

## Bodhisattvas in the Lotus and Other Sutras

Margarita I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya

**W**E shall talk today of the bodhisattva that takes up an important place in the Lotus Sūtra, Māhāyana and Buddhism as a whole. The Sanskrit word bodhisattva should be translated as “a being (or man) who has reach a state where he can acquire *bodhi*.” *Bodhi* means Enlightenment, the state that Buddha had reached. Thus bodhisattva denotes a person who is prepared for Enlightenment. After he gets Enlightenment he will be prepared to become Buddha. Such definition is engenders with a lot of questions:

What is the state that bodhisattva reached?

What does reached mean? How did he reach it, by what means?

If bodhisattva is prepared to acquire Enlightenment, why doesn't he do it? What is holding him back?

And, finally, where did this image come from? Has it always existed in Buddhism and what are its function during the different periods of development and establishment of Buddhism?

It is known that Buddhism has gone a long way in its development: from the first sermon by Buddha about the four noble truths and the eightfold path to saving up to a popular religion with its own pantheon, ritual, temples and clergy. In other words, it has gone all the way from a team of disciples following Buddha Shakyamuni and learning the lessons of virtuous life and social equality to the complex hierarchy of the followers of the teaching inside a community and a system of specific interrelations with the state in different countries. We shall try to answer the questions we have just asked.

The notion of bodhisattva arose at the beginning of this millennium, during the period when Buddhism spread beyond Indian borders and started conquering new territories. The six centuries that had passed from the times of the great *parinirvāṇa* of Buddha Shakyamuni were marked with events in the life of Buddha's teaching. First, his disciples had split, and this process was taking on an increasingly definite character; the followers of different orientations went apart not only ideologically, but territorially as well. Having drifted so far apart they confirmed

their ideological differences, making them a law. Second, and most important, is that Buddha's teaching had by that time been written down by his disciples. The Buddhist canon had made its appearance, which had brought together and classified all the lessons and sermons by the teacher and all his instructions. The *tripiṭaka* came into being, which literally means three baskets; they include *vinaya-piṭaka*, or disciplinary regulations for members of monastic communities, *sūtra-piṭaka*, or collection of texts covering the Buddhist doctrine issues, and *abhidharma-piṭaka*, or collection of texts covering the philosophy of the teaching. I am only mentioning these well-known things because they have a direct bearing upon the subject we are going to take up today.

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

The *arhatship* could not attract any considerable number of the new followers of the teaching. First of all, this way was too time-consuming. The main landmarks on this way was the *karma*, which was a manifestation of a whole series of reincarnations. Second, the image of an *arhat*, a hermit, was not as attractive as to make the masses of householders want to follow it—while it was the latter that Buddhism was trying to allure as its followers. This is when the bodhisattva image made its appearance, which played a major role in attracting new followers of the teaching. The prototype for this image was Buddha Shakyamuni himself. The numerous stories of his former reincarnations—the so called *jātakas*, as well as the texts describing the life of Shakyamuni himself, such as *Lalatavistāra* or *Mahāvastu*, provided a

lot of material for creating the image of a man who helps the others in this life, which contributed to his progress towards self-improvement and finally reaching the Enlightenment. After that he could lapse into nirvāṇa, but he does not, remaining among the people and helping them. Such charitable man was introduced into the teaching under the name of bodhisattva. In terms of his position and role played the bodhisattva is an exact antipode to the *arhat*. He lives among the people and for them, helping out not only the followers of the teaching, but those who are in the beginning of their way and are experiencing difficulties. Bodhisattva's activities attract broad masses to Buddha's teaching, who are thus acquiring support in their lives. This new powerful influx of followers marks the advance of the teaching beyond Indian borders. At the same time, it is a new stage in the development of the teaching proper, that has enriched it with many new ideas. Starting from this period we can single out a new trend in Buddhism as an all-encompassing ethical, religious and philosophical tendency. It got the name of Mahāyāna, or the great vehicle, as distinct from *śrāvakayāna*, which remained under the name of Hīnayāna, or the small vehicle.

The early Māhāyana sutras, whose existence can be reliably proved by the existence of the Sanskrit manuscripts—copies of these sutras—as well as by the existence of their Chinese translations of the second-fourth centuries, contain the description of ideal bodhisattvas and their moral code. These sutras include, first and foremost, the Lotus Sūtra. Let us take a closer look at it.

The ideal bodhisattva is described in chapter 14 of the Lotus Sūtra, which is called *Sukhavihāra-parivārtah* in Sanskrit, meaning chapter on ideal state. The Chinese translation from Kumārajīva's language runs as Peaceful Practices. In this chapter Buddha addresses his disciples saying that in case the worst times come and belief wanes he is entrusting the bodhisattvas of the future his biggest treasure—the Lotus Sūtra, so that they can go on preaching the teaching. The bodhisattvas will only be able to preach this sutra if they observe four sets of rules in their way of life (*ācāragocāra pratiṣṭhita* in Sanskrit), that are necessary for any bodhisattva. What are these rules?

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

Further, what contacts shall a bodhisattva refrain from? In this discussion we find interesting details that testify of the early origin of the

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

Before passing over to the second set of rules obligatory for a bodhisattva it seems necessary to make an important comment that might shed light on the Lotus Sūtra as one of the early ones and on the origins of the *śūnyatā* doctrine—a term that is commonly taken to mean emptiness in the Buddhist studies. The Buddhologists belonging to the Russian school interpret *śūnyatā* as subjectlessness and objectlessness of all dharmas, as having no substance and lack of contents.

In the Lotus Sūtra, where the notion of *śūnyatā* is linked to bodhisattva's state, we can clearly observe the original interpretation of this term, that is, its direct connection with meditation, or contemplation. Let us turn now to the text of the sutra.

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

stone which can identify the text as belonging to a specific school of thought.

I would like to comment on one more detail. We should not confuse the notions of meditation, contemplation and the shamanism or *vajrayāna* trance, though meditation is often called trance in scholarly works. The shaman trance means going beyond the limits of reality, but it means, at the same time, entering the world of imaginary things and phenomena. The *vajrayāna* trance is somewhat close to it, as it is aimed at departing from the real world and merging with one of the deities carrying *vajra*, i.e. the gods of the *vajrayāna* pantheon.

Thus, the second set of qualities that the ideal bodhisattva has to possess according to the Lotus Sūtra is the ability to plunge into contemplation.

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

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

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

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

In the Lotus Sūtra Mahāyāna is called *bodhisattvayāna* or bodhisattva's vehicle.

The attempts to substantiate the role of the bodhisattva in Buddha's

teaching is manifested in other early sutras—the nucleus of Mahāyāna. One of the first scholars to try and unite these sutras into one canon was Nāgārjuna (150–250 A.D.). He is attributed the authorship of the work called *Sūtrasamuccaya*—the Collection of Sutras, which has unfortunately reached us only in the ninth century Tibetan translation and the 11th century Chinese translation. To designate Mahāyāna proper Nāgārjuna uses the word *bodhisattva-duṣkarācārya*, meaning the system of bodhisattva's behaviour as solving difficult problems. In trying to protect the Mahāyāna sutras from the critique on the part of the orthodox *śrāvakas*, Nāgārjuna collected citations from the most well-known sutras and classified them into 13 major topics. On the whole he cited 68 sutras from the collection, which can thus be considered early Mahāyāna's ones. As a basis for his classification Nāgārjuna took the principle of classifying them according to *āgamas* (in the Pali canon) and *nikāyas* (in the Sanskrit canon). We are dwelling on this work because it was the first and only attempt to classify Mahāyāna's works as a canon, in the form of *tripiṭaka*, that had ever taken place in India. There is no evidence of any other attempts in the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. So if we are now talking about the Mahāyāna's *tripiṭaka*, this title can only be applied to it in a relative sense. When the Chinese and Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts were being codified, they were classified according to the principles that were completely different from the ones mentioned above, the main of them being the division of the texts into sutras and shastras. The latter included both comments on the sutras and Buddhist literature by different authors.

To continue, Nāgārjuna cites one earlier sutra which also held the code for an ideal bodhisattva—it was *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra*, that is the Collection of Treasures. This sutra enjoyed so much authority that starting from the Han epoch (second century A.D.) it was five times translated into Chinese. In the ninth century it was also translated into the Tibetan language. However, the text that has reached us is the later Sanskrit version of this sutra dated seventh century A.D.. By that time it had already got the name of *Kāśyapaparivarta-sūtra*, or *Kāshyapa's Questions*. This manuscript is now displayed at our exhibition, it holds 74 folios. The code of an ideal bodhisattva is worked out here in more detail. Classification of the actions, types of behaviour and knowledge is presented, which should be characteristic for a true bodhisattva. In this sutra the term *bodhi-saṃbhāra* first made its appearance, meaning what is necessary to acquire to reach Enlightenment. Extensive use of this term in Mahāyāna texts is the evidence of the gradual establishment of the bodhisattva cult in canonic literature.

According to *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra*, in order to reach Enlightenment a bodhisattva has to acquire a number of qualities, which are grouped into two sets. The first is *puṇya-saṃbhāra*, or the group of merits, which includes six *pāramitās* or six kinds of perfection. The first two—*dāna*, or generosity, and *śīla*, or high morale—contribute to reaching the other two—*kṣānti*, or intellectual receptivity, and *virya*, or persistence, efficiency of continuous moral effort. The four *pāramitās* were prerequisites for reaching the two final ones—*dhyāna*, or perfect meditation, and *prajñā-pāramitā*, the superior excellence resulting in differentiating comprehension.

The second set of necessary qualities is *jñāna-saṃbhāra*, or the knowledge group. It is aimed at penetrating the *śūnyatā*, or emptiness that we have already discussed today. The comprehension of *śūnyatā* is only possible through *prajñā*. The meaning of this term as given in the dictionary is wisdom, while its philosophical meaning, which *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra* deals with, is discoursed intellectual comprehension, differentiating comprehension, that results in *jñāna*—or absolute intuitive knowledge.

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

On the whole the *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra* holds 88 dharmas, 44 of them belonging to the true bodhisattva—the Sanskrit *bhūta-bodhisattva* and, correspondingly, 44 acts, that can be the evidence of the bodhisattva having lost the qualities of the true bodhisattva and having become *pratirūpaka-bodhisattva*, i.e. a bodhisattva by name only. In the generalised sense, the essence of an ideal or true bodhisattva in the *Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra* and in Nāgārjuna's works can be represented in the form of the following seven components, or *bodhi-saṃbhāra*:

He has command of the four superior psychic states—the Sanskrit *catu-dharmavihāra*;

He has command of the five kinds of knowledge beyond all boundaries—*abhiññā*;

He possesses all qualities necessary for reaching the *jñāna*—the absolute intuitive knowledge, i.e. he has acquired *jñāna-saṃbhāra*;

He directs all the live creatures on the way to liberation, regardless of how good or bad they are, and never leaves them;

He has learned the ways and techniques to convince his audience—*upāya-kauśalya*. This term, as a quality characteristic of Buddha received detailed interpretation in the second chapter of the Lotus Sūtra as Expedient Means;

Everything that he has said or promised is immediately brought into life;

He is continuously accumulating good merits—*puṇya-saṃbhāra*.

We can thus see that the codex of the ideal bodhisattva that had made its appearance in the early Mahāyāna texts as a substantiation of the real help that a bodhisattva can offer to people gradually accumulates minute details; through this codex, the major philosophical categories of Mahāyāna are revealed, such as the *śūnyatā*, the six *pāramitās* and the ten lands of bodhisattva, *bodhisattva-daśa-bhūmi* in Sanskrit, or the 10-stage way of a bodhisattva.

Finally, between the second and the fourth centuries some more sutras make their appearance, which describe and classify the features of an ideal bodhisattva. Two of them are of most importance; however, they have only reached us in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

Chronologically, the first to appear was the so-called *Bodhisattva-piṭaka-sūtra*—a sutra, which is a basket of bodhisattva's qualities. The second was the *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa-sūtra*—a sutra holding an exhortation to the bodhisattva *Akṣayamati*. The name of this bodhisattva is mentioned in the Lotus Sūtra. Nāgārjuna's *Sūtra-samuccaya* holds 22 citations from *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa-sūtra*. In its turn, *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa-sūtra* has many citations from *Bodhisattva-piṭaka*. In spite of the precise classification of the qualities characteristic of an ideal bodhisattva, both sutras use *jātakas* to illustrate them, the latter being stories of the early reincarnations of Buddha Shakyamuni. In *Bodhisattva-piṭaka*, for instance, there are 14 stories like that. This serves to support our suggestion that it was Buddha Shakyamuni who was the prototype for the image of bodhisattva, while the *jātakas* turned out to be the first works to hold the image of a bodhisattva. A number of terms that they have in common with the Lotus Sūtra suggest that all the three sutras were codified in the same monastic environment. However, the texts of *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa* and *Bodhisattva-piṭaka* underwent considerable editing. This may have taken place beyond Indian borders. Besides *jātakas*, both sutras hold *mātrikas*—lists of terms—of abhidharmic nature, for instance, lists of 80 inexhaustible (in Sanskrit—*akṣaya*) skills and attributes of a bodhisattva, for which the *jātakas* serve as sense fillers. The way of a bodhisattva is described in the following way:

The basis for bodhisattva's practices is the same, as in the Lotus Sūtra—it is consecutive mastering of *pāramitās*—six perfections—six-fold training. Meanwhile there are some additional details in explanation of this process in the sutras in question: the foundation of all things



is freedom, which allows a bodhisattva to lead a life of high morale. It is this behaviour that enables him to take all the hardships patiently that he encounters on his way. The patient perception of things around engenders intrinsic energy. As for meditation, it paves the way to differentiated comprehension—*prājñā-pāramitā*. After achieving differentiated comprehension the bodhisattva continues his earthly existence for the sake of supporting people. This way is entirely contrary to *arhat*'s way in *śrāvakayāna*. The ability to meditate leads an *arhat* to the superior birth, further progress on his way to liberation and to the stage of non-returning—*anāgamin*.

The second phase on bodhisattva's way, partly overlapping the first, is ten stages—or ten lands—*daśa-bhūmi*. Let us refrain from discussing each stage, the more so, since they go into detail about reaching the six *pāramitās*. We shall only comment on the last one—*dharmamegha*, or the stage of differentiating between a multitude of dharmas. This stage signals bodhisattva's entrance into contemplation. The one who has gone through all the ten stages of the way is regarded as possessing the state of an ideal bodhisattva—*bodhisattva-vihārāḥ* in Sanskrit.

Thus, the ability to meditate is considered as one of the major bodhisattva's qualities. Success in meditation is achieved due to the four qualities which are called unmeasurable (Sanskrit. *apramāṇa*): benevolence (*maitri*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathy, joy at seeing the well-being of live creatures (*muditā*) and composure (*upekṣā*). It is these four qualities that are conducive to free penetration and differentiating comprehension.

Formation of the codex of an ideal bodhisattva entered its final stage when in the seventh century A.D. the Chinese scholar and translator Bodhiruchi brought together 49 sutras into one code called *Mahāratnakūṭa*. It comprised 24 sutras, which were dealing with some aspects of the status of an ideal bodhisattva, including *Kāśyapaparivarta-sūtra* and *Bodhisattva-piṭaka-sūtra*.

The very *bodhisattva-piṭaka* is sometimes used in other sutras and literary comments. In parallel to the three *piṭakas* constituting *tripiṭaka*, some researchers were of the opinion that it served to denote the fourth, independent *piṭaka* of Mahāyāna.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of the context in which this term was used shows that *bodhisattva-piṭaka* was the name most often applied to Mahāyāna itself (cf. bodhisattva or bodhisattva's vehicle as the name for Mahāyāna in the Lotus Sūtra). In this meaning *bodhisattva-piṭaka* was contrasted to *śrāvakayāna*.

*Bodhisattva-piṭaka* was also used in a different sense. It was used to denote the sutras from Mahāyāna, in contrast to the *dhāraṇī*-incanta-

tions and *vajrayāna* texts. The Mahāyāna sutras never mentioned the magical skills of bodhisattvas or incantations that could activate them.

What practical lessons can our today's audience learn from what has been said? First, support given to the others, mutual support is the major function of a bodhisattva, which should be inherited by those studying the Lotus Sūtra today.

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

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

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: Ulrich Pagel, *The Bodhisattvapiṭaka.—The Institute of Buddhist Studies*, Tring, U.K., 1995.