as directly inspired by the Buddha and thus just as valid as *sūtras* from the ancient Buddhist canon. This led to a third change, namely a move from a ‘closed’ to an ‘open’ tradition. In a closed tradition truth is said to have been revealed at a certain point of time through particular individuals. In an open tradition people believe that the truth can be disclosed to individuals at any time. A fourth change was the cult of the book. The rise of the *Mahāyāna* was linked to the innovation of writing down texts. *Sūtras* became sacred objects that could be venerated. Before the rise of the *Mahāyāna*, *sūtras* were recited in unison. In that way the body of scriptures was transmitted to each new generation in a standardised form. Now that texts could be written down, it was possible

to also preserve dissenting or even heretical ideas. In this way a new freedom of expression came into being. The fifth change was that the *Mahāyāna* embraced the concept of *upāya*, or ‘skilful means’. The Buddha was now said to have changed certain teachings in accordance with his hearers’ needs—which allowed disparate teachings to be harmonised. This allowed a measure of creativity in how to respond to others. The sixth innovation was a new interpretation of *nirvāna*. Whilst the *Theravāda* saw *nirvāna* as final extinction and exit from the round of rebirth, the *Mahāyāna* developed the concept of *nirvāna* as the experience of unity of *samsāra* and the absolute.

You can see how Zen as a *Mahāyāna* tradition still expresses most of these aspects.

Buddhist teachings of the *bodhisattva* path.

The ideal of the *bodhisattva* way holds compassion at its centre. Within the matrix of Buddhist teachings this ideal is expressed in the four Great Vows, the six Perfections and the four Noble Abodes.

The four Great Vows are chanted daily in Zen retreats. They are:

The many beings are numberless, I vow to save them;
Greed, hatred, and ignorance rise endlessly, I vow to abandon them;
Dharma gates are countless, I vow to wake to them;
The Buddha's way is unsurpassed, I vow to embody it fully.

These four vows express the aspiration of the *bodhisattva*. How these aspirations can be put into practice is laid out in the four Noble Abodes and the Six Perfections. The Noble Abodes describe four different modes of *Bodhisattva* practice: loving-kindness (Pali *mettā*, Skt. *maitri*), compassion (Pali and Skt. *karunā*), gladness (Pali and Skt. *muditā*), and equanimity (Pali *upekkhā*, Skt. *upekṣā*).

The stages of the *Bodhisattva* path are outlined in the six Perfections, or *pāramitās*:

The perfection of giving: *dāna*
The perfection of morality: *śīla*
The perfection of forbearance: *kṣanti*
The Perfection of vigour: *vīrya*
The perfection of meditation: *dhyāna*
The perfection of wisdom: *prajñā*

Each *pāramitā* merits an extensive exploration and I will take them up another time. Suffice to say that *dāna*, the practice of open mind, open heart, and open hand, can be said to include the practice of loving-kindness.



In Buddhist folklore there are some great mythic *bodhisattvas*. The most famous is *Avalokiteśvara*, known in Chinese as *Guanyin*. *Avalokiteśvara* was at first depicted in male form, but later on the image became that of a woman. ‘*Guanyin*’ means ‘observing the sounds’. Thus, she listens and responds to the cries of the many suffering beings.

Here is an image from Mt. Jiuhua in China's Anhui province. Her many arms represent the *bodhisattva*'s limitless commitment to helping other beings.

Being an ally to all

What is the opposite of loving-kindness? Some people say it is hatred, or fear. I would say it is indifference. The practice of loving-kindness teaches us to care deeply and to express that tender regard in action.

One way to embark on this path of kindly action is to become an ally to all. We tend to think of being an ally as taking sides as ‘us against them’. When we do that, we emphasise separation instead of oneness and this leads to suffering. Just reflect upon your *sangha*. When factional lines are drawn, harmony is breached and people become isolated and unhappy. In our society there are many examples of how suffering is created by the idea of ‘us against them’, ranging from discrimination to persecution. On a global scale we see ‘us against them’ expressed as war.

A way of moving from discord to harmony is to become an ally to all. This means seeing and honouring all needs, including one's own.

“What do they need?”

A key question is: “What do they need?”

There is a lovely story about this in Jack Kornfield's book *Soul Food*. It stems from the Christian tradition. A parish priest on retreat went to a monk who was known for his helpful questions. The priest said,

“I am a parish priest here on retreat. Can you give me a question, please?”

“Ah yes,” the monk said. “My question is, ‘What do they want?’”

The priest came away baffled and frustrated. After a few hours he went back to the monk.

“Excuse me,” he said pointedly. “Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. Your question was very helpful, but I wasn’t so much interested in thinking about my parish during this retreat. Rather, I wanted to think seriously about my own spiritual life. Could you give me a question for my own spiritual life?”

“Ah, I see,” the monk said. “Then my question is, ‘what do they **really** need?’”¹

It is only when we spot a need that we can take kindly action as undercover *bodhisattvas*. Here is an example: A few days ago Mary, a friend of mine who is ten years old, rang me up:

“Mum’s a bit stressed,” she said. “Could we maybe come and see you? Anna and I could watch TV in the other lounge and you and Mum could talk. That’ll make her feel better.”

“That would be nice,” I said. “What else do you need? Would it help if I cooked tea tonight?”

Mary breathed a sigh of relief, “Oh, yes! And could we bring our washing to put into the dryer?” Then she added, “Just don’t tell Mum I rang you.”

Two undercover *bodhisattvas* in cahoots!

We tend to be a bit squeamish about drawing attention to our kindly actions. And that is appropriate. After all, we are not doing anything special in those moments; we are simply allowing our aspiration to guide us. And yet it is helpful to share such experiences so that we can encourage and inspire each other.

Sometimes the *bodhisattva* opportunities are small and fleeting. Yesterday I was in the supermarket standing in front of a display cabinet filled with buns and bread. I noticed a woman beside me had her left hand in a plaster cast and was struggling to hold a paper bag and fill it. All she needed was another hand to hold the paper bag just for a few seconds. It was easy to reach out and hold it.

These are natural and barely noticed deeds. The poet William Wordsworth says of them:

That best portion of a good man’s life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and love.²

How can we learn to be a *bodhisattva*?

The Way of the *bodhisattva* is a practice. The word ‘practice’ implies that we need to bring ourselves back on track over and over. When we embark on the Way of the *bodhisattva* we find help along the way, especially amongst friends and family members. They are often quick to bring us back in line. I was reminded of this a few weeks ago. My son Sebastian and I were driving around in his car when he asked me to phone a real

¹ Kornfield, J. and Feldman, C., 1996, eds., *Soul Food*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, p. 124.

² From *Tintern Abbe.y*

estate agent to get some information about a particular property. After I hung up there was a sticky silence. Sebastian shot me a disapproving look:

“That wasn’t very nice, Mum. You treated her as if she was a twit.”

I frowned, “Well, she **was** a twit!”

“How do you know?”

“She just didn’t have a clue!”

“Maybe she’s a stressed-out solo mum with three children. Or maybe she just couldn’t remember all the details of this property because she’s in her kitchen and not in the office. You made her feel really bad about herself, Mum.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a faint blush rise.

My partner David is definitely a *bodhisattva*, though he’s quite unaware of this. He is dedicated to saving spiders. If a spider small or large gets trapped in the shower, David immediately rushes into action and gets out the plastic box labelled ‘Spider rescue and relocation kit’. Personally, I don’t find spiders particularly endearing. But these days, with David’s example, I can’t bring myself to flush a spider down the drain.

I am sure you too will find that family members and friends guide you.

Mindfulness

You may be wondering, “What’s all this got to do with practice on the cushion?”

There is a clear link: We only notice what others need when we are in the present moment. If we are locked away in our thoughts, we can’t spot the opportunities for practicing good. Being present is the key to practice both on and off the cushion. Aitken Roshi says:

When you practice kindness, you also practice no-self... Kindness is an attitude of pleasantness, interest in the other, encouragement. The kindly person is not worried about giving away personal power. In fact, when you are kindly, you are cultivating Buddha power, the power of decency that brings your interrelationship with all beings into clear focus.³

Become a collector

Being an undercover *bodhisattva* has nothing to do with grandiose action. Your kindly task can be the smallest thing. Maybe you fish a spider out of the shower, or stroke a cat, or talk to the neighbour, or wave a car into your bumper-to-bumper lane. Your kindly deed is not for others; they are for yourself. What is that self?

³ Aitken, R., 1996, *The Original Dwelling Place*, Washington, Counterpoint, p. 48.

Why not become a collector? People collect many things: stamps, cars, ex-wives, houses and so on. An undercover *bodhisattva* collects kindly actions. Try and collect at least one such deed a day—then notice how this changes your life.

© Mary Jaksch 2007