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**Bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra**

The notion of bodhisattva arose at the beginning of this millennium, during the period when Buddhism spread beyond Indian borders and started conquering new territories. The six centuries that had passed from the times of the parinirvana of Buddha Shakyamuni were marked with events in the life of Buddha's teaching. First, his disciples had split, and this process was taking on an increasingly definite character; the followers of different orientations went apart not only ideologically, but territorially as well. Having drifted so far apart they confirmed their ideological differences, making them a law. Second, and most important, is that Buddha's teaching had by that time been written down by his disciples. The Buddhist canon had made its appearance, which had brought together and classified all the lessons and sermons by the teacher and all his instructions. The Tipitaka came into being, which literally means three baskets; they include vinaya-pitaka, or disciplinary regulations for members of monastic communities, sutta pitaka, or collection of texts covering the Buddhist doctrine issues, and abhidharma pitaka, or collection of texts covering the philosophy of the teaching. I am only mentioning these well-known things because they have a direct bearing upon the subject we are going to take up today.

Thus by the time Buddhism had spread over a large territory and started to advance to the North and East-to Central Asia, China and Tibet, it was already armed with a canon that was fixed in writing. This canon was called `sravakayana or the chariot for the `sravakas, i.e. the disciples who adhered to the teaching, the literal meaning of `sravakas being those listening. Let us first dwell upon this title. The ideal aim that `sravakayana was promoting the arhatship. An arhat, literally meaning the one deserving, enjoying the rights, was a hermit observing all Buddha's instructions, who had gone through all stages of consecration in the Buddhist community, who had then left it and perpetrated some feats befitting a hermit, cut off all his worldly affections, acquired a number of supernatural abilities and prepared himself for the Enlightenment. However, he was striving to achieve Enlightenment for himself only, wherein lay the disadvantages of the way laid out by `sravakayana. This is why in the first century A.D. it got the name of Hinayana-the small vehicle (Theravada).

The arhatship could not attract any considerable number of the new followers of the teaching. First of all, this way was too time-consuming. The main landmarks on this way was the karma, which was a manifestation of a whole series of reincarnations. Second, the image of an arhat, a hermit, was not as attractive as to make the masses of householders want to follow it-while it was the latter that Buddhism was trying to allure as its followers. This is when the bodhisattva image made its appearance, which played a major role in attracting new followers of the teaching. The prototype for this image was Buddha Shakyamuni himself. The numerous stories of his former rebirths-the Jataka Tales, as well as the texts describing the life of Shakyamuni himself, provided a lot of material for creating the image of a man who helps the others in this life, which contributed to his progress towards self-improvement and finally reaching the Enlightenment. After that he could lapse into nibbana, but he does not, remaining among the people and helping them. Such charitable man was introduced into the teaching under the name of bodhisattva. In terms of his position and role played the bodhisattva is an exact antipode to the arhat. He lives among the people and for them, helping out not only the followers of the teaching, but those who are in the beginning of their way and are experiencing difficulties. Bodhisattva's activities attract broad masses to Buddha's teaching, who are thus acquiring support in their lives. This new powerful influx of followers marks the advance of the teaching beyond Indian borders. At the same time, it is a new stage in the development of the teaching proper, that has enriched it with many new ideas. Starting from this period we can single out a new trend in Buddhism as an all-encompassing ethical, religious and philosophical tendency. It got the name of Mahayana, or the great vehicle, as distinct from `sravakayana, which remained under the name of Hinayana, or the small vehicle.

The early Mahayana sutras, whose existence can be reliable proved by the existence of the Sanskrit manuscripts, contain the description of ideal bodhisattvas and their moral code. These sutras include, first and foremost, the Lotus Sutra.

The ideal bodhisattva is described in chapter 14 of the Lotus Sutra, which is called Sukhavihara-parivartah in Sanskrit, meaning chapter on ideal state or in Chinese texts as Peaceful Practices. In this chapter Buddha addresses his disciples saying that in case the worst times come and belief wanes he is entrusting the bodhisattvas of the future his biggest treasure - the Lotus Sutra, so that they can go on preaching the teaching. The bodhisattvas will only be able to preach this sutra if they observe four sets of rules in their way of life, that are necessary for any bodhisattva. What are these rules?

The first set of rules concerns bodhisattva's behaviour and his contacts. In his behaviour a bodhisattva must be purposeful and persistent, noble, generous and tolerant; he should not be cruel and self-conscious, and he should only act after the true meaning of things is obvious to him.

Further, what contacts shall a bodhisattva refrain from? In this discussion we find interesting details that testify of the early origin of the sutra and the democratic nature the teaching had at the time when it was first put down in writing. First of all, a bodhisattva should not have any close relations with rulers, princes, ministers of high rank and heads of administration. All other restrictions concern the contacts which can compromise a bodhisattva, for instance, those with representatives of other religions, with heretic sects, with people involved in risky entertaining, actors, boxers, hunting and fishing-fans and, finally, executioners. He must be also careful in communications with monks and nuns who ask irrelevant questions and try to engage the bodhisattva in a discussion or argument. If a bodhisattva comes into any home asking for alms, he must concentrate on the lessons taught by Buddha and refrain from engaging in settling everyday problems. Such is the first group of rules concerned with the behaviour of a bodhisattva - a preacher of the Lotus Sutra.

Before passing over to the second set of rules obligatory for a bodhisattva it seems necessary to make an important comment that might shed light on the Lotus Sutra as one of the early ones and on the origins of the `sunyata doctrine - a term that is commonly taken to mean emptiness in the Buddhist studies.

In the Lotus Sutra, where the notion of `sunyata is linked to bodhisattva's state, we can clearly observe the original interpretation of this term, that is, its direct connection with meditation, or contemplation.

The ability to plunge into deep contemplation is a necessary quality that each bodhisattva must possess. How should he practice contemplation? Having concentrated on a specific object the bodhisattva first registers in his mind that it is motionless and does not move in space. The next stage is when the bodhisattva observes the outlines of the object, its contours disappear. Then he sees its colour disappear, its specific features that are usually perceived with one's sensory organs. Finally, in place of the object there is a sort of an emptiness. The bodhisattva is completely cut off from the reality. In order to return to it he must concentrate on the idea that everything in this world is the result of cause-and-effect relationship and comes into being only due to the rise of causes and the resultant consequences. While restoring, step by step, the external and internal features of the object which is being contemplated, the bodhisattva returns into the world of reality. This is one of the earliest, if not the earliest, attempts to explain the term emptiness. Further on this term is given a philosophical foundation and becomes a touch-stone which can identify the text as belonging to a specific school of thought.

The second set of qualities that the ideal bodhisattva has to possess according to the Lotus Sutra is the ability to plunge into contemplation.

The third and the fourth set refer, once again, to the morale of the bodhisattva - the preacher of the Lotus Sutra.

The third set is concerned with bodhisattva's great tolerance. He should not rejoice when detecting mistakes in the speeches and manuscripts of other preachers, and he should not condemn them in public. If ever he comes across any monks or nuns, or even lay men who want to proceed in bodhisattva's wake he should not dissuade them, telling them about the difficulties they would en-counter on their way, and he should not plant the seeds of doubt in their souls. In case there are some disciples among the bodhisattva's followers who display special interest towards the dharma, they should not be in any way singled out and get more teaching than the rest. It is necessary to treat all live creatures with equal compassion. The Buddhas should be treated as one's own father, and the bodhisattvas of all four world quarters worshipped and respected.

Based on these qualities the obligatory rules of the fourth set are formed: in case there are some people in the audience who neither believe or understand what is being said, the bodhisattva must treat them with compassion and promise to direct these people on the way to true dharma after he has achieved Enlightenment.

If the bodhisattva observes all the rules he will not make any mistakes and will be preaching the Lotus Sutra among people. "It is impossible to enumerate all the lands, one cannot run his eyes over them or list their names, where the Lotus Sutra should not be read and taught, where it would not be received with understanding."

In the Lotus Sutra Mahayana is called bodhisattvayana or bodhisattva's vehicle.

According to Maharatnakuta sutra, in order to reach Enlightenment a bodhisattva has to acquire a number of qualities, which are grouped into two sets. The first is punya-sambhaara, or the group of merits, which includes six paramitas or six of perfection. The first two - dana, or generosity, and `sila, or morality, contribute to reaching the other two, ksanti, or intellectual receptivity, and virya, or persistence, efficiency of continuous moral effort. The four paramitas were prerequisites for reaching the two final ones- dhyana (jhana), or perfect meditation, and prajna paramita, the superior excellence resulting in differentiating comprehension.

The second set of necessary qualities is jnana sambhara, or the knowledge group. It is aimed at penetrating `sunyata, or emptiness. The comprehension of `sunyata is only possible through prajna. The meaning of this term as given in the dictionary is wisdom, while its philosophical meaning, intellectual comprehension, differentiating comprehension, that results jnana or absolute intuitive knowledge.

The teaching about the two types of qualities necessary to acquire Enlightenment, i.e. of two sambharas, was further developed in the works by Nagarjuna and other later sutras.

The essence of an ideal or true bodhisattva in the Maharatnakuta sutra and in Nagarjuna's works can be represented in the form of the following seven components, or Bodhi sambhara:

* He has command of the four superior psychic states
* He has command of the five kinds of knowledge beyond all boundaries
* He possesses all qualities necessary for reaching the jnana -the absolute intuitive knowledge
* He directs all the live creatures on the way to liberation, regardless of how good or bad they are, and never leaves them
* He has learned the ways and techniques to convince his audience. a quality the Lotus Sutra describes as Expedient Means;
* Everything that he has said or promised is immediately brought into life
* He is continuously accumulating good merits.

The ability to meditate is considered as one of the major bodhisattva's qualities. Success in meditation is achieved due to the four qualities which are called unmeasurable benevolence (maitri), compassion (karuna), sympathy, joy at seeing the well-being of live creatures and composure.

It was to bodhisattvas that Buddha bequeathed his greatest treasure-the Lotus Sutra. Bodhisattvas should spread it in all the worlds, all the lands and all the corners of the universe. Those who are studying and spreading the sutra today are fulfilling Buddha's behest.

 One more lesson. The history of the teaching shows that bodhisattva's image attracted a lot of followers to Mahayana. However, broad masses always crave for a miracle and demand instant help. To satisfy the public Mahayana had to create a pompous ritual of bodhisattva worship. Temple officials and Buddhist clergy often used the profits from the influx of believers to their own advantage. Moreover, it was bodhisattva's image that ultimately became a prototype for the Vajrayana-type deities. It happened to be in some Buddhist schools of China especially. The purity of an ideal bodhisattva who had covered a hard way came to be lost in the vajrayana. The very voicing of the incantations was to bring immediate help. This trend in Buddhism deviated quite considerably from its sources, from the teaching about an ideal bodhisattva as a symbol of pure behaviour and profound comprehension of the world. That is why those who still keep believing in the help of an ideal bodhisattva are the closest to the lessons taught by Buddha in the Lotus Sutra.