

## **The bodhisattva in the Mahayana Buddhism.**

The only purpose of the teaching of Buddha is to propose a model of accomplishment of the human being. It is a transmission of a person – the person of the Buddha – the human being fully realized.

The central figure of Buddhism is the bodhisattva. That means “the one who is brave enough to walk on the way of the Bodhi, namely the awakening or the way of the awakened being. This way is for the ones who are really awakened to the reality of whom they are and of the world, and not blinded by their illusions and projections.

Given the evidence that Buddhism is not just a philosophy outside of ourselves, we can say that Buddhism consists de facto in the life of the bodhisattva. He dedicates his life to the salvation of all human beings.

Zen is part of Buddhism, but his main practice resides in doing zazen. It is an immediate practice to see our own reality, devoid of ego, linked consequently to all beings as the shadow created by our own opinions vanishes naturally during this practice. It is a way of abandoning oneself directly.

One can then say that a full Buddhism practice is embedded in zazen, which is a direct approach of the absolute dimension of the vacuity of everything, and in the life of the bodhisattva that is a relative approach.

The two go together. Zazen is propitious to the non-attachment by the practice of awakening, and all the actions of the bodhisattva in his everyday life come as a verification, an actualization of his awakening coming from his regular practice of samadhi.

In the zen lineages, the career of the bodhisattva is not talked about as much as the practice and merits of zazen. But we will see that the everyday practice of the bodhisattva is inherent to the way of zen also. They are like the two sides of the same sheet of paper, dedicated to the transformation of our mind and of the one of everybody. Both practices are transcendental as they go well beyond us only.

I will then try to touch upon what is called the career of the bodhisattva.

## **The three vehicles.**

Buddhism actually recognizes three vehicles, but at the end there is only one. We can recognize inside us these three visions of approaching our awakening to the ultimate reality:

- a) The vehicle of the auditors, called the sravakas. This is for the people who can reach a static nirvana by listening to others. Their goal, for themselves, is to become arhats, to be able to live, or to escape, in a permanent nirvana, a state of peace actually somehow disconnected from everyone's life.

- b) The vehicle of the Buddha's for themselves, called the pratyekabuddhas. These people progress on the way to their awakening by their own efforts. They will also become arhats, staying in a static nirvana.
- c) The vehicle of the bodhisattvas. They devote themselves to the wellness of others, and do not disappear in a static nirvana, a permanent peace for themselves. Their awakening, or nirvana, is dynamic and they always go back to the samsara to help everyone, constantly.

The highest way is the one of the bodhisattva. His career is long and will take all his life.

### **The two kinds of bodhisattvas.**

By observing the people and the practitioners that we know, and also by observing ourselves, we can recognize that there are two kinds of bodhisattvas. We should also see with modesty that these two approaches cohabit in us.

- a) Bodhisattva of an immediate intelligence. These are the people who are out of hand motivated by a great compassion. For them being a bodhisattva is obvious in their life and they do not worry about their own awakening, but in their mind they always and immediately, unconsciously, dedicate themselves to the awakening of others. Of course they still have to progress in eliminating or understanding all the shadows that obscure their mind.
- b) Bodhisattva of a gradual intelligence. These have reached a state very close to the status of arhat after a long practice. At that time only they are ready to pronounce the vows of the bodhisattvas.

We see that in the different approaches of the zen practitioners, some take years before they decide to take the ordination of bodhisattva along with the vows and the precepts and for others it is a more immediate and obvious process.

Both ways are respectful and ourselves often we navigate in our life with both.

And there are also the bodhisattva's mahasattvas, the great bodhisattvas as Manjusri, Kannon, Sariputra and many others. These are the ones who have reached the ultimate awakening at the same time of wisdom and compassion. For us that would be an infinite process as the beings are infinite as well as attachments and dharmas, the phenomenons.

Immediate and gradual knowledge cohabite inside us.

## **The basis, the way, the fruit.**

Most religions or spiritual schools can be represented by such partition: the foundation, the way or practice, and the fruit.

### The foundation.

The foundation explains and details the fundamental reality of things, and in this case the reality of the bodhicitta. There are two realities of bodhicitta: the absolute one and the relative one.

The absolute bodhicitta is actually the perfect awakening, of the vacuity and Buddha's nature. It is necessary as it is the source of the relative bodhicitta. The realization of the vacuity is the condition for the manifestation of an authentic compassion, unlimited and equal for all, compassion without personal attachment.

Normally we start by studying the relative bodhicitta that is more approachable for everyone.

When we talk about bodaishin, we actually mean a bodhicitta of aspiring to unlimited motivations like unlimited love, unlimited compassion, unlimited joy, and unlimited equanimity for all beings. That is this motivation which brings us to practice the way of the Buddha, to come to a zen dojo to experiment with our entire being, body and mind, something we feel inside.

But in the relative bodhicitta (awakening mind) there is also the implementation of it, the direct application of the compassion. So bodaishin is not only the ardent desire to reach the awakening but is also, it comprises also – and that should be well understood – the actions. We have the aspiration; we should set out ourselves to follow the absolute reality that we discovered, by the practice of the paramitas that are also called the transcendent virtues. They are called transcendent as they bring universal values and merits to everyone, not only for us but also for humankind.

The first four ones are directed to actions in the world:

- The generosity – dana
- The discipline or ethics – sila
- The patience – ksanti
- The enthusiastic effort or energy – virya

These are transcendent and become paramitas when the action is devoid of any real existence of one self. They are turned toward the awakening of everyone.

For example in the Diamond Sutra: *“So, Subhuti, if a bodhisattva does not attach himself to any concept when he practices the generosity, the resulting merits of this virtuous action will be as great as the space. They could not be measured.”*

The two others are more directed to the inner self even if directed to all:

- The transcendent concentration – dyana or zazen

- The transcendent knowledge or wisdom – prajna.

This last one, the 6<sup>th</sup> one actually participates to the absolute bodhicitta. The first five can be accumulated, wisdom no. Wisdom illuminate the other paramitas and acts as a bridge between the absolute and relative in doing so.

It would then be a great error for a bodhisattva to believe that outside of zazen he could behave as he wishes, missing ethics, patience, effort and concentration as well as generosity, the 1<sup>st</sup> paramita. It is the first as it is linked to abandon in the moment his ego by giving everything we have.

The four unlimited aspirations as well as the practice of the paramitas in the everyday of life of a bodhisattva is an essential part of the way of Buddha and of course of the way of zen consequently.

#### The way or the practice.

From then, we are on our way. This journey is made reachable by taking the bodhisattva vows. Everyone, lay people as well, can take these vows.

The way of Buddha consists in a double accumulation, a double goal:

- Wisdom and realization of the vacuity of everything – prajna
- Merits for all – paramitas

So taking the vows is the mark of the entrance, the door to the Mahayana Buddhism, with the double goal:

- Reach the awakening of Buddha
- Infinite compassion for all beings

The vows concern:

- Universal compassion: “Beings are innumerable, I engage myself to deliver them all.”
- Discipline of the bodhisattva: “Passions are innumerable, I engage myself to cut them all.”
- Wisdom: “The dharmas are innumerable, I engage myself to know them all.”
- Reach the goal: “The unsurpassable awakening – namely be a Buddha – I engage myself to realize it.”

So the four vows are the unification of omniscience and compassion, so they really are at the center of the bodhicitta.

In his career then the bodhisattva will practice the paramitas, will put his vows in action, accumulating the merits for all with wisdom. He will start by taking his vows, will continue his efforts, reach a direct vision of vacuity, purify more and more the shadows of his mind up to the point where “there is nothing more to learn.” And become a samyakusambuddha, perfect awakening.

As we saw, this awakening is dynamic so, not to abandon the suffering human beings, he will continue in the samsara to help everyone.

In order to preserve, cultivate and develop his bodhicitta, the bodhisattva is guided by precepts. These are the ten precepts intended for not conducting non-virtuous actions, like not to kill. There are also advices to gather virtuous actions, like developing the three wisdoms: study, reflexing, meditation, or be happy of the quality of others. And also precepts concerning the help to give to the others, like protecting them from fear, comfort them, rescue the poor's and serve them along their needs.

All the actions of a bodhisattva will become effective in reaching the awakening if his motivation is the right one: help all human beings. For that he acts in the frame of the three noble principles that are:

- Altruistic motivation
- Vision of the vacuity, so there is no attachment in his actions
- Sharing of all merits with all human beings

With these three noble principles the bodhisattva combine all aspects of the practice of a bodhisattva. For a bodhisattva, the zen practice – zazen – is integrated in all of these.

### **Zen and zazen: Dogen on the bodhisattva.**

The zen is a school of Buddhism; it is also and entirely the way of the buddhadharma. But its approach is different and it puts its main emphasis on the practice of zazen. However as we will see, Dogen himself (who said eyes horizontal, nose vertical, only) insists also upon the good practice and upon the necessity of the bodhicitta and of the moral attitude.

One could say that zazen is related to the absolute and the work and merits of the bodhisattva are relative, being illuminated by such absolute.

The essential of zen resides in the direct experience by zazen of the awakening as described in the Mahayana. It goes directly to the essential:

*“A special transmission outside the scriptures, no dependence on words, penetrate directly the heart, the mind of the human being and contemplate his own nature and realize Buddha.”* Bodhidharma.

It is a sudden approach of vacuity where the thoughts do not entail consciousness.

For Dogen this practice is in itself the awakening. It is not a practice directed to drive people to the awakening, but is simply the sudden awakening of Buddha itself. So is the importance of zazen, reach the absolute spontaneously during its practice.

That may unfortunately drive some uneducated practitioners to believe that, if zazen were the most important, anything else would be not important. This wrong

interpretation generally conducts to undermine the question of good ethics and good behavior, leading to arrogance and disregard to anyone not sharing the same certainty or vision. They could even say that zen is not Buddhism, forgetting that all is the buddhadharma.

In a chapter of the Shobogenzo “Bodhisattva Shishoko” Dogen emphasizes the necessity of the bodhicitta and of the good practices of the bodhisattva.

The three trainings are important:

- Sila: the discipline or ethics
- Samadhi: meditation
- Prajna: wisdom, superior knowledge

The three trainings are called the trisiksa and are also the basis of the practice of the bodhisattva. So a bodhisattva should aim to master: flexibility of the mind, intelligence or wisdom, skill in the means that he uses, along with the practice of sudden enlightenment with zazen.

### **The fruit**

The fruit of the practice of the bodhisattva is a result of the double accumulation of:

- Wisdom and
- Merits

which is the double omniscience, the knowledge of all phenomenon's in their thusness, vacuity and of all phenomenon's in their features, namely their details and characters. That can be expressed by obtaining the three bodies of a Buddha. That allows a Buddha not to stay in a static nirvana and to light up all his actions with a universal meaning, beyond his personal life. These three bodies are not separated and are actually only one, with three modalities of a unique body of awakening. The three are:

- The body of the outcome of wisdom – dharmakaya
- The two bodies of the outcome of the merits – rupakaya

This scheme allows connecting the absolute world of the dharma with our reality of every day, the vacuity with the living forms namely the human beings. So the dharma is linked to our lives and not stays as a static nirvana disconnected from the acting Buddha's and from the bodhisattvas. All this is not an exterior teaching, a mental construction having nothing to do with ourselves but at the contrary describes how we can as the same time perceive the vacuity of all things and recognize the suffering of the beings lost in their illusions who wander in the samsara. At the same time the Buddha is not more involved in the world because of his non-attachment but his great compassion allows him to intervene in it in order to relieve the pain of those who are

drowning in the samsara. That is the special character of a non-static, dynamic, nirvana of the Buddha's in the Mahayana context.

It is then expressed by the trikaya, the three bodies of a Buddha.

The dharmakaya is the absolute body; it is the state of a Buddha in his natural purity. This body has no form and represents the dimension of the vacuity, inconceivable and unspeakable. This nature is the same for all Buddha's. But the dharmakaya alone does not allow a Buddha to act in the world. For that he will need two other bodies related to the forms, to the actual world with all its living beings. This dynamic manifestation, due to his great compassion, of the dharmakaya results in two bodies that form the rupakaya, the body of a Buddha taking a form. These are:

- The sambodakaya that is not directly noticeable for the ordinary human beings. It is the body of the perfect fullness of the realization of the awakening. It will then grant all qualities of the awakening to the other human beings. This body is pure form. In order for him to appear in the human world, an additional body is created whose goal is to help all the ordinary beings in the samsara, to help them to reach also the perfect awakening.
- This body is called the nirmanakaya. With him a Buddha will manifest himself in the world. One of these manifestations is the Buddha Shakyamuni.

These three bodies, actually one with his manifestations, permit us to make a junction between the dharma and our lives, between a perfect Buddha and the acting bodhisattvas in the world. Again from that is established the universal and transcendental nature of all the actions of a bodhisattva, well beyond his only person or his personnel behavior. These actions of a nirmanakaya are consequently pure and do not create any karma, so are then the actions of a bodhisattva.

We could compare the trikaya with our practice. The dimension of zazen, silent, goes with the dharmakaya. Effectively zazen cannot be expressed by words, it is an unspeakable experience of abandoning the body and mind, leaving us in a state of vacuity.

But we do not stay all the time in zazen. From our wisdom and the vision of the world developed by this practice, we go back to the normal world and act as bodhisattvas in our everyday life. As the dharmakaya generate by compassion the rupakaya, so zazen will give the incentive to act by compassion also in the world of samsara.

We can then see more clearly that zazen – Buddha – dharmakaya and actions in the samsara – bodhisattva – rupakaya, express the same process, the same manifestation, expressed only in a different language.

As the dharmakaya creates bodies of manifestation, the rupakaya, we can say in a zen context that zazen will create a body of manifestation, the bodhisattva. That is why in fact zazen and the career of the bodhisattva are totally linked and are both essential to our practice.

We also talk about the three treasures or the three jewels, Dharma, Buddha, Sangha. These three are related to the three bodies of a Buddha. Of course the dharmakaya, the body of reality is “situated”, if we can say, in the dimension of the Dharma. The Buddha is the perfect apparition of the awakening; it is the body also of the teaching that passes all qualities of an awakened being. It is to be compared to the sambodakaya.

Without the sangha the two others treasures could not manifest them. The sangha is then related to the nirmanakaya. It is the living form of the buddhadharma or dharmakaya, sambodakaya. As these two manifest themselves in everyone, everyone forms the sangha. As the three bodies of a Buddha cannot be separated, the same is valid for the three treasures: Dharma, Buddha and Sangha cannot be separated but form also finally a unique body of awakening.

So we have the correspondence:

- Dharma is the absolute reality
- Dharmakaya is the body of the absolute reality, body of a Buddha
  
- Buddha is the awakened being
- Sambodakaya is the body of the awakening
  
- ❖ Sangha is the congregation of all awakening people
- ❖ Nirmanakaya is the body of awakening manifested in the world of forms.

## Conclusion

What actually did we learn from this survey, not exhaustive, of the figure of the bodhisattva in the Mahayana?

First the bodhisattva is the central figure in Buddhism. His existence, vows, practice and unlimited compassion make him an acting Buddha, a human being realizing the awakening to the reality of himself and of the world, everyday of his life. Etienne Mokusho Zeisler was saying: “Please pass in front of me.” The bodhisattva direction in life is to help, to save all beings from the suffering in the samsara that ultimately is in their mind. He makes no difference between samsara and nirvana because the samsara is the world. The dimension, when he takes action, of each of them is inspired not by a worldly intention but by his dynamic nirvana.

We can also understand better the ultimate connection between zazen and the practice of the bodhisattva.

Dogen and Deshimaru have essentially based all their teaching on the importance of zazen and its unlimited, cosmic scope.

The great bodhisattvas as Manjusri and Kannon are the expression of the sambodakaya when the acting bodhisattva is the manifestation in our world of the



trikaya. Without zazen and the acting compassion of the living bodhisattvas the bodies of a Buddha would not exist.

In relative terms, namely in here and now terms, everything is connected and forms a unity from the source to the application in the world of the living beings: everything is practice for us, zazen, bodhisattva, sangha; everything is the way of the Buddha's

In summary one can say that all practitioners follow the way of the Buddha's. The bodhisattvas carry on their shoulders, for the benefit of everyone and their awakening, the way of the Buddha's and actualize it each day with their practice of meditation and compassion enlightened by their wisdom.

**Reference:**

Philippe Cornu, avec la collaboration de Louise Bressollette, Manuel de bouddhisme, Philosophie, pratique et histoire, Tome II, Bouddhisme Mahayana, Editions Rangdröl, ISBN 978-0-244-47014-2.