

Are Bodhisattvas Really Real?

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Endless Path Zendo

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Buddhism speaks of bodhisattvas or “wisdom beings.” The name is quite literal. In Sanskrit, “bodhi” means “wisdom” and “sattva,” “being.” These are said to be the countless, spiritually maturing, growing-up and grownup beings throughout the universe, dedicated to the Path of dropping self-centeredness (an ultimately unreal position), and attaining the way of truthful, which means selfless and, so, wise and compassionate being and doing. The Buddha in the jataka tales is “*the Bodhisattva*,” on a personal path of evolution to the complete realization of innate Buddhahood.

Still, where is he going? An advanced bodhisattva might have challenged him about his progressive path of evolving practice. Mara is the Tempter or Distracter, the one who keeps messing up our focus, filling our minds with all kinds of distractions when we sit down to do zazen. As there are countless bodhisattvas throughout the universe, there are, likewise, said to be countless Maras. However, thanks to the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, we also know that all such Maras may actually themselves be advanced bodhisattvas, whose job is to test the less mature. “Bah! Not enough,” they proclaim. “Not enough yet. Keep going!” At the same time they add, “Just this! Right now! Just this! Do you see?” Then with the black, piercing eyes of a devil – to quote Wu-men – they watch younger bodhisattvas squirm as they try to grasp the living truth. Tricky, tricky Maras!

So why didn't Mara challenge the Bodhisattva in the jatakas? Why didn't he say, “Hold on. Where are you hurrying off to, life after jataka life? Where do you think you are going? What do you think you'll get that you don't already have?” In *Shobogenzo*, section six, “This Very Mind is Buddha,” Dogen insists that this very Mind (not thought, not intellect), right now, not thousands of lives in the future *is* Shakyamuni Buddha. At the same time Dogen, won't let us escape into lazy views like – “Great! I don't have to do a thing. I'm a Buddha.” As Zen students we will be challenged on where are we going early on in our koan curriculum when we take up the important koan of Pai-chang's (Hyakujo's) Fox, the 2nd koan of the *Wu-men kuan* or *Mumonkan's Gateless Barrier* koan collection. The case includes several challenges on this point. Huang-po asks his teacher, Pai-chang – “What if the abbot, whose wrong answer turned him into a fox for 500 lives, had given right answers each time? What would have happened, then?” And Wu-men's commentary to the case states that the ex-Abbot lived all those 500 fox lives as lives of grace. How?

Well, the thing about Mara is that he never seems to be there when you might want him, and always always turns up to mess with your practice when you don't. When the Buddha-to-Be *is* finally challenged by Mara he's mature and ready. He doesn't get

sucked in but heads Mara off at the pass with one simple move that ends the whole show. He simply touches the earth. That's it. Here, right here. This is it. Just this.

Nonetheless, though that is the truth — right here, right now — there *are*, nonetheless, stages to ongoing practice. Understanding, commitment, and embodiment all evolve. Jataka tales are the record of one particular bodhisattva's, our own Shakyamuni Buddha's, exertions on his path of compassionate and skillfully evolving practice. They show him working through human, non-human, and super-human lives toward the complete actualization of his and our own vast and mysterious potential, the potential of Mind itself.

According to Mahayana (literally, "Great Way") Buddhist tradition, absolutely profound Selfless wisdom is already intrinsic to every atom, bug, rock, tree, star, animal and person. It is already here, and has been so from the beginning. Hakuin Zenji make this the opening of his *Zazen Wasan*, "Song in Praise of Zazen:" "From the *very* beginning all beings are Buddha." Yet as Zen tradition makes clear, and, as Dogen takes pains to point out again and again, unless we do the work of actually practicing realization, our intrinsic enlightenment remains unconscious to us even as it underlies all we think, feel, sense, and do. It is asleep, remaining only as a potential, not yet awake and functioning. The "very beginning" is not simply distant in time or space. It is here, with this thought, this breath, this count, this koan. This is the very beginning. Dogen, in the superb brief section of *Shobogenzo* titled, *Genjo koan* or *Actualizing The Fundamental Point* writes:

Do not suppose that what you realize becomes your knowledge and is grasped by your consciousness. Although actualized immediately, the inconceivable may not be apparent. Its appearance is beyond your knowledge. Zen master Baoche of Mt. Mayu was fanning himself. A monk approached and said, "Master, the nature of wind is permanent and there is no place it does not reach. Why, then, do you fan yourself?"

*"Although you understand that the nature of the wind is permanent," Baoche replied, "you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere."
"What is the meaning of its reaching everywhere?" asked the monk again. The master just kept fanning himself. The monk bowed deeply.*

The actualization of the buddha-dharma, the vital path of its correct transmission, is like this. If you say that you do not need to fan yourself because the nature of wind is permanent and you can have wind without fanning, you will understand neither permanence nor the nature of wind. The nature of wind is permanent; because of that, the wind of the buddha's house brings forth the gold of the earth and makes fragrant the cream of the long river.

Written in mid-autumn, the first year of Tempuku 1233. Revised in the fourth year of Kencho, 1252. (Trans. Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi)

Through the work of practice-realization we can wake to it. Practice is realization. It is because the nature of wind is permanent that we can fan ourselves. Because Original Mind is our nature, we can practice-realization of Original Mind.

According to the jataka tradition, animals can be bodhisattvas. Or rather, perhaps more accurately, bodhisattvas can be animals, or plants and trees. We know for real these days that dogs will run through flames to save human friends; dolphins push drowning swimmers to shore and drive off sharks circling a surfer; orcas—killer whales—have guided lost boaters through heavy fog to safe harbor; octopus are intelligent and curious, with distinct personalities; and that older trees protect younger family members, while younger ones may help nourish and sustain more ancient ones. In the jatakas, a parrot saves a burning forest, a deer saves many animals from hunters, a bear saves a hunter, an elephant and lion join forces to save shipwrecked merchants, an ox takes on a mighty task to help the farmer who raised him. All are bodhisattvas. In actuality, not simply in old stories, the more we learn of animals, the more astonishing their behaviors, intelligence and empathy appear. How similar our modern sense of animal intelligence and personality is to the way animals were already being presented in the 2500 year old jataka tales! Western science is catching up to where Buddhism began!

Practicing meditation and committing ourselves to an ethical life is the core of our work as beginner bodhisattvas. To help accomplish this, we renew bodhisattva vows at the end of every period of formal zazen. With our Great Vows for All, we remind ourselves of our own deepest life purpose and renew our commitment to be of benefit to others—human and non-human alike. The bodhisattva or wisdom being is a grown-up, someone who has matured beyond childish notions of self-centeredness and self-importance. This long process begins, not by tearing down the self but by awakening to non-duality.

The Four Vows or, Great Vows for All, are our essential vows of bodhisattvic aspiration in Zen. They map out the Path and clarify our determination to free all beings, not just human beings from the sufferings caused by delusion. Feeling ourselves to be separate, we add to our own suffering and the world's. War, class division, and destructive climate change result. Yet, in reality, says Dogen all beings, us included, not only have but, *are* Self-Nature. So, animals, trees, rivers, grasses, mountains, insects all join in the Great Vow. This is not simply kindness; it is wisdom. Without insects, there is no pollination. Without pollination, plant life withers and we all die. Without healthy rivers we're up the creek. And so on. We save each other. The vow is mutual.

To release all beings from the separation we ourselves put on them, as well as to help others get free of the causes and effects of dualistic egocentrism is an immense challenge. It is our first bodhisattva vow—"The many beings are numberless, I vow to free them all." Secondly, we understand that we accomplish the realization of our initial

vow by being responsible to a practice of not attaching to the greed, hatred, and ignorance, arising within our own minds. Eventually we see that our habitual, unconscious attachment to the idea of a permanent, separate, inner self is a provisional, not Absolute truth. What is it really, this self that sees colors with the eyes, hears sounds with the ears? As we free ourselves from our delusive dualism we regain intimacy with all things. As we free ourselves, we simultaneously free others and our planet from the damaging effects of our own wrong thinking. Saving others starts in small ways. This is all summed up in the second of our Great Vows For All: "Greed, hatred and ignorance rise endlessly; I vow to abandon them all." Thirdly, we vow to see the circumstances of our life as Dharma gates, opportunities through which we can, by touching base with our vast and groundless Nature, mature further. It also means we vow to fulfill the terms of our formal practice. Each count, each breath, each koan is a Dharma gate. And so, "Dharma gates are countless, I vow to wake to them all." Fourth, we vow to embody the unattainable way of the Buddha, that is, to follow the selfless Path that leads to fulfillment. This Way is unattainable because, in reality, it already is us. You cannot enter a room you never left, cannot attain a Way that is already intrinsically your own being. Our fourth Great Vow is: "Buddha's Way is unattainable: I vow to embody it all."

Zen teaching makes it clear that if we mean to fulfill our deepest goals and realize our vows of awakened life, it will take effort and perseverance. We will have to practice. The good news is that with the growing dedication, insight, and determination that arises from ongoing practice, such goals can, to one degree or another, be realized. Habitual self-centeredness, the false, separated, dualistic sense of ourselves as flawed and alone in a world we never made, as Roshi Kapleau used to put it, is a kind of delusion, or sickness. The sickness can be healed. Our original nature and the nature of all beings can be brought into consciousness. We don't need to add a thing to what is. Rather, we just need to let go of what is not. Koan # 87 *Hekigan roku* – "Yun Men's Medicine and Sickness Cure Each Other" states: "Yun Men (Ummon) said to his disciples, 'Medicine and sickness cure each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is your Self?' "

The experience of the realization of selfless intimacy with all things or, maybe, better put, with this breath, this koan point, this buzz of a fly, this "Caw!" of the crow is kensho in Japanese – which simply means seeing Self-Nature. These days it is usually more a glimpse than a clear steady viewing. Yet this glimpse is significant, shallow though it may initially be. For it is the beginning of an endless path of ongoing and deepening practice/realization. In time our self-conscious efforts give way to more relaxed and less self-willed practice. We guide, balance, and steer, but are no longer bent over the bars, red-faced, gasping for breath, pedaling furiously uphill for all we're worth. Classical Buddhist texts say that there are fifty stages to a bodhisattva's evolution. There might as well be a million. Our job, regardless of numbers, is to begin anew with *each* round of zazen, with *each* breath. Our job is to practice Now. And so to

touch the ground right where we are.

It's said in Buddhist tradition that advanced bodhisattva-mahasattvas, ("maha" means great, and sattva "being"), that is, greatly realized, greatly functioning bodhisattvas, those who are far ahead of us on the Path, and have been doing this work for lifetimes, are now so skillful they can appear in any form to bring aid where and whenever needed. One such Great Wisdom being is Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Prajna or non-dual wisdom. He sits in the zendo with us and shows the way of practice/realization by swinging the sword of full attention that cuts through delusions, especially through the core delusion of "me in here, everyone and everything else out there." From his left shoulder rises the lotus of fulfilled mind on which rests the book or scroll of Prajna Paramita – perfect Wisdom. When Manjusri's delusion-cutting sword swings, the selfless non-dual wisdom that has always been here is revealed. This sword kills even as it gives life. Killing self-centered delusion gives life to selfless wisdom. Sometimes Manjusri sits at ease on a lion. Its thunderous roar wipes the mind clear and kills delusions. Its nobility and vitality overwhelm self-centered opposition. Manjusri has been at it so long he was teacher, it is said, to the last seven Buddhas. Long ago, he was already a Buddha, but gave it up to actively lend a hand to beginners like us and help all beings enter the Way.

Avalokitesvara, another central Bodhisattva Mahasattva, is known as Kwan-yin in China, Kannon in Japan, Chenresig in Tibet. Her aim, in all her various forms, is to embody pure compassion and save all beings from suffering. Sometimes he or she is shown with 1,000 hands able to reach into any realm and bring exactly the right kind of aid. This is an astonishingly tactile image of the mind and aspiration of a bodhisattva. Avaloktesvara gained this power, the Surangama Sutra reveals, when, practicing under the guidance of the Buddha, he focused on the enquiry, "Who is hearing Sounds?" With great liberation, Avalokitesvara became the One Who Hears the Cries of the World, the Greatly Compassionate One.

Samantabhadhra, or Fugen in Japanese, Bodhisattva of Compassionate Action is another exemplar of the Path. Mounted on an elephant she makes her unstoppable way through the twists and turns of life, bringing the light of compassionate action into every dark corner. In some zendos the two central bodhisattvas are Manjusri on the lion and Samantabhadra or Fugen as he is known in Japan, on the elephant. I say "his" only provisionally. There is a Japanese Buddhist legend drawn from a sutra and turned into a folkloric story of Fugen taking the form of a dancing girl or courtesan in order to awaken men. Bodhisattva-mahasattvas are not defined by gender.

Advanced Bodhisattvas can appear it is said, not simply as I've described them, but in whatever form is needed. It is their art form, their play to come forth and lend a hand. Ennin, a Japanese Buddhist monk traveling in T'ang era China, reported that when he went to Mt. Wutai, sacred to the Bodhisattva Manjusri, he found that pilgrims there

were kind to even the lowliest sorts of animals. They'd see a donkey and whisper, "That could be Manjusri! He might have taken this form!" And so they would treat it with the utmost respect and reverence, just in case. In this way, whether they realized it or not, they brought the real Manjusri of their own minds forth. Wisdom is exactly compassion.

Advanced bodhisattvas, Buddhist tradition says, who can take any form to help, might surprise us with actions that look like anything but help. The storm that grounds our plane and upsets our plans could be a bodhisattva doing his or her job. Perhaps the delay saves us from who knows what. Or a bodhisattva could be the one dialing that ringing phone which, when we pick it up, has no one on the line. Here's a true story. A young woman with a child on her hip stepped from the kitchen into the living room to answer the phone. "Hello?" she said. But there was no one on the line. *How irritating!* Suddenly she heard a loud, *BOOM!* The pressure cooker on the stove hadn't been properly closed and with great, pent up force the lid exploded to the ceiling, spraying the room with boiling sauce. She and the child were saved from injury or death. The Wrong-Number-Phone-Call-Bodhisattva had dialed her up just in time.

However, we can't depend on miraculous salvations. It would be silly to go around claiming, "Oh, that rude person who cut me off on the highway, making me miss my intended exit was a bodhisattva!" Or "That bee sting that put me in the hospital was really a bodhisattva in disguise." It's not an article of belief we need cling to. Roshi Kapleau used to say all we really need to know to practice Zen is the recognition that impermanence is real, and not simply a statement in a Buddhist book. *And* that Shakyamuni didn't lie and wasn't a fool when after six years of dedicated effort he exclaimed, "Wonder of wonders! All beings are Buddhas, fully endowed with wisdom and compassion." If he wasn't a fool and he wasn't lying, what then did he mean?

If we accept that he wasn't a fool or a liar, then, in time, we will ask ourselves, indeed, we will be driven to ask ourselves, "If I'm a Buddha, then, where is *my* wisdom, my Insight, *my* compassion, my own sense of peace? Why don't I see it, feel it, know it? Why don't I live from it, abide in it?" And then we must ask after that, "What can I do to bring about a realization in my own small way, of what the Buddha himself – not a god but a human being like me – experienced and then taught, 2500 years ago?" There's the grit under our shell that can produce a pearl.

Ultimately, to know who bodhisattvas are, we need to know who we ourselves are. What IS this self? Where IS this self? Can we find it? Where is it located? Who sees colors with the eyes, hears sounds with the ears? We may point to our heads or hearts and say "within" – but where is that? And is that self within, male or female, old or young, wise or foolish? Not turning away but looking directly into this, our freedom from anxiety, unease, and distress begins to open.

Huike, the second Ancestor of Zen in China was sorely troubled. He stood in the deep

snow before Bodhidharma's cave begging him for help. "I have no peace of mind. Please help me!" he cried out in anguish. Bodhidharma didn't point to a text for Huike to read. He didn't say, "Don't worry. It'll be all right. You have this nature. Be at peace, my son." Instead, like a skilled Dharma thief he said – "Bring me your troubled mind and I'll give it peace." With that answer (and with Huike's work on it) he stole Huike's confusion and pain away. When preconceptions and illusions are gone, something beyond our habitual, self-oriented dreaming can appear. Bodhidharma, seen by Zen tradition as a manifestation of Avalokitesvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion actualizes this truth. This is his bodhisattva work. In the extremity of darkness, a light may shine. Huike, though he sought and sought, could not find his own troubled mind to present it to Bodhidharma. Defeated, he confessed his failure. "I have searched and searched yet I cannot find it!" "There!" said Bodhidharma, striking when the iron was hot. "I've pacified your mind for you." Through Bodhidharma's insight and the skill arising from it, Huike came to realization. Here is where actual Zen begins; direct pointing without reliance on a specific text.

Eventually we all walk the road seeking peace. Eventually we all come face-to-face with seemingly unanswerable questions: "Where is my mind? What is my mind? Who am I? Why was I born? Why am I here? Why must I die?"

We think we know so much. We have many fixed views and beliefs. "This is true. This isn't true. This is a fact. This isn't a fact. Science has proved this, but it hasn't proved that. God is real. God isn't real. I'm a Buddhist. I'm not a Buddhist. Bodhidharma was a shaven-headed old guy who lived 1,500 years ago and brought Zen to China from India. Bodhidharma was the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvra. Or he wasn't. I have a soul. I don't have a soul." Round and round we go, and yet, what we don't know is who or what we really are. We don't know the thinker of our own thoughts!

But are there really bodhisattvas who can take any form, and appear in any guise to help, beings whose whole purpose and joy is to help as naturally as you and I might reach back for a pillow in the night? Kobayashi Issa wrote a now famous haiku after the death of his young daughter:

This dewdrop world,
is just a dewdrop world.
And yet . . . and yet.

Ours is a dewdrop world, fragile and temporary, and yet . . . and yet, its difficulties and griefs can stun us with the solidity and force of a sledgehammer wielded by a maniac. There are tragedies we can never explain or understand. There are Killing Fields and Holocausts, earthquakes, collapsing bridges, and sinking ships. We can't escape the pain of not knowing why terrible things happen by slipping on rose-colored glasses. Clinging to beliefs, even such good beliefs as belief in great bodhisattvas, can distort our

ability to *See*. There is a Zen saying – “Even gold dust in the eyes can blind.” There is something better than the gold of lofty belief. It is genuine seeing, genuine intimacy. For that we must take a step beyond *all* belief to what IS. Focusing again and again on the count, the breath, the koan, the compulsive need to repeat and continually recreate the same old inner narrative fades. We are freed by our own unremitting efforts to awake from a limiting, and ultimately destructive dream.

Zazen is our way of actualizing this. It is not simply a way of calming ourselves down. When we are filled with anxiety, peace is important. Yet, despite this, we needn't go searching for bodhisattvas to save us. What we need to do is discover who bodhisattvas are and where they are, by knowing who and where we are.

To return to where we began – are bodhisattvas really real? Here's another true story and a personal one. Back in 1970, when Rose was pregnant with our son, Jacob, we were living in an old farmhouse in backwoods Pennsylvania, south of Binghamton. One day we drove into town – Rose had a dentist appointment – and while she was busy, I took off in our old VW bus to handle errands. I chanced on a gas station where sat two old gents in overalls. They also sold used cars. As I gassed up, we talked. I mentioned the upcoming birth. They looked at me. Then they looked at the VW – an old, unpadded, un-insulated, rattling, bare metal cargo plane of a van.

“You have a child coming?” they mused. (In their voices I now heard echoes of Foghorn Leghorn's, “Son, I say . . . son.”) For, “Well, now,” they said, “why don't you take a look at this GMC truck? Step right over here.”

It was blue, solid, gleaming. Everything about it, from the massive emergency brake, to the rows of thickly padded, removable, bench-type seats proclaimed, ‘Industrial Strength.’

“Take a drive,” they said. I got in and drove away. Such a smooth, solid ride! I had visions of plowing with ease up the hill to the old farmhouse through deep winter snows – a risky, bouncing, pedal-to-the-metal feat in our bus. I had visions of nomadic family security.

“How much?” I asked, heart in my mouth, when I returned, flushed with truck-power, with dreams and hope. They named a ridiculously low sum, plus the wretched old bus. We shook hands all around. It was a bargain.

I picked up Rose, spilled the good news, and we headed happily home. I drove back the next day, check in my shirt pocket. About five blocks from their gas station/car lot, there was a sudden, loud *Bang!* It came from the engine in the rear. The old VW staggered as if shot, then kept on rolling, though now in a halting, shuddering, groaning, wheezing sort of way. We limped up to the pump. I stopped and mercifully

killed the engine, which gave out a final long drawn-out, lamenting gasp before it died. Except for the ticking of overheated metal there was only silence, an awful silence. I sat on the peeling leather seat waiting for the smoke to clear. From the haze of my mind rose a helpless, anguished refrain: "Up the creek without a paddle. No truck, not even the old van now. Cash low, baby coming."

The two elderly gents had watched my stricken, labored approach. They rose from their chairs and stepped forward. "Well," they said, "you brought the bus. Do you have the check?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. You'll still take it?" I asked, incredulous.

"A deal's a deal," they answered.

"You don't want more money?" I asked in a daze.

"Nope," said the bodhisattvas.

Feverishly I pulled the crumpled check from my pocket, signed it, and handed it over before they could change their minds. We finished up the paperwork and again shook hands all around. Then I drove off in that heavenly blue (blue the color of Bhaisiyaguru Buddha, the Buddha of Healing, Yakushi in Japanese), GMC truck, which not long after I drove serenely and safely and reliably down twisting mountain roads in a heavy fog in the middle of the night so Jake could be born with one push in the local hospital of Susquehanna, PA.

Eight weeks after that we loaded all our possessions into our big blue truck and moved to Rochester. The truck was later named 'the Rafemobile' by the Zen Center, which acquired it from us a year later. They got many further years of sturdy yeoman's service from it. It ran and ran as if it possessed a good stout heart under its huge blue hood, and not the mere mechanical assemblage of an engine. It ran as if blessed.

Thinking back I've sometimes wondered what I'd have found if I'd gone back to that used car lot and gas station – an empty field, wind rippling through long grasses? No cars, flags, banners, pumps, no old gents in overalls? Maybe all, "gone gone entirely gone" as the Prajna Paramita Sutra says. Vast emptiness, yet, like Mind itself filled with endless potential.

Are bodhisattvas really real? At an appropriate point in our practice a Zen teacher may ask, "What is the age of Kannon?" Or he or she may challenge us with the question, "Where does Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom now live?" As we continue on with our practice, sometimes clearer, sometimes duller we begin to be able to offer answers that may both surprise and delight us. At the same time, they remind us of how much work

we have yet to do, how far there is to go. Great bodhisattvas may be all around us. Regardless, our job remains to embody our own bodhisattva vows, minor as they may presently be and, each day, do our best to make them that much more real.

That great ongoing effort always begins intimately again from the very beginning, actualized with this very breath, this very count, this very vast and timeless MU. MU. MU.