

The Bodhisattva Ideal: Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism

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Chapter 4

ALTRUISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

THERE IS A CERTAIN POETRY to the idea that Bodhisattvas are concerned not with their own Enlightenment, but with the Enlightenment of other people. However, we shouldn't get so carried away with the beauty of the ideal that we start to distort it. This is really the effect of the image often conjured up in the popular imagination of the Bodhisattva seeing, as it were, the gates of nirvāṇa shining afar off, and saying, 'No! I am not going to pass through those gates alone. I want to help others to get there first.'¹⁰⁷

This image of transcendental chivalry does not do justice to the Bodhisattva ideal. Nor does the image found in popular pseudo-traditional Buddhist art of the Bodhisattva wringing his hands in ineffectual despair or gazing down with a sentimental smile over the sorrows of the world. It is not easy to find true images of the beauty and poetry of the ideal; an image that does express something of it is the sublime figure of the Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi, one of the paintings at Ajaṅta in India.¹⁰⁸

As well as making the Bodhisattva into the perfect gentleman, or a particularly sentimental kind of social worker, some accounts of Mahāyāna Buddhism make a misleadingly blunt contrast between the Bodhisattva and the Arhant, the Enlightened individual of the Theravāda tradition. The Arhant is said to be concerned only with his or her own emancipation, and the Arhant ideal is therefore said to be selfish, while, by contrast, the Bodhisattva ideal is said to be unselfish.

Of course, the Buddha himself attained nirvāṇa – there doesn't seem to have been any question of *his* postponing it – and the Mahāyāna had somehow to find a justification for this. In the *White Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha – the Buddha of the Mahāyāna, of course – is represented as saying that his parinirvāṇa is only a skilful means, not literally a parinirvāṇa as the Theravāda would understand it.¹⁰⁹ Some schools of thought

maintain that what we think of as a Bodhisattva is that aspect of a Buddha which at the time of his 'parinirvāṇa' does *not* enter into supreme Enlightenment. It is said that the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara functions in this way in the 'interregnum' between the disappearance of Śākyamuni and the appearance of Maitreya, the future Buddha. Not that a separate or distinct personality appears on the scene: what remains in the form of Avalokiteśvara is that aspect of the personality (to use an un-Buddhistic term) of Śākyamuni Buddha which does not disappear into parinirvāṇa. If nothing else, such considerations suggest that one can't discuss the whole subject too literally.

This, anyway, is the Mahāyānists' way of explaining the fact that the Buddha went ahead and gained Enlightenment. Their explanation does not impute to him the kind of selfishness of which they accuse the Arhants. To understand the emphasis on altruism of the Mahāyāna, we need to bear in mind its origins. By the time the conception of the Bodhisattva ideal was fully worked out, the act of Going for Refuge had lost its central position in Buddhist spiritual life to the act of becoming a monk.¹¹⁰ The Mahāyāna to some extent was a movement or reaction against that, and the Mahāyānists therefore stressed the altruistic aspect of the spiritual life. But instead of reinstating Going for Refuge to its central position and simply emphasizing its altruistic dimension, they formulated what amounted to an entirely new ideal. Not ultimately new, because it did echo the spirit of the Buddha's original teaching, but certainly new as a way of looking at the spiritual life. The Bodhisattva ideal, together with the concept of the arising of the bodhicitta, the practice of the pāramitās, and the formulation of the vows, was at least partly intended to stress the importance of the altruistic aspect of the spiritual life, a sense of which had been lost by many people within the Buddhist movement.

In his *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, D.T. Suzuki says:

The Bodhisattvas never become tired of working for universal salvation, nor do they despair because of the long time required to accomplish this momentous object. To try to attain enlightenment in the shortest possible period and to be self-sufficient without paying attention to the welfare of the masses, is not the teaching of Mahāyānism.¹¹¹

Neither, of course, is it the teaching of the Therāvada. In the Pāli scriptures the Buddha is represented as recommending his disciples to go off and teach 'for the happiness and

welfare of many people'.¹¹² Indeed, in Theravāda sources even *paccekabuddhas*, that is, Buddhas who make no attempt to teach, are said to practise the *brahma-vihāras*, which include the cultivation of compassion.¹¹³ So that idea is there, preserved in Theravāda tradition, but it is not stressed or given intellectual justification as in the Mahāyāna.

It all hinges on the question of compassion. The Arhant ideal is considered by its detractors to exclude the idea of compassion, but it is impossible to imagine Enlightenment in the true sense as being without compassion. Surely – although this goes against the Abhidharma teaching within the Theravāda tradition – any kind of Enlightenment experience must have a compassionate dimension.

Perhaps the real question is whether or not there is any discernible practical difference arising out of the Mahāyāna's exclusive claim to an altruistic motivation. Theravāda Buddhists are not noticeably less kind and helpful and friendly than Mahāyānists. If there is a difference between the traditions in this respect, perhaps one could say that there is in Mahāyāna teaching a sort of spiritual glow or warmth which is not there in the Theravāda. In the Theravāda the kindness and friendliness is more on the human level, as it were – and very welcome it is too. But with Tibetan Buddhism, to take just one example of a Mahāyāna-inspired tradition, one gets the impression of a more definitely spiritual, even transcendental, kindness and compassion. It's the difference, one could say, between *mettā*, loving-kindness, which is wonderful, and the *bodhicitta*, which is still more wonderful.

It might be said that Theravāda practitioners are inclined to present their teaching in a formal way, insisting on the correct ways of doing things, while true Mahāyānists will just try to help as and when the opportunity offers, without standing on their dignity. I remember a nun I used to know telling me about a time she was staying in a Japanese temple in India. She needed to catch a train and had a very heavy suitcase, so a monk from the temple went with her to the station to carry her case. As they approached the station, the train came in and they were obviously in danger of missing it. So the Japanese monk – who was the head of the temple – just put the case on his head and *ran*. And my friend caught her train. That is the Mahāyāna spirit, one could say. It would have been an unusual Theravāda bhikkhu who would have done that. Well, he wouldn't have carried her case in the first place. He would have wished her well and helped her, but only to the extent that his dignity as a bhikkhu was not compromised. A

Mahāyānist might stand on ceremony in that way too, of course, but anyone with the true spirit of the Mahāyāna would never do so.

None of this is to say that we ourselves, in our own unenlightened state, are in any position to look down on the Arhant. If Arhantship is lower than supreme Buddhahood, it is so only in the sense that Mount Kanchenjunga is lower than Mount Everest. Indeed, the attainment of Stream Entry, which is really the first decisive step towards Arhantship, is the most worthwhile goal for a spiritually committed person to aim for in this life. And however lofty, it is an *achievable* goal – achievable within this lifetime.

In some of its more popular formulations the Mahāyāna sometimes lost sight of the *self*-regarding aspect of the spiritual life, appearing to suggest that one could help others without having paid attention to one's own spiritual development. The Bodhisattva didn't exactly become a Buddhist social worker, but there was sometimes a great deal of emphasis on what the Bodhisattva did for others, and very little mention of what he was doing for himself by way of personal spiritual practice.

This, at least, was the Theravāda response. Followers of the Arhant ideal have always said, in effect, that charity begins at home. To want to help others to gain Enlightenment while not having gained it oneself, they say, is like trying to pull others out of a ditch when one is in the ditch oneself. In other words, it's impossible. First one must get out oneself, then one can help others to get out too.

It seems not always to have been remembered that the altruistic aspect of the spiritual life is not meant to displace the self-regarding aspect, or even alternate with it. The idea is not that one follows the Arhant path, from time to time taking a break for altruistic activities, nor that one follows the Bodhisattva path, occasionally taking time out to brush up on one's meditation and personal development. One does one's best to integrate these two aspects all the time, because one sees that there is one path, with a self-regarding and an other-regarding aspect, each a counterpart of the other.

The Bodhisattva ideal doesn't represent altruism as opposed to individualism, or saving others as opposed to saving oneself. As we have already seen, it synthesizes opposites: helping others and also helping oneself, compassion and wisdom. And

altruism and individualism are synthesized in particular through the practice of the first two of the six perfections: *dāna* and *śīla*, or generosity and uprightness.

The tension – the clash, even – between regard for others and regard for self, is not, of course, confined to the spiritual life; it occurs at every level of human existence. We exist as individuals, but we also exist as members of society – that is, in relation to other individuals. We have our own needs – material needs for food, clothing, warmth, and shelter, psychological needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs – and obviously we have to consider these. But others too have their needs, needs of the same kind as our own, which we also have to consider, because we have to live with other people, live in society. And it often happens that our own needs conflict with those of other people; this can happen both in the wider life of the community and in our personal life.

Altruism is not simply the spirit of co-operation. A famous anarchist called Peter Kropotkin, in a book called *Mutual Aid*, which was intended as a sort of counterblast to the pseudo-Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest, maintained that mutual aid between human beings was necessary to survival and that it therefore played a crucial part in the evolutionary process.¹¹⁴ Given that our very survival has always been contingent upon a certain amount of mutual aid, one cannot think of humans as being unmitigated individualists.

But one can co-operate with other human beings in one's own interests without necessarily having altruistic feelings towards them. If we accept Kropotkin's point of view, those groups of humans or proto-humans that didn't engage in mutual aid just didn't survive, so that tendency has been present in human nature for a very long time, but altruism is another matter altogether. Co-operation is essentially self-regarding, but altruism is concerned with the good of others.

Furthermore, even though mutual aid may have played its part in the survival of the human race, one cannot speak of altruism as part of human nature in the same way. It has to be learned. This is a psychological statement, not a metaphysical one. It may be that deep down in human nature there is a Buddha-nature which is fully endowed with altruism. But leaving aside metaphysical questions and taking human beings as we find them, altruism goes against the grain of human nature and definitely needs to be learned, sometimes rather painfully.

After all, how genuinely altruistic are we? When we do something for others, isn't our action usually tainted with subtle self-interest of some kind? Is it ever possible to be sure that we have done something out of pure altruism? Sometimes it is clear that someone else has acted in this way. It is generally considered that the most altruistic thing anyone can possibly do is to give their life for another. Unless one is hoping for fame after death, a reward in heaven, or something like that, there is nothing in it for oneself. But all too often altruism is tainted with more self-interested factors.

In *The Precious Garland*, Nagarjuna says:

*Intention endowed with desire is a wish
To help others motivated by desire.*¹¹⁵

'Desire' here suggests that one is getting something out of helping others which one is not acknowledging – basically an egoistic satisfaction. Maybe one enjoys being known as someone who helps others, or feeling superior to those one helps. One identifies with being the helper, the person everyone looks up to, the person who hands out good advice. It is rare to have a completely disinterested wish, an utterly pure motivation, to help others. There is almost always something in it for oneself, even if it is something intangible like the accumulation of merit or the promise of a reward in heaven.

Obviously, this does not mean that one should not do anything for other people until such time as one's motivation is completely pure. One has to do what one can to help others and at the same time try to transform one's motivation for doing it. If one acts mindfully, that in itself will help one to purify one's motives.

Is it possible to develop altruism without having some notion of a spiritual life? It seems unlikely; but some people seem able to live very ethical lives despite having no explicit beliefs or principles. Indeed, some have been able to sacrifice their very lives for others on the basis of no metaphysical underpinning whatsoever.

This was the kind of idea people had of the Buddha when he first became known in the West. In those days it was believed that ethics depended on religion, and religion of course depended on God. T.W Rhys Davids, one of the Buddha's early Western admirers, said of him, 'none so Godless and none so Godlike'. To Rhys Davids and

others it was a great paradox that someone who didn't believe in God should exhibit so many spiritual qualities.

The Buddha, of course, had a very definite, albeit non-theistic, idea of the spiritual life. By contrast, some people seem able to lead a spiritual life by sheer instinct, guided by no philosophy of any kind. They don't read their Bible, they are not interested in Buddhism, they don't consider themselves to be religious, but they seem to possess an innate goodness. Such people are rare, though, and one should certainly hesitate to number oneself among them.

It is their circumstances that stop many people from engaging in altruistic activity. To put it in what might appear to be cynical terms, one has to be able to afford to be altruistic. If one is struggling to survive, if one doesn't know where one's next meal is coming from, it is hard to be very altruistically inclined. It is true that altruism involves giving not just money or material things, but time, energy, and interest. If one is preoccupied with one's very survival, though, one just won't be able to do that. Having said that, those who have least are sometimes the most generous; and conversely, one is not necessarily the soul of generosity just because one has resources at one's disposal.

For all of us, true altruism includes taking care of oneself. It's a very good thing to put oneself into meeting the needs of the objective situation. It's a good thing to think of other people and forget about oneself for a while. But it is important not to neglect one's own needs – important not just for one's own sake, but also for the sake of others. If one doesn't keep oneself rested and in good condition, one isn't going to be able to do much for other people. If one allows oneself to get worn out, perhaps one's so-called altruism is a little blind. Sometimes the needs of the objective situation may mean that one has to put some strain on oneself, but one should do that only with awareness of what one is doing and a conviction that in the long run that kind of effort will be justified. One may find oneself caught up in an emergency, in a situation where people's lives are in danger; it is natural to choose not to spare oneself in such circumstances. But in general it makes sense to keep oneself in good condition so that one can be of greater and more effective service to other people.

This is easy to say; in practice it can be difficult to be sure when one is going to overstep the mark. One learns from experience what one can and should do, and what one cannot and should not do. It is important not to be precious about oneself, but equally important not to disregard one's own health and safety, even in the name of altruism.

It is quite dangerous, in a way, to think of undertaking some responsibility while having a feeling that it isn't going to be very good for one's spiritual development. Even if one is unwilling to begin with, one should be able to take on that responsibility in such a way that it is also a means to one's personal spiritual development. If one can do this, it shows that one has succeeded in unifying these two aspects of the path – altruism expressed through taking responsibility and the 'individualism' of personal spiritual practice; and this unification is necessary if one is to follow the path at all.

Work can be seen as a great Tantric guru, a great spiritual teacher. It seems generally true that people tend to grow more spiritually through doing things which at first they don't want to do than through doing what they feel like doing. Often we tend to think that if we very much want to do something, it must be good for our development. But it is important to distinguish carefully between what we *need* to do for the sake of our personal development and what we *want* to do. The long-term aim is to make no distinction between doing something as a response to the needs of the objective situation and doing something for the sake of one's own development. It should genuinely be both at the same time.

The tension between self and other which, one could say, produces the arising of the bodhicitta is typical of the process of development all along the line. This is rather similar to the dialectical movement in Hegel's philosophy, in which the thesis is opposed or contradicted by the antithesis. Both are valid, so one can't get rid of either – an uncomfortable position to be in, but one which one can't escape. And after a while there's a breakthrough. One rises, so to speak, to a higher point of view, from which one can see that both the thesis and the antithesis have their own validity; at this stage they can be integrated into a higher position, the synthesis.

It's much the same in the spiritual life. At a relatively lower level, one inevitably experiences certain contradictions. That painful experience forces one to rise not just

to a higher point of view but to a higher level of experience altogether, a level at which the contradictions are no longer contradictory. The arising of the bodhicitta is like that. Whenever there is a breakthrough from one level of spiritual experience to another, it is generally the result of some painful dilemma, some problem that can't be resolved intellectually. This is exemplified above all in the Zen koan, a paradoxical self-contradictory situation which one can only resolve by rising to a level of experience or perception where the contradiction no longer exists.

The Bodhisattva is a living contradiction, a living union of opposites at the highest possible level, in that he or she represents a synthesis of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra. This synthesis cannot be expressed conceptually. As long as we think in conceptual terms there will always be a contradiction, and any attempt to resolve that contradiction conceptually will give rise to a further concept with its own opposite, so that a further synthesis becomes necessary. The synthesis of concepts can only come about in the life of the individual for whom those concepts have meaning. Life, in other words, transcends logic.

So the Bodhisattva is the synthesis of the contradictions inherent in the path: the contradiction between dāna and śīla, and even the contradictions apparently inherent in the so-called goal, such as those between wisdom and compassion, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. We should be careful, though, not to make the Bodhisattva into a concept; then the concept of the Bodhisattva would be opposed to the concept of the Arhant, and a further concept – or another spiritual ideal – would be required to unite them.

Until we ourselves are able to reach the point of synthesis, these contradictions tend to present themselves to us in the form of various existential dilemmas. Usually our (unconscious) strategy is to be aware of one side of the dilemma and suppress the other, but sooner or later we are going to be compelled to take both sides into consideration at once; only then can the dilemma be resolved. Of course, life and death present us with the ultimate dilemma. Wanting life, fearing death, we try to hang on to the one and shut our eyes to the other. But sooner or later we are forced to confront death, either our own or somebody else's. We can only solve the problem of life if we are prepared to face the problem of death – indeed, to see life and death as two sides of the same coin.

Similarly, we can only solve our own problems by taking those of other people into account. In other words, the practice of *śīla* must always be accompanied by the practice of *dāna*. *Dāna* – literally giving or generosity – is the practical, altruistic aspect of the Bodhisattva’s life and activity, and the first of the six *pāramitās*, the six perfections or transcendental virtues.

Dāna is right at the top of the list of perfections for a very good reason, which is that our natural tendency is not to give, but to take. If any new proposition comes up, whether in connection with work or home, professional activity, sport, or entertainment, our usual reaction, at least half-consciously, is ‘What’s in it for me?’ There is always this self-referential tendency, this grasping. The fact that it is put right at the hub of the Wheel of Life is a recognition of the fact that craving – not just ordinary healthy desire, but craving – occupies a very important place in our life and activity. In fact it dominates our life, at least unconsciously. We are all in the grip of craving, swept along, impelled, by this thirst. Everything we do, everything we are interested in, has an element of self-reference.

If we are to get anywhere near Enlightenment, we have to reverse this tendency. Giving is the first *pāramitā* because giving is the direct opposite of grasping. It’s as if the teaching is saying, ‘You may not be morally scrupulous. You may not be able to meditate even for five minutes at a time. You may not dip into the scriptures from one year to the next. But if you aspire to lead any sort of higher life, then at the very least you will give.’ If you find it difficult to part with things, difficult to look to the needs of others, you aren’t going to get very far, spiritually speaking. On the other hand, if you are even a little bit open-handed, then whatever else you may be, there is some hope for you, from a spiritual point of view. This is the message of the Mahāyāna.

It isn’t just a question of handing over one’s possessions. Generosity is above all an attitude of heart and mind, indeed, of one’s whole being. Walt Whitman says, ‘When I give, I give myself,’¹¹⁶ and this is very much the Bodhisattva’s attitude. To forget about traditional definitions for a moment, perhaps we could simply define a Bodhisattva as someone who gives themselves all the time, to everybody.

The Buddhist scriptures have a great deal to say on the topic of *dāna*, and it is also a popular theme for discourses in the East. The scriptures consider it under a number of

different headings, as they tend to do with any subject, dividing and subdividing and sub-subdividing their material. Sometimes one can get a bit lost in it all, but this systematic approach is quite helpful for serious study. Here I want to follow that tradition – remembering at the same time that our concern is with the spirit of giving, not just the technical details. The scriptures usually deal with *dāna* under the headings of: (1) to whom a gift is given, (2) what is given, (3) how it is given, and (4) why it is given.¹¹⁷

First, to whom should a gift be given? In principle, all living beings whatsoever are the objects of the Bodhisattva's generosity, and it is important to uphold this ideal, even though in practice very few people are ever in the position of being able to benefit the entire human race. Being more specific, the scriptures mention three classes of recipients to whom the Bodhisattva should pay particular attention. First of all, the Bodhisattva should give to his or her own friends and relations. It's no use being kind and friendly to strangers while being a difficult, awkward, uncomfortable, or even cruel person to live with. Charity really does begin at home. But it doesn't, or shouldn't, end there. In the *mettā bhāvanā* meditation, one starts by developing a feeling of loving-kindness towards oneself. Then one moves on to extend that feeling wider and wider, to all the people present in the room, then all the people inhabiting the town, the country, the continent, the planet, eventually the whole universe. One extends *mettā* not only to human beings but to all living beings whatsoever. Similarly, generosity should begin on our own doorstep, but then we should try to extend it as widely as we possibly can.

The second class of people who are especially recipients of the Bodhisattva's generosity are the poor, the sick, the afflicted, and the helpless – and among the helpless, tradition includes all animals. And thirdly, the Bodhisattva is exhorted to give to those who are leading a full-time religious life. Buddhism traditionally considers it the duty of society to support all those who are engaged in any kind of higher spiritual activity: nuns, lamas, spiritual teachers, and so on. But ideally this principle could be extended to include those engaged in any kind of creative work that expresses higher values – painters, musicians, writers. At the same time, the kind of ideal society that would take on such a duty would make no attempt to coerce either the religious person or the artist into conforming to its own ideas and ideals. The (at least implied) condition of support from the community is generally that the person being supported

should, in return, support the *status quo*. But from a Buddhist point of view this is to misunderstand entirely the nature and meaning of the spiritual and creative life. The support should be freely given, with no conditions attached.

Secondly, what is given, or what can be given? Potentially, whatever can be possessed can be given away. But to assist us further, there is a sixfold classification of the things that can be given as *dāna*. The list starts with the basics: food, clothing, and shelter.

In Eastern Buddhist countries, as in most traditional societies, generosity and hospitality are normal features of everyday life. People make a practice of giving something every day, just to stay in the habit of it. We are taking something every day, if only air and food; so why not give something every day? Buddhist families tend to keep a look out for a beggar or a monk to whom they can give food, or a poor person to whom they can give a few coins or a few spoonfuls of rice. The gift may be small, but at least they are keeping the habit of giving, so that generosity is part of the fabric of their everyday existence. There is a constant giving to counterbalance the constant taking that comes only too naturally.

The second thing that can be given is more psychological, and may perhaps be surprising: the gift of fearlessness. Many people are worried and anxious, strained and tense, never at ease – so this gift is very precious. Here, ‘giving’ is not to be taken too literally. Fearlessness is not so much given as sparked off. This goes for any positive, skilful quality that one has developed oneself, whether it is friendliness, *mettā*, courage, energy, inspiration, or fearlessness. What one possesses oneself, one can give – or spark off – in others. (And by the same token there’s no point in thinking that one can encourage or inspire someone if one doesn’t have that courage or inspiration oneself.) But why does the Buddhist tradition especially mention the giving of fearlessness?

There is not much discussion of this point in traditional sources. One might think that it was especially important at the time of the Buddha, when people faced many more immediate threats and uncertainties than we do today. But the fear of death, disease, and the loss of near and dear ones is universal; and even today people justly fear attack by wild beasts, floods, earthquakes, famine, fire, robbers and muggers, injustice and corruption. In the Buddha’s day people were in some ways less protected from all these things than we are today. On the other hand, we ourselves are living with the great fear

associated with the nuclear age, a fear such as has never existed before in human history. Perhaps in the modern and post-modern era there is greater need than ever before for freedom from fear.

A friend of mine in Kalimpong, a great Russian Tibetologist, once returned from a visit to America and described his experience of arriving there. Apparently he was just getting off the boat when he paused and thought, 'That's strange. There's a peculiar atmosphere, like a sort of fog – something clinging and clammy. What on earth is it?' He was a very sensitive person. He thought, 'It isn't anything physical – it isn't smoke from factory chimneys or car exhaust fumes. What is it, this grey, heavy, clinging atmosphere?' And then it struck him that this was fear – fear exuding from this vast continent.

When a whole nation is living under the influence of fear, there is a kind of psychic poison in the atmosphere, like an oppressive cloud over the land, a dark pall, in Keats' phrase, hanging over our spirits.¹¹⁸ The sense of worry and insecurity is one of the defining features of our age, aptly called the age of anxiety. And in the midst of this cloud, this darkness at noonday, people live and work and try to breathe. People have little confidence in one another, little confidence in life itself, and certainly little confidence in themselves.

The lack of authentic self-confidence that one observes in many people today is often the result (so psychologists' studies suggest) of some strong emotion which they don't want to experience, but which keeps trying to come to the surface. Half conscious of it lurking somewhere underneath, one does one's best to stop it from coming into consciousness; and if one senses it coming up, one experiences the uneasy sensation we call anxiety. Like any form of fear, anxiety is an unskilful emotion, and one to be resolved. To do this, one has to acknowledge and confront the underlying emotion, whatever it may be. Here one may need one's spiritual friends for help in identifying whatever it is that is threatening to emerge into consciousness, and for reassurance that one can deal with it, that in a sense there is nothing to be afraid of. Once confronted, these emotions lose their power, and some of them even turn out to be positive. But whether they are positive or negative, the energy invested in them needs to be integrated into one's conscious life and personality.

Those who practise meditation will know that from time to time an experience of deep fear comes up. At first it may be something coming from one's childhood, or even earlier, but a stage may come – for some people at least – when a more basic, primordial fear arises: not fear of anything in particular, but a fear that goes right down to the depths of one's being, the roots of existence. This fear, too, one has to face and overcome.

In the Mahāyāna sūtras the Bodhisattva is represented as giving not only fearlessness but self-confidence, encouragement, and inspiration. In *The Precious Garland*, Nāgārjuna says:

*Just as farmers are gladdened
When a great rain-cloud gathers,
So one who gladdens embodied beings
When he encounters them is good.*¹¹⁹

The reference is to the coming of the Indian monsoon. If the monsoon is even a few days late it means a bad harvest, so farmers watch anxiously for its coming and rejoice when it comes at the right time. It is continually emphasized in Buddhism, especially in the Mahāyāna, that one should make people happy: not in a frivolous way, but by arousing genuine joy, which means helping them overcome their fears and anxieties. If one enjoys creating fear in others, that suggests a desire for power over them, but if one wants simply to make them happy, that suggests the opposite: that one is giving oneself to them instead of trying to control them for one's own purposes. The Bodhisattva, being joyful, spreads confidence and happiness wherever he or she goes. In a sense it is one's duty to be happy and joyful. One can't gladden others unless one is glad oneself.

The effect of one's positivity and inspiration can be far-reaching. In *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Gampopa quotes the *Varmavyūhanirdeśa-sūtra*:

*A Bodhisattva puts on armour
In order to gather all beings around him.
Since beings are infinite*

*So is his armour.*¹²⁰

The Bodhisattva's 'armour' is motivation, and the idea that he 'gathers all beings around him' suggests that he is at the centre of a mandala, gathering people around him in what Buddhists call a sangha, a spiritual community. In this way one can think of the spiritual community as a mandala, with the Buddha or the Bodhisattva at the centre.

So the Bodhisattva has a harmonious, creative effect. Here is this mass of human beings, all fighting and quarrelling, trying to subdue one another, trying to amass wealth. The Bodhisattva comes among them and gradually transforms the chaos into a cosmos, the confusion into a beautiful mandala, society into the spiritual community. It's as though as soon as one decides that one is aiming to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of others, a sort of vibration is set up, and the people in one's immediate environment form a kind of mandala around one.

This happens in a small way when one organizes, say, a retreat. Lots of people turn up, with all sorts of different ideas and expectations, and all sorts of temperaments. Simply by setting the programme for the retreat, one acts as an integrating and harmonizing factor. Indeed, if one is intent on leading the spiritual life, one will have at least something of this kind of harmonizing, creative influence wherever one is, at home, at work, or on holiday. Of course, all sorts of other factors and forces are going to have their effect too, and they may counteract one's influence, but nonetheless it is there.

We will be going on to consider the spiritual community as a hierarchy in [Chapter 7](#). Here I will just observe that one can think of that hierarchy, and one's own place in it, in the form of a mandala, whether one is a guardian of the gates of the mandala, an offering deity within it, or performing some other function, according to whatever myth one may be aiming to fulfil in one's life, as long as one is making a spiritual effort, one will have a place in the mandala.

The third gift that the Bodhisattva aspires to give is education and culture. Wherever Buddhism went in Asia it influenced not just religious life but art, science, knowledge of all kinds. In fact, there is no real distinction to be made between religion and culture:

through the arts and sciences, the heart and the mind are refined, to become more closely attuned to spiritual realities.

The effect of the encounter of Buddhism with Western culture has yet to be seen, but at present there is still a considerable gap between the two. Many of the greatest works of art in Western culture give direct expression to Christian values at least in that they depict Biblical scenes or incidents from the life of Christ. One is frequently moved by the beauty of the form while being disturbed by the content, particularly when it comes to depictions of scenes of extreme violence. Conversely, when we turn to traditional Buddhist works, while we may be inspired and deeply affected by their content, the form in which they are expressed may seem quite alien to us, so we may not be able to respond fully. Both Western art and the Buddhist tradition nourish us, but until the Dharma is given expression in our own culture in forms as sublime as those found in previous Western traditions, our responses will necessarily be ambivalent and in a certain sense unintegrated.

But one can find within Western culture works of art which are ostensibly Christian but to which one can still respond wholeheartedly. One can only turn away from a blood-stained crucifixion in horror, but there are many paintings in Western Christian art from which, even as a Buddhist, one can obtain nourishment. For instance, depictions of the Annunciation don't have to give rise to the theological issue of the virgin birth. If one just looks at the painting, what does one see? On one side is a beautiful angelic figure with wings, holding a lily in his hand, and on the other, a young woman half-bowing before him in a respectful attitude. Between the two figures there are sometimes rays of light and a dove. One's response to the picture need not be limited to the episode from the Gospels it is illustrating; one can see it as an archetypal image of receptivity on the part of the human soul to some higher influence, a messenger from some other realm. Or take the painting of Tobias and the Angel from the studio of Verrocchio. Of all the people who have looked at that painting, who has bothered to read the Book of Tobit from which the theme ostensibly derives? But the image itself – the angel leading the boy by the hand and the little dog following – is expressive of spiritual friendship, and can be appreciated as such.

In many cases one suspects that the artist himself, even though he lived in the Renaissance era, wasn't expressing anything particularly religious, but just trying to

please his client, and perhaps himself at the same time. So in practice this isn't the problem that it might seem to be in theory. Very often – for example, in the case of bits of broken Gothic sculpture – one doesn't even know what the figures represent, they are so badly damaged: whether it's Saint Matthew or Saint Mark or Jeremiah the Prophet nobody knows any longer. But it doesn't matter – it's just a magnificent head of an old man with flowing locks, a long beard, and a fierce expression. One can admire it and get something from it without needing to know precisely who it is meant to be.

Conversely, in the Buddhist art of the East there are images which leave one cold because they are badly executed. Not every work of art depicting a Buddhist theme is a masterpiece. But here and there one does find a meaningful image, painting, or woodcarving. It is very much part of Bodhisattva activity to promote the creation and appreciation of works of art, as well as the extension and dissemination of knowledge in other fields of enquiry that lead to the discovery and expression of truth and beauty.

Fourthly, the Bodhisattva may, upon occasions, need to give his or her very life. This form of giving is the subject of many a Jātaka story (the Jātakas being stories about the Buddha's previous lives). Some of these stories may seem lurid, melodramatic, or simply weird. The story of Prince Vessantara, for example, describes the Bodhisattva ('Bodhisattva' in this context referring to the Buddha-to-be) giving away his wife and children.¹²¹ We may be inclined, perhaps thinking of incidents from our own society, to feel upset or even outraged at the very idea. Were his wife and children the property of the Bodhisattva that he should give them away like so many goods and chattels? And, of course, in our society men – and sometimes women – have been known to give up their families not for any noble or altruistic reason, but simply in pursuit of their own happiness.

But the story of Prince Vessantara (which is after all from a cultural context very different from our own) is intended to illustrate how Bodhisattvas may need to give up even those who are naturally nearest and dearest to them. For some, this will seem an even harder sacrifice than that of one's own life – a sacrifice which the Bodhisattva hero of many Jātakas also makes, on one occasion, for example, sacrificing his body to a starving tigress so that she could feed her cubs.¹²²

We are unlikely ever to find ourselves in a situation anything like that, but we should never forget that if we take Buddhism seriously, we may be required under certain circumstances to make great sacrifices for our ideals. In the West at present, if we want to practise Buddhism, nobody can stop us. We can study texts, we can meditate, we can practise dāna, we can perform devotional ceremonies, we can do whatever we like, and we are fortunate that this should be so. But it isn't the case in all parts of the world, even now. We need to recognize how fortunate we are to have religious freedom.

We might even have to be prepared to sacrifice our lives for the sake of our principles. In present circumstances it may be easy enough to go along to a meditation class; but suppose one had to make one's way to it under cover of darkness, watching out for the police or the informer? If one meditated in peril of one's life, or read a book on Buddhism in peril of one's life, or stood up and spoke about the Dharma in peril of one's life – as is the case in some countries in the world today – would one do it? Or would one think, 'Well, I'll be a Buddhist in my next life; it's too difficult in this one'? One just doesn't know. All this is not to suggest that there is any virtue in throwing away one's life in a reckless or showy manner; but we must ask ourselves whether, if the sacrifice was necessary, we would be prepared to make it.

The next aspect of dāna is the giving of merits. The idea that if one does a good deed a certain amount of merit is credited to one's account, as it were, so that over time a balance accumulates, is prominent in the Theravada.¹²³ It's a good idea in that it encourages people to perform skilful actions, but it does tend to foster individualism; one can start to think of the spiritual life in terms of accumulating a personal wealth of merit. I once came across the example of a Jain mendicant who performed austerities for years upon end – I don't think he lay on a bed of nails, but he fasted and led a very hard life indeed – and thereby chalked up a considerable balance of merit. (Apparently there was some unit by which it was measured.) But eventually he decided to give up being a mendicant and return to lay life and set up a business. As it happened, he knew another mendicant who hadn't got so much merit but had some money. So the first mendicant sold his merit to the second, and with the proceeds set himself up in business. This is the sort of thing that can happen when the idea of merit is taken too literally.

But the Māhayāna came along and said, as it were, ‘We can’t have this individualistic nonsense. But at the same time, people are very attached to the idea of merit. They believe in it as a kind of possession, acquired through performing good actions. All right, let’s ask them to give up their merit, or at least to share it.’ In this way the Māhayāna counteracted the individualism of the previous approach. So one shouldn’t hug one’s virtue to oneself as though it were a favourite child on whom one was pinning all one’s hopes. Francis Bacon said that money is like muck, the better for being spread, and one might say the same about merit.

Lastly we come to the gift of the Dharma, the gift of the truth. This is the greatest of all gifts. One can give a person material things, psychological security, education and culture. One can sacrifice one’s life and limbs, or even share one’s precious merit. But the best gift of all is to share the truth that one has understood, perhaps after much effort, pain, and difficulty. This giving of the gift of the teaching, by word, precept, or example, is traditionally the special duty of monks, lamas, and so on. But the Mahāyāna emphasizes that we can all participate in this great responsibility. In fact, we can’t help it. We are giving all the time: something is coming from us, radiating from us, all the time. If one has imbibed anything of Buddhism, one must inevitably express it in one’s dealings with other people.

This doesn’t mean dragging in Buddhism on every possible – or impossible – occasion. One should be careful not to become a heavy-handed Buddhist bore. There’s no need to be like the ardent Roman Catholic in one of G.K Chesterton’s stories who would manage to bring the Church into whatever conversation was started, so that a chat about fishing would inevitably lead to a consideration of the merits of that famous fisherman Saint Peter. One can communicate one’s spiritual sensibility much more subtly and naturally than that.

If one is involved in teaching the Dharma, one should constantly be investigating whether the methods being recommended as means of personal development are actually working for the people to whom one is recommending them. One shouldn’t settle down into a programme of meditation courses, pujas, and lectures and take it for granted that they must be helping people to grow spiritually. One must keep assessing whether the methods being used are having that effect. Nothing should become a matter of course.

When people say they are interested in Buddhism, very often they are not really interested in spiritual development but are seeking something else: solutions to psychological problems, or companionship, or just somewhere to go. On the other hand, some people who declare themselves uninterested in Buddhism might well become interested in what Buddhism really is. A would-be Bodhisattva intent upon giving the Dharma would go out of his way to spend time with such people, even though they are saying, 'No, I'm not interested in Buddhism.' Not everybody who says 'I want Buddhism' really wants it; equally, not everybody who says 'I'm not interested in Buddhism' is really not interested in it. So the giving of this gift requires great sensitivity and discernment.

Having considered what to give, one needs to consider *how* to give. The tradition gives several pieces of advice on this.¹²⁴ First of all, we are told, one should give courteously. I'm afraid that in the East people sometimes break this precept, at least where beggars are concerned; when they see someone begging at the roadside they are apt to fling a coin rather contemptuously. But according to Buddhism, when one gives, whether to a beggar or even an animal, one should give courteously. Then, one should give happily. What's the use of giving something with a frown? That undoes half the effect. Also, one should give promptly. This is no trivial matter: sometimes a person's life depends upon someone else's prompt generosity.

Then, it is important to give without subsequent regret, to feel happy that one has done so, not to agonize about it afterwards, and of course not to *talk* about it afterwards. Some people find it hard to resist letting everyone know exactly how generous they are. Well, not always *exactly*. I remember once I was attending a meeting in South India, in my early days there. Before the meeting someone had sent along a minute sum of money as a contribution. Then in the middle of the proceedings he got up and said loudly to the organizer, 'Did you receive my donation?' By contrast, the spirit of true generosity is very quiet, never drawing attention to itself.

Then, the Mahāyāna sūtras say, give to friend and foe alike. If one's enemy is in need of help, one should give to him or her just as one would to a friend. And, they say, don't discriminate between the so-called good person and the so-called evil-doer when you are giving. Furthermore, we are told, one should give everywhere and at all times

‘observing due proportion’ – that is, giving to people according to their real needs, not their apparent wants.

Having considered what should be given, to whom, and how, we have one last consideration to make: why? Some people are motivated to give – sometimes on a grand scale – to boost their reputation. In India you sometimes get multimillionaires subscribing large sums of money for hospitals and dispensaries – on the understanding that, in return, it will be made abundantly clear, preferably in large letters above the entrance, whose generosity is responsible for the project.

Other people are generous on the basis that they are ‘laying up treasure in heaven’. But according to Buddhism, this isn’t at all a noble idea. The Buddha did teach that if one leads a virtuous life one will reap the rewards of one’s virtue, but one shouldn’t lead a virtuous life with that aim in mind. It is more appropriate to consider that, if there is anything to be gained personally from one’s generosity, it is simply that through generous action one may overcome greed and thereby come a little closer to Enlightenment – not just for one’s own sake but for the sake of all sentient beings.

This question of motive leads us from the subject of ordinary giving, *dāna*, to that of *dāna pāramitā*, the *perfection* of giving. The word *pāramitā* literally means ‘that which conveys to the other shore’ – the other shore being *nirvāṇa*. The tradition speaks of six or ten *pāramitās*, but in a sense there is only one: *prajñā pāramitā* the perfection of wisdom, the direct realization of reality. *Dāna pāramitā* is the practice of giving conjoined with the experience of reality.

For this reason, *dāna pāramitā* is often referred to as *trimaṇḍalapārisuddha* – ‘of a threefold circle of purity’; threefold because in the act of giving there is no idea of self, that ‘I am giving’; no idea of a recipient; and no idea of the act of giving. This is not giving in a state of blankness or unconsciousness – on the contrary, there is perfect, clear awareness – but the giving is natural, spontaneous, inexhaustible. One gives out of the depths of one’s experience of reality, one’s unity with the spirit of compassion in accordance with the needs of sentient beings.

Śīla, the second *pāramitā*, embodies the more self-regarding aspect of the Bodhisattva’s life and is connected with the idea of self-purification. *Śīla* can be

interpreted not just as 'ethical life' but as something like 'immersed in Dharma life', living a healthy lifestyle. The word suggests habitual skilful activity: not the occasional skilful action, but the regular and consistent performance of skilful actions.

'Uprightness' is the more or less literal meaning of the term. It is sometimes translated as 'morality', but for many people this word has unpleasant connotations, being associated with conventional and arguably outworn moral attitudes, especially in the sphere of sexual ethics. Orthodox Christian ideas and ideals, which are not necessarily those of the Gospels themselves, but which are underpinned by the doctrine of original sin, have been responsible for generating such intense feelings of sinfulness and guilt in many people as to ruin their lives. All of us who have been brought up in the West are to some extent influenced by these attitudes. Even those who consciously reject Christianity, whether they be atheist, humanist, agnostic, or indeed Buddhist, are often still deeply influenced by Christian ethical assumptions. As a Buddhist one needs to understand this; otherwise, one will unconsciously carry Christian attitudes into one's Buddhist life, which will result in confusion, especially in the sphere of ethics.

While the old moral order has to some extent broken down, a new one has not yet been established. So far we haven't even cleared the ground. In any case, we can't completely abolish the old moral order and establish a new one from scratch; the two will always overlap.

And we can draw inspiration from the past – not the recent past, but the dim and distant pre-Christian past, the past of pagan times. Today we can look back through 1,500 years of religious history, to the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century, the Methodist revival before that, Puritanism before that, the medieval church, the beginnings of the Church, right back to the introduction of Christianity. But before that, nothing: only an abyss of darkness in which we see hideous shapes vaguely swarming, an abyss from which we have been taught to shrink back in horror, the pre-Christian dark abyss of paganism. We can't feel our own roots deep down in that darkness; we feel no continuity with the past. A site like Stonehenge, that great circle of stones that has stood on Salisbury Plain for 4,000 years, is very impressive; but for us it may be no more than an archaeological monument. We don't necessarily feel any real continuity with the religious and cultural life of the people who put those great stones there.

Usually we are not aware that we have been deprived of this continuity, but we can see it if we compare our situation with that of modern Hindus. They can look back thousands and thousands of years – back to the great saints and reformers of the nineteenth century, the medieval mystics, the early medieval philosophers, back to Buddhism, back to brahminical Hinduism, Vedic Hinduism, the primitive cults before that, back and back – one single uninterrupted process, right back into the dawn of history, the mists of the past. Modern Hindus can feel their continuity with the Vedic rishis living hundreds, even thousands, of years before Christ. This surely is a wonderful feeling, to be able to feel that one's religious roots go so deep, like a flowering plant rooted deep in the earth.

But in any Christian country, one is more like a flower without roots, a flower in a glass of water, even an artificial flower, because continuity with the past, with our own religious past, has been lost. The continuity of Western religious life was disrupted by the advent of Christianity. Wherever Christianity went, first within the Roman Empire and then outside it, paganism was ruthlessly destroyed. Pagan images were smashed, stone circles were damaged, sacred groves were cut down, priests were killed. Virtually nothing of paganism survived in Britain; it was destroyed root and branch. If it survived at all, it did so in somewhat distorted forms, such as what is popularly called witchcraft. Official Christianity no longer includes much that is in any sense pagan or ethnic. Perhaps traces have survived in the churches of the Mediterranean area, in which certain practices are performed in the name of Christianity but are really remnants from earlier pagan times, in the same way that some saints were created by baptizing pagan gods and heroes.

But essentially our own special brand of paganism has been lost; our link with the past has gone. And this link must be restored. People are beginning to recognize that it is important that the old myths and legends, beliefs and practices, should be studied – not just as so much grist for the academic mill, but so that one can feel one's way back into the old myths and legends of our native land. It is important that all of us, including Buddhists, should try to establish contact with our pre-Christian past. Indeed, I have sometimes thought that Buddhism will only become widespread in the West after a revival of paganism. Perhaps Buddhism will have to put down roots in the West before it can start producing flowers.

In what would such a renewed paganism consist? First of all, we need to be careful not to romanticize pagan culture. There were very positive elements in it, elements on which we can draw, but it would be a mistake to paint a glowing picture of a noble paganism, contrasted with a dark picture, say, of medieval Christianity. That would be neither fair nor historically correct. Also, although it would be nice to think that as people freed themselves from unhelpful ethical attitudes their natural straightforward humanity would simply blossom, it would be naïve to suppose that the demise of Christianity would leave us with a pure clean sweet-smelling humanity. The Nazis were pagan in a sense – some of them professed to look to the old pagan gods, and even revived some pagan festivals – but what sort of paganism was that?

In any case, pre-Christian pagans were by no means perfect. One reads truly horrible things about the morals of ancient Rome. Perhaps one shouldn't attach too much importance to the *Satires* of Juvenal – he was making a few points of his own in a rather heavy-handed way – but it certainly wasn't all sweetness and light before the advent of Christianity. Pagan culture wasn't all beautiful Greek statues and people walking around in flowing white garments. Quite dreadful things went on – slavery, for example, and the gladiatorial contests at the Colosseum. In certain respects Christianity was a definite improvement on all that. (And, of course, the Romans themselves were responsible for the near-destruction of Celtic paganism.)

So in contemplating a revival of paganism, I am not thinking of paganism in any specific cultic sense – not Classical paganism or Teutonic paganism – but something more like 'unspoiled human nature' or 'healthy, happy, human nature'. This, though, as far as we are concerned, is something to be cultivated, to be developed. The happy, healthy, human individual, living free and independent of the attitudes of the surrounding society, is a figment of the imagination. One doesn't encounter anybody who has not been conditioned in some way, positively or negatively, by the society in which he or she has been brought up.

In the eighteenth century people liked to speculate about what would happen if you put a child on a desert island and let him grow up by himself. What sort of human being would he become? Well, we will never know, because we cannot bring up a child in that way. The concept of the human individual who has not been conditioned by any sort of

culture is a hypothetical construct. However, one can certainly *become* a happy, healthy human being as a result of spiritual life and training.

Personally I would be happy to see a combination of Celtic paganism and Buddhism – the one for the majority, the other for the minority, and each tolerant towards the other, so that it would be easy to pass from one to another. It was rather like that in the Buddha's time: most people followed the old ethnic cults, but the Buddha was free to recruit followers from their midst.

We can't put the clock back. It is difficult to get away from Christian influences in the West. Some people are brought up without Christianity impinging on them very much, but there is no healthy pagan substitute, no ready-made paganism to make use of as an alternative to the missing ethnic element in Christianity. A truly pagan attitude has not so far developed in our Western post-Christian culture to any degree, although some people would like to think it has.

So how can we bring into our Buddhist life those elements of paganism that are especially helpful? There are two fundamental aspects of paganism, which are especially important to a happy, healthy human life: first, a sense of our connectedness with nature, and second, a more natural morality.

One of the characteristics of paganism is a sense of connectedness with the life of the earth. Official Christianity teaches that the earth was cursed as a result of the fall of man. If you see the earth through Christian spectacles, it has fallen, just as mankind has. The earth is evil because nature is evil, bound up with the devil. This is the orthodox Christian attitude, although it is sometimes left unformulated: everything natural is of the devil. God created the earth good, but it has become corrupt due to man's fall. People may say they don't believe that doctrine any more, but that sort of feeling about nature is still around, as well as the idea that nature is to be exploited, which also derives from the Old Testament.

Paganism, conversely, is a feeling of oneness with nature, a feeling that one is part of nature, and that nature is healthy and good – 'natural', in a word; innocent. And because one is part of it, one is oneself also natural, healthy, and innocent. This is the essence of paganism, and if the study of ancient ethnic religions or pagan mythology

helps one to experience that, it is worth engaging in such study; otherwise, it has little spiritual value.

We could gain a more direct experience through celebrations and rituals. We could celebrate the seasons, for example: we could have a midwinter festival and a spring festival. We might feel self-conscious at first, but we would get used to it: bonfires, dancing round the maypole, all that sort of thing. There is something analogous in the Tibetan tradition, in the form of their New Year festival. Tibetans make a big thing of this. They give it Buddhist colouring, but it definitely comes from their pre-Buddhist pagan roots. For example, horses were very important to the pre-Buddhist nomadic peoples of Tibet, and to this day horse-racing is a big part of the New Year celebration – interpreted as helping to speed the coming of Maitreya, the future Buddha!

The second area in which we could benefit from a revival of paganism is the sphere of morality – which, of course, is our main theme here. A more pagan attitude, dropping the less helpful ethical attitudes of Christianity, should not, of course, mean the complete absence of any ethical code, but a more natural morality, something closer to the realities of human life and experience.

Here we can consider a distinction dating from the earliest days of Buddhism: the distinction between natural morality (Pāli *pakati-sīla*) and conventional morality (*paññatti-sīla*). Natural morality refers to behaviour that is directly related to mental states, while conventional moral behaviour is a matter of custom and tradition, and has no basis in psychology, not being related to a specific mental state. For instance, that one should try not to do things based on a mental state of craving, especially in its more neurotic forms, is a matter of natural morality; but whether one has one spouse or two, or four, is a matter of conventional morality.

Conventional morality also includes matters of etiquette and behaviour such as whether you take off your hat in a holy place or keep it on. There isn't necessarily any connection between whether you are wearing your hat or not and the degree of reverence you feel; it is simply customary in one society or culture to show reverence by keeping one's hat on, while in another culture one shows reverence by taking one's hat off. The feeling of reverence is a matter of natural morality, but how it is shown is a

matter of conventional morality in most cases, although it could be said that there is a psychological connection between certain mental states and certain bodily attitudes.

Within Buddhist tradition there are some precepts, especially precepts to be practised by monks, which have nothing to do with natural morality. That a monk wears yellow robes, shaves his head, and so on is simply a matter of convention. This is clearly recognized in Theravāda tradition, in theory, though often in practice, and certainly as far as public opinion is concerned, very great importance is attached to matters of conventional morality – as much as to even the most important precepts of natural morality – and this is rather unfortunate.

Unfortunately also, sometimes people feel very guilty about not observing matters of conventional morality, especially if the society to which they belong attaches great importance to those matters, virtually as though they were matters of natural morality. For instance, in some societies it is regarded as moral to work, and therefore immoral not to work; so people who don't work in the sense of being gainfully employed are looked down upon, regarded as slightly immoral, even made to feel guilty. Indeed, they themselves may feel guilty, as though they have done something wrong, when they have not offended against natural morality, but only gone against custom and convention. In a sense this is the difference between virtue and respectability. Sometimes the two coincide, but often they don't. One may be both virtuous and respectable, but it is also possible to be very respectable and not at all virtuous, or highly virtuous and not at all respectable.

Only matters of natural morality have any direct connection with the question of karma. One should not entangle a matter of real, substantial virtue, a matter of natural morality, with one's prejudices about what is right and wrong, which may be based merely on local custom, and have nothing to do with skilful or unskilful mental states.

It is quite important to be sure within oneself whether one is really leading a moral life or just respecting the prejudices of the group within which one happens to be. Moral life is essentially a matter of skilful mental states expressed in skilful behaviour and skilful speech. The precepts of natural morality are those precepts which prevent one from committing unskilful actions – that is to say, actions based upon craving,

aversion, and ignorance – and help one to perform actions based on skilful states of mind such as generosity, love, and wisdom.

And this is the nature of the traditional precepts of Buddhism, which guide the application of ethical principles to all aspects of life. There is a set of five precepts: one ‘undertakes the training principles’, as the traditional wording has it, not to take life, not to take what is not given, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants. A set of ten precepts – an elaboration of the five – involves a threefold purification of body, speech, and mind. And there are sixty-four special precepts for Bodhisattvas. There is much that could be said about the practice of these precepts, but here I want to concentrate on Buddhist ethics as applied to three basic spheres of human life: food, work, and marriage.

The most basic of these is, of course, food. You had some not long ago, and so did I; eating is just part of everyday life. Some people in some places can only afford to eat once a day, or even every other day, but most of us eat several times a day; food occupies a very important place in our lives, and takes many hours of our lifetime. An activity to which we devote so much time, energy, and money, and for which we require special provision in our houses in the form of kitchens and dining rooms and utensils, very definitely needs to be brought within the influence of our Buddhist principles.

The most important principle here is non-violence, reverence for life. This means, among many other things, vegetarianism. Some of the Mahāyāna sūtras say that the Bodhisattva can no more think of eating the flesh of living beings than a mother can think of eating the flesh of her child. If one is to practise śīla, therefore, one needs to make a definite move in the direction of vegetarianism. Sometimes circumstances at home may be difficult – it may be impossible to be strictly vegetarian – but at least one can move towards it, perhaps by giving up meat and fish on certain days of the week, or on certain occasions. No one is perfectly non-violent; it is always a matter of degree. But we should reverence life as much as possible – this is of course an aspect of the pagan connectedness with nature we have been discussing. Vegetarianism, practised to any degree, is a direct application of the principle that guides the life of the Bodhisattva: the principle of compassion.

It should be said that the Buddha himself did not insist on vegetarianism. He considered it more important for mendicants to practise not picking and choosing what they ate, but accepting what they were given (provided they were sure that any meat they were offered had not been killed especially for their benefit). However, it seems surprising that so few Buddhists in the East have subsequently made any attempt to encourage, where they could, this most basic application of a basic Buddhist principle. In the harsh climate of Tibet vegetarian foodstuffs are certainly scarce, but many Tibetan Buddhists living in India continue to eat meat although they no longer need to do so. It isn't just the Tibetans; Thai and Burmese Buddhists are, if anything, even greater meat-eaters, and the majority of Sinhalese monks and laymen are non-vegetarian too. But perhaps non-vegetarianism is especially strange among Mahāyāna Buddhists like the Tibetans, given the Mahāyāna's special emphasis on compassion. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* contains a whole chapter about the unskilfulness of eating meat,¹²⁵ but people don't seem to take that very seriously.

In this connection Tantric teachings, misunderstood, play a part. Tibetan lamas sometimes say that when an animal is slaughtered, if certain mantras are recited over it, its consciousness is at once released and goes to a sort of heaven. Some even go so far as to say that the fact that the flesh of an animal passes through their system ensures the salvation of that animal. It isn't possible to prove or disprove such a statement, of course, but it has all the hallmarks of a rationalization.

The Thai bhikkhus I knew in India used to say that the lay people gave them meat and therefore they couldn't refuse it – it was just dropped into their bowls. But the lay people were Buddhists and had been so for hundreds of years, and the bhikkhus had taught them to do all sorts of things, for example devising elaborate ways for women to make offerings without coming into physical contact with the bhikkhus. If they could teach the lay people things like that, why couldn't they teach them not to offer them meat? After all, they were able to explain that certain kinds of meat were prohibited and should not be offered according to the Theravāda Vinaya: human flesh, tiger flesh, and so on.¹²⁶ Could they not ask them to refrain from offering any flesh at all?

When I stayed with some of my Thai bhikkhu friends – in the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment, Bodh Gayā, of all places – every single dish they ate was mixed with meat. Sometimes when I had a meal with them, all I could eat was rice. They weren't

very sympathetic, though; they clearly felt that I was just being awkward and that they were under no obligation to help me out of the difficulty I had created for myself.

The Sinhalese were much more sympathetic. Some Sinhalese bhikkhus are vegetarians, and Sinhalese lay Buddhists are very cooperative about that. Tibetans, when challenged about it, will often say, 'Yes, we know we should be vegetarian, but it's difficult in Tibet.' They do make an exception when they are engaged in any kind of puja or spiritual practice connected with the Bodhisattvas Tārā and Avalokiteśvara. Then they do observe vegetarianism, even if the pujas last for as long as ten days, because Avalokiteśvara and Tārā are especially associated with compassion.

As well as being vegetarian, one should practise loving-kindness towards oneself by eating pure and wholesome food. ('Pure' here does not mean refined to such an extent that there is no goodness left in it.) At the same time, one should eat only as much as is necessary for maintaining good health. Sometimes we forget that the purpose of eating is just to keep the body going. If one is down to a subsistence level diet, as people are in so many parts of the world, one knows this very well, but it isn't so obvious in the West, where we have an optimum diet, to say the least.

Also, one shouldn't eat neurotically; one shouldn't use food in an attempt to satisfy some other need. And one should eat quietly and peacefully. These days many people have business lunches, during which they try to do business and eat at the same time. This is grossly uncivilized conduct. Eating should be quiet, peaceful, even meditative. To eat in a public restaurant or coffee bar, where there is a lot of noise and clatter, and loud conversations going on, is not good for any sensitive, mindful person. The principle here is that one should eat mindfully, with full awareness of what one is doing. One shouldn't eat while reading a newspaper at breakfast time, or having a family argument, or even discussing some practical matter.

For an example of mindfulness in this respect, there is nothing more beautiful than the Japanese tea ceremony. A small group of people gather together in some quiet corner, a little rustic hut in the garden perhaps, and they sit around a charcoal stove and listen to the kettle simmering away. Then, with slow, graceful, delicate, mindful movements, the tea is poured out and handed round to the guests. And people sip it,

just sitting peacefully together, engaging in the ordinary, everyday activity of drinking tea.

The Japanese tea ceremony shows to what a pitch of perfection even everyday activities can be raised if we apply mindfulness. Indeed, although this statement could easily be misunderstood, one might almost say that it is better to eat steak and onions mindfully than to eat vegeburgers unmindfully. The main point is that even eating, this ordinary activity, can be made into a sort of art, a way – a *dō*, to use the Japanese word. Someone who ate and drank mindfully every day, year after year, might even gain as much spiritually as they would gain from a sustained practice of meditation. To encourage oneself to be mindful in this way, one could perhaps bring to mind a little verse or saying, reflecting, perhaps, on the source of the food one is eating.

Another area of ethics that is particularly important in the West is to do with work. We tend to think that everybody should work – that is, for money; we think it is wrong, sinful even, not to be gainfully employed. We have already considered this as an example of conventional morality. It is undoubtedly a legacy from Protestantism. Some people can't take a few days off, or even spend a few extra hours in bed in the morning, without feeling horribly guilty about it. We usually feel that we ought to be doing something. Sometimes if we see someone else just sitting around not doing anything, we feel all fidgety and uncomfortable and want to get them moving, as though the very fact of their sitting there quietly while we are so busy is a threat to us.

This is not a new thing. It is to be found, for example, in the Gospels, in the story of Martha and Mary – Martha bustling around getting everything ready, while Mary just sat at the feet of Jesus listening, when there was food to be prepared and served, and washing-up to be done. Martha was most indignant. Jesus, however, said that Mary had chosen the better part. In the West we tend to be Marthas rather than Marys; this feeling that we ought to be doing something is a sort of disease.

The Buddha never worked for his living, as far as we know. He was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family. He had lots of servants. According to all the accounts he spent most of his time in palaces with singing girls, dancing girls, and musicians. Then, after he left home as a mendicant, other people gave him food and clothing. He never did anything to earn his keep. Of course he taught the Dharma, but he would have done

that anyway; it was his nature, just as the nature of the sun is to shine. He never worked for money; he never did a day's work in his life.

I have so far been referring to work in the sense of employment; but there is such a thing as creative work. Indeed, creative work is a psychological necessity. It may be in the form of bringing up and educating children. It may be in the form of writing or painting or cooking, or engaging in some constructive social venture. To produce, to create, is a human need. But it need not be linked with employment. In an ideal society, no one would have to work for wages. One would give to the community whatever one could, and the community would give to each person whatever they needed.

However, such an ideal state of affairs is no doubt a long way off, and in the meantime we do have to be gainfully employed in the ordinary sense – and so we have to apply the principle of right livelihood. In brief, this is that our means of livelihood should involve no exploitation of others and no degradation of oneself. And however one is employed, there should always be time for study, meditation, contact with friends, and other positive and creative activities.

Another aspect of life that affects practically everybody in one way or another, formally or informally, is marriage. The Buddhist conception of marriage is very different from the traditional Western one. In the first place, in Buddhism marriage is regarded neither as a religious sacrament nor as a legally binding contract. According to Buddhist tradition, marriage is simply a human relationship which is recognized by society in the form of one's family and friends.

Even in the West the white dress, the orange blossom, the church bells ringing, and all that sort of thing are not *de rigueur* in the way they used to be, but in the Buddhist East there has never been any marriage ceremony of that kind. If anything at all is done to mark the event, the couple concerned will give a feast for their friends and relations, and just make an announcement that they are living together. A Sikkimese friend of mine and his wife didn't give their feast until they had been together for twenty years and their children had grown up. But they were not regarded as 'living in sin' in the interval. If a man and woman are living together, they *are* married. This is the Buddhist view. Marriage consists in living together, not in a legal contract, a social convention, or even an official announcement. The marriage is primarily the relationship itself. After

the feast held to initiate it or celebrate it, the couple may go along to the temple or monastery and ask for a blessing, but this isn't a wedding ceremony. The monks may bless the relationship, but they don't create it – they just recognize it and give their blessing that the couple concerned may live together happily in accordance with the spirit of the Dharma, helping each other to practise the Buddha's teaching.

With that background, it is not surprising that in all Buddhist countries, from ancient times, there has never been any difficulty about dissolving a marriage, if the people concerned wish it. Also, after marriage the woman retains her own name. This practice is now increasingly common in the West, but here it is quite a new thing, whereas in the East it has never been any other way. In the Buddhist countries of the East there is no one pattern of marriage relationship; nowhere does Buddhism say that monogamy is the only possible form of marriage. Monogamy, polygamy, and even polyandry are all to be found in Buddhist countries, and are recognized as perfectly respectable. Buddhists direct their attention entirely upon the quality of the human relationships involved.

These, very briefly, are the standard Buddhist views on food, work, and marriage – three key aspects of śīla, the predominantly individualistic, self-regarding aspect of the Bodhisattva's life. But we mustn't forget that it is *śīla pāramitā* with which we are concerned: śīla as a perfection, śīla conjoined with wisdom. Uprightness, however carefully observed, is not an end in itself but a means – a means to Enlightenment. Indeed, according to Buddhism, if śīla is regarded as an end in itself, it becomes a hindrance. It's the same with dāna. Dāna as an end in itself is humanitarianism or secular philanthropy; it is good, but it doesn't go far enough. The only real reason to practise dāna and śīla is as means to Enlightenment, for oneself and for all sentient beings.

I referred earlier to the possibility of conflict between the practice of dāna and śīla. Śāntideva refers to this in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

Whoever, having been enlightened, commences to act, ought to think of nothing else. Insofar as this can be accomplished it is by means of applying one's entire being.

This way, everything is well done. Otherwise, both [of the conflicting interests of dāna and śīla] may not be achieved. And the flaw of non-awareness (asamprajanya) will attain further development.¹²⁷

Śāntideva is suggesting that this potential conflict can be resolved by doing everything mindfully, with thought, reflection, care, and awareness. If your mindfulness is strong enough any conflict between the respective claims of dāna and śīla will be resolved almost automatically. Suppose, for example, a monk encounters a woman who is seriously ill. Naturally he will want to give her medicine and look after her – that’s dāna. But because she is a woman, to have much to do with her might lead him to compromise his monastic vow, and jeopardize his practice of śīla. Thus a conflict arises within the context of his monastic life. But never mind. If he keeps up his awareness and mindfulness all the time, whatever he does, he will resolve that conflict.

Historically speaking it seems that some members of the sangha experienced a degree of tension between the demands of dāna and the demands of śīla. Some of the monastic rules were quite strict and, one would think, would have restricted the Bodhisattva’s activities. For instance, there are rules about not preaching the Dharma to people wearing turbans or carrying swords.¹²⁸ The Bodhisattva, through the strength of his feeling for giving the doctrine, might well disregard these rules. Technically he would be breaking certain śīlas of the monastic law. But in effect Śāntideva is saying, ‘Conflict will arise but never mind.’ Be mindful, be aware, in everything you do, and then everything will work out, with regard to dāna and śīla and everything else.

This is certainly what I found during my time in India, especially when I went around with my Thai bhikkhu friends, who were generally very strict in their observance of the monastic rules. Often there was a genuine conflict between the rules and the demands of the situation. Suppose someone arranged for you to give a lecture starting at 10 a.m. and unlikely to finish before 1 p.m. When would you eat? You are not supposed to eat after noon – for a strict monk this is a very important point. We would discuss the situation among ourselves. Should we cancel the meeting so we could observe the twelve o’clock rule, or have the meeting and ignore the rule, or perhaps even fast until the next morning? Some monks would be prepared to fast, but others wouldn’t be very happy about it. After quite a bit of discussion we would sometimes agree to take our meal an hour late. The bhikkhus would say, ‘Never mind, it’s for the sake of the

Dharma.’ Though they were strict Theravādins they adopted the more Mahāyānistic approach. At other times we had to ride in bullock carts – again, this is against the monastic rule, but there was no other means of transport. If we had walked, we would have got to the meeting too late to give our lectures.

Quite a few Theravāda monks in modern times experience a conflict between their desire to propagate the Dharma and the requirements of the monastic rule, which sometimes get in the way of their Buddhist work. This sort of thing must have happened a lot in India as social conditions changed and the Mahāyāna arose, and as, perhaps, some of the monastic rules were interpreted too narrowly. Sāntideva, however, is reassuring, and says that provided one is mindful at all times such conflicts will not only be resolved, but will not be experienced as conflicts in the same way. This is the union of opposites towards which all aspects of the Bodhisattva ideal lead.



- [107](#) The idea of the Bodhisattva postponing Enlightenment is first mentioned in the Pāli Canon, in the *Buddhavamsa* of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*.
- [108](#) Padmapāṇi (‘Lotus in Hand’) is a form of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The image of him painted on a wall at the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra, India, dates from the fifth century CE.
- [109](#) See *The Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, op. cit., p.251.
- [110](#) See Reginald A. Ray, *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 1994, pp.402ff.
- [111](#) D.T Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, op. cit., p.63.
- [112](#) Vinaya Piṭaka i.20–1.
- [113](#) The four *brahma-vihāras*, the four sublime states – loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upeksa*) – are cultivated by a sequence of meditation practices described by the Buddha in, for example, *Dīgha-Nikāya* 13.
- [114](#) P.A. Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, E Sargent, USA 1982.
- [115](#) *The Precious Garland*, op. cit., verse 427.
- [116](#) Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’, part 40.
- [117](#) Har Dayal gives textual references for these categories of *dāna*. See Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, op. cit., p.173.
- [118](#) Keats, ‘Endymion’: ‘... yes, in spite of all, / Some shape of beauty moves away the pall / From our dark spirits.’
- [119](#) *The Precious Garland*, op. cit., verse 173.
- [120](#) *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, op. cit., p.184.
- [121](#) See E.B. Cowell (trans.), *The Jātaka Book* xn, *Jātaka Stories*, vols.v and vi, Pali Text Society, London 1973, no.547, *Vessantara-jātaka*. See also Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Sanskrit Literature*, op. cit., p.185.
- [122](#) This story is told in the *jātaka-māla*, and also in a Mahāyāna sūtra, R.E. Emmerick (trans.), *The Sūtra of Golden Light*, op. cit., pp.90–6.
- [123](#) The *locus classicus* here is the *Nidhikaṇḍa Sutta*, the eighth section of the *Khuddakapāṭha*, the first book of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya*, which says: ‘... prudent, you should make merit, the fund that will follow you along. This is the fund that gives all they want to beings human and divine.’
- [124](#) See Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Sanskrit Literature*, op. cit., pp.175–6.
- [125](#) D.T. Suzuki (trans.), *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, [chapter 8](#), ‘On Meat Eating’, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1999, pp.211–21.

[126](#) *Vinaya Mahāvagga* vi.23.9–15.

[127](#) Śāntideva, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment, The Bodhicaryāvatāra of the Buddhist Poet Śāntideva*, trans. Marion L. Matics, Allen & Unwin, London 1971, p.166.

[128](#) These are covered in rules 59 and 66, listed in chapter 10, section 3 of the *Pāṭimokkha*.