

The BODHISATTVA PATH



Blavatsky Lecture 2011
by Bhupendra R. Vora

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** The Blavatsky Lecture **

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THE BODHISATTVA PATH

It is a great honour to be invited to deliver this year's prestigious Blavatsky Lecture and to pay tribute to the great *Yogiñi* Madame Blavatsky. She was an initiate who was deeply committed to the selfless path of service of the Mahatmas and Bodhisattvas. She sacrificed her entire life for the cause of Theosophy and the enlightenment of humanity; setting an example of the highest ideals of selfless giving. In *The Key To Theosophy* she states:

a true Theosophist must put in practice the loftiest moral ideal, must strive to realise his unity with the whole of humanity, and work ceaselessly for others.



the youthful Blavatsky

Her entire life was that of sharing and giving.

There is a truly touching event in her life when she was on her way from Paris to New York in June 1873. She acquired a first class ticket for the Atlantic crossing but on her way to boarding the ship found a woman with two small children, desolate and weeping. This woman had apparently been swindled and was therefore stranded without any money and unable to travel to New York. With the generosity of a Bodhisattva she changed her first class ticket for steerage tickets for herself and this woman and her children. She spent ten days in the overcrowded steerage quarters of an emigrant ship with its filth, the bad smells and rats. Ten days of horror it was, except for the warm companionship of the grateful woman and her children.

The Key to Theosophy defines charity as

personal exertion for others; personal mercy and kindness; personal interest in the welfare of those who suffer; personal sympathy, forethought and assistance in their troubles or needs.

These are the virtues of a Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva is a spiritually advanced being in whom the Bodhi-chitta has flowered and who is on the path to full Buddha-hood or Adept-ship. The Buddha used the term *Bodhisatta*, in the Pali cannon, to refer to himself, prior to his attaining the state of a *Sammāsama Buddha*, which means the fully awakened and all knowing One, who is perfect in wisdom. The term therefore connotes a being who is "bound for enlightenment" or whose aim is to become fully enlightened. It is also used to indicate a spiritual being who has chosen to renounce Nirvana or the final state of enlightenment and bliss so that other sentient beings may be helped in achieving liberation. It is in this context that Theosophical teachings refer to the Bodhisattva ideal, followed by many of the Masters of Wisdom who in their infinite compassion for humanity have chosen this path of service.

It is said about Gautama Buddha that he resolved to become a Buddha of Compassion and help mankind in his life as Sumedha, far back in time, in the presence of the then Buddha Dipankar. Forgoing the opportunity to become an Arhat, as the disciple of Dipankar, he resolved: "Let me rather" he said



The Buddha statue at the
Theosophical Society, London

like Dipankar, having risen to the supreme knowledge of the truth, enable all men to enter the ship of truth and thus I may bear them over the Sea of Existence, and then only let me realise Nibbana myself.

A similar tradition exists in the Jain philosophy where a being resolves to become a *Tirthankar* or a builder of the ford, to help men cross the sea of life to the other shore. Some of the previous lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva are featured in the *Jatakakatha* or tales of his previous lives. These show that life after life, in whatever form he was born in, the Buddha helped all sentient beings. It is said of Gautama Buddha that there is no spot on earth where he has not in some past life, sacrificed his life for the sake of others.

Theosophical literature mentions the many lives of this Great Being as a Teacher of mankind dispensing the divine wisdom so that men may be liberated from their bondage. It is awe inspiring that so much of the spiritual teachings, of the many religious traditions, in the different parts of the world, is attributed to him as Bodhisattva in one or other of his incarnations as either Vyasa in India, Hermes in Egypt, Orpheus in Greece, Zarathustra in Persia and finally as Gautama Buddha in India once again. As a teacher of men and Gods he helped all beings.



Zarathustra at Theosophical Society Headquarters, Adyar

In his final incarnation as Prince Siddhartha he made the ultimate sacrifice on attaining Buddha-hood, of renouncing Nirvana until all sentient beings entered the doors of that blessed state. Esoteric literature rightly calls this the great sacrifice or *Mahabhinishkramana*. Pali texts refer to the Buddha's contemplation, following his enlightenment, about the state of the world and the chain of causation.

Legend has it that as a Prince of Kapilvastu he had sight of human suffering in the form of disease, old age and death whilst going round the city, and resolved to find the cause of suffering and the way to liberation. Having found the way to end this suffering on that full moon night of *Vaisakh* (May), he mused whether humanity was ready to receive his message. Light of Asia describes symbolically, this moment of the concern of mother earth that the Buddha may not preach the *dharma*, and sent out a cry for help:

"*Nasyami aham bhu Nasyati loka*" - "Surely I am lost, I and my creatures." "*Sruyatam dharma, Bhagavat*" - "Oh Supreme! Let Thy Great law be uttered!" The Master cast his vision forth on the world and its suffering humanity and resolved to utter the Law. Declared he "Yea I preach! Whoso will listen, let him learn the Law."

Thus started the work of the Buddha for which he had long prepared. Resolving to renounce the fruits of Nirvana, he chose to be a *Nirmanakaya* and lead all sentient life to the doors of liberation. In *The Secret Doctrine* Madame Blavatsky reveals the mystery of the Buddha's refusal to enter into Nirvana in the following words:



statue of the Buddha in
wood. private collection
southern France

Thus after his outward death, twenty years later, Tathagata in his immense love and "pitiful mercy" for erring and ignorant humanity, refused Parinirvana in order that he might continue to help men.

Many of the close disciples of the Buddha who had attained to the level of Arhat chose the path of their Master so that they could also work for the liberation of humanity. The Masters of Wisdom connected with the world have similarly resolved to work for the welfare of humanity rather than seeking the bliss of Nirvana. *The Voice of the Silence* refers to them as having formed a "Guardian Wall" built by their hands, raised by their tortures, by their blood cemented it shields mankind from further and far greater misery and sorrow. In this context, the *Bhagavad Gita* lays emphasis on unselfish service to mankind without desire or attachment and calls it *Karma Yoga* or the path of work for the realisation of God. In one verse (chap 3 - Verse 19) it specifically teaches that through the performance of one's duty in society, man worships and attains the Supreme. In an ancient hymn of the *Rig Veda* there is a remarkable statement on the ideal of service to humanity:

Who is it that is said to live? He who lives for the sake of others truly lives.

The *Anna Sukta* of the *Rig Veda* lays down the duty of service to others. It mentions various kinds of service amongst which are the helping of others in distress, the spread of knowledge and distribution of food to the needy. It indicates that service must be performed not with vanity or with a sense of patronage but with utter humility and selflessness.

There is a fine example of the Bodhisattva spirit in the *Bhagavat Purana* about King Rantideva. During a period of devastating famine in his kingdom, Rantideva spent the whole of his wealth in feeding the hungry and the distressed. Deeply pained at the distress of his people and by the way of atonement, the king undertook a fast for forty-eight days and did not take food or water during that period. On the forty ninth day when he was satisfied that almost all the hungry and the distressed in his kingdom had been relieved of their sufferings and misery, he decided to break his fast.

Just when he was about to have his first drink of water after forty-eight days, he heard the piteous cry of a person of lowly stature called Pulkasa, asking for water to quench his thirst. The king who was in the midst of his ministers stopped taking the water placed before him and ordered that the cup be immediately given to Pulkasa. The ministers remonstrated strongly with the king at his suicidal act. The king however did not budge and made the famous pronouncement in moving terms as recorded by the great sage Vyasa:

I do not seek from the Supreme Lord the highest bliss nor do I care for *moksha* (Liberation), the cessation of the round of births and deaths. But my only desire is to suffer with all beings and be present in them and serve them so that they may become free from misery. My hunger, thirst and fatigue, my disappointment and delusion- all these undesirable features of my distressed soul have disappeared upon my giving water to one who was suffering from acute thirst.

This great declaration of Rantideva also recorded in the *Mahabharata* emphasizes the supreme duty of relieving the sufferings of others and bettering the lot of one's brothers and sisters. It states that sharing of the sufferings of others is not only necessary for the sharing of burden of sorrows of others but for moral purification. In the Bodhisattva tradition it declares that the duty of relieving of suffering is greater than seeking one's own salvation.

In one of the *Upanishads* is a symbolic story about the devas, asuras and humans approaching the Creator Lord Brahma and expressing dissatisfaction about the state of their lives where there was no peace or contentment. The devas were used to a life of opulence and sensual pleasures, the asuras were used to inflicting pain and suffering on others and the humans were greedy and accumulated wealth and possessions. None of them had any peace of mind and wanted the Lord God to help them. The story of the *Upanishad* states that Brahma responded by proclaiming the syllable "Da" three times. The devas understood the syllable to mean *damyata* or restraint in their sensual life, the asuras interpreted the sound to mean *daya* or compassion for all beings and the humans assumed that the "Da" was meant to convey *dana* meaning charity towards the less fortunate. There is a very significant message in this story for mankind about the kind of life that should be lived in which the three aspects of *damyata*, *daya* & *dana* are always present.

In the Book of *Saint Mathew* in the New Testament is given an indication of the kind of selfless giving that ensures the realisation of the Divine. The Lord says:

For I was a-hungered and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison and you came unto me.

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Then shall the righteous answer him saying, "Lord when saw we thee a-hungered and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? Or naked and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison and came unto thee?" And the King shall answer and say unto them, "Verily I say unto you, in as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."
(Matthew 25.35)

The Bodhisattvas or Mahatmas are driven by an impelling desire to help alleviate suffering in the world and to lead all sentient life to liberation. They are not merely beings on their way to the status of fully enlightened Buddhas or Adepts, but are beings who through their great compassion or *Mahakaruna* for all sentient life, renounce the ultimate bliss for themselves. This is indicated in the famous vow of the Bodhisattva that states:

Never will I seek to receive individual salvation. Never will I enter into final peace alone, but forever and everywhere will I live and strive for the redemption of every creature throughout the world.



Avalokiteshvara (Bodhisattva)
Nepalese copper. 10th century

The Bodhi seed of the Bodhisattva is nurtured and watered by compassionate and loving deeds until it blossoms into Bodhi-chitta or heart of wisdom. A similar seed of a Bodhisattva exists in each human being as all are part of the Universal Consciousness, which is inherently compassionate; however only by reason of ignorance and imperfection in love, the glory of the Bodhi heart is not yet made fully manifest. Through selfless living and loving deeds performed life after life, and following the path of many enlightened beings the aspirant reaches that state of perfection and compassion which is that of the great initiates on the path.

In the Mahatma Letters is an intriguing reference by the Adept known as Mahatma M, in connection with the retreat to the Tower of Bodhisattva of Mahatma KH, for the purpose of preparing for a higher initiation that would lead him further on the path of Bodhisattva-hood. It is interesting to note Mahatma M's statement about "the old tower within whose bosom, have gestated generations of Bodhisattvas." The location of the Tower is a mystery as also the kind of preparation the Mahatma was involved in, which would lead to the flowering of the Bodhi-chitta, to its fullness of wisdom and unbounded love for all humanity. It is stated that he was preparing for his higher initiation that would ready him for his future work as a Teacher of men like The Christ.

The compassion of this Mahatma was evident in his request to his brother the Mahatma M to ensure that the spiritual teachings that the two English gentlemen Mr. A. P. Sinnett and Mr. A. O. Hume were receiving from him did not suffer due to his absence. This Mahatma has been a teacher of mankind life after life and on his way to becoming a Bodhisattva. Elsewhere in the Mahatma Letters he advises Theosophists:

You should, even as a simple member, much more as an officer, learn that you may teach, acquire spiritual knowledge and strength that the work may lean upon you, and the sorrowing victims of ignorance learn from you the cause and remedy of their pain.

The significance of this advice must be realised by Theosophists. The darkness of ignorance, which pervades the human race and is the cause of suffering, must be dispelled by the light of true wisdom about the purpose of life; and this is the work of Theosophists.

In the famous letter of the Great Adept known as The Mahachohan is given an indication of the duty of a Theosophist. The Mahatma says:-

It is not the individual and determined purpose of attaining oneself NIRVANA (the culmination of all knowledge and absolute wisdom) which is after all only an exalted and glorious selfishness - but the self sacrificing pursuit of the best means to lead on the right path our neighbour, to cause as many of our fellow creatures as we possibly can to benefit by it, which constitutes the true Theosophist

It is this spirit of compassion and love, implicit in the principle of Universal Brotherhood, which should be the guiding light of a Theosophist. To understand the oneness of all existence, is to develop an intense state of spiritual love, divine wisdom and compassion, founded upon an impelling will to help all sentient life.

There is a legend about the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara that shows him as thousand-handed and thousand-eyed; signifying his all reaching consciousness and compassion that helps all life. With a multitude of arms this being can help all those who suffer, and with the many eyes, see their suffering. This is a beautiful poetic imagery of a compassionate being, who is a source of inspiration to millions around the world, and is therefore eulogised with great faith with the mantra: "*Namo-namas tasmai abhayamdad Avalokiteshwaraya Bodhisattvaya Mahasattvaya*". (I bow to you Avalokiteshwara, Bodhisattva, Mahasattva the granter of peace and security from the calamities of the world).

All who are truly committed to this path never tire of the number of people that need to be helped or the amount of work involved or the time that needs to be devoted to this work. This was evident in the life of the founders of the Theosophical Society Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott.



Kuan Yin (Avalokiteshwara)
private collection
Victoria, Canada

Shantideva the author of *Bodhicharyavatara Sutra* states that the condition or status of a Bodhisattva is not reached through grace, but by sheer self-effort following the signposts and landmarks provided in the texts and scriptures. The initial preparation or resolve is called *bodhi pranidhi chitta* and the journey of spiritual growth is referred to as *bodhi prasthan chitta* in the scriptures. Long before the aspirant reaches this state the person must have sown the bodhi seed in the heart as the Buddha did in a long past former life. The journey is possible only through the intense spiritual discipline of the *Paramita path*. From the out set the aspirant must be very clear as regards the motive, which should be that of selfless service of all sentient life. *The Voice of the Silence* asks,



Avalokiteshvara (Bodhisattva)
wall painting, Ajanta, India

Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shall thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?

Esoteric literature refers to the various steps that an aspirant goes through, until the stage is reached of a firm resolve, to work for the well being of all sentient life, or taking the *maha pranidhana* vow. The text of this solemn promise is given in *Bodhipatapradipa* a work by the great Atisha, who was the Master of Je Tsong Ka Pa. It reads:

I shall play host to all living beings and rescue them from the cycle of incarnations. Henceforth, until I attain the highest enlightenment. I shall not engage in hostility, wrath, avarice or envy. I shall practice the pure life and avoid sin and desire. With rapture in the vow of morality I shall act as the Buddha. I am not zealous to attain enlightenment by a speedy method but for the sake of a single sentient being I shall remain until the very end. I shall purify the immeasurable fields. I shall cleanse all

actions of the body and speech and mind and refrain from deeds that are not virtuous.

The taking of such a vow means to save all beings, to destroy all passions, to learn the truth, to teach it to others and to lead all beings to liberation. In the three jewels of Theosophical literature *At the Feet of The Master*, *The Voice of the Silence* and *The Light on The Path* is laid out the path to self-purification and the journey to the temple of Divine wisdom.

Prajna-Paramita or the path of transcendent wisdom elaborated in *The Voice of the Silence* guides the aspirant to that level of sensitivity and compassion where the person feels for all sentient life. It has also been described as the "wisdom that brings the person to the other shore." Our worldly existence is that of its highs and lows, where the mind is constantly changing its configurations, that create various kinds of emotions and thoughts of fear, anger, anxiety, love and hate etc. There is no stability in such a mind. But to arrive at the other shore is to realise a pure tranquilised condition. The attainment of this wisdom consciousness is possible through the cultivation of the 'perfections' of charity (*dana*), purity or self discipline (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), desirelessness (*viraga* or *vairagya*), diligence or vigour (*virya*), profound meditation (*dhyana*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

When we consider the individual steps, it becomes clear as to the kind of preparation that a person needs to make and to cultivate the virtues that have been suggested. *The Voice of Silence* refers to *dana* as the key of charity and love immortal. There is no better description of such a charitable and loving spirit then the one given by St. Paul to the Corinthians to whom he said :

Charity suffereth long, and is kind: charity envieth not: charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth: beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth. (*Corinthians 13*)

The charity referred to here is not merely the giving of alms but a giving of one-self unreservedly and unconditionally in service without any kind of expectations for the fruits of action. In the *Bhagavad Gita* such action has been termed as *Nishkama karma*. Humans find it easy to donate to some charity or other to ease the conscience, but find it difficult to serve others by giving of time and listening to the problems of others sympathetically. Charity also signifies generosity of spirit to bear equanimity when others do not act in the manner that one may consider right and proper. The example of The Christ providing refuge to the woman, accused of adultery, and protecting her from the crowds surging forward to throw stones, is indicative of such charity (*John* 8:6-11).

The second virtue that needs cultivation is that of *sila* which has been explained as "The key of harmony in word and act, the key that counterbalances the causes and the effect, and leaves no further room for karmic action." It is described as good conduct. *At the Feet of the Master* describes this good conduct as *shatasampatti* or the six virtues of *sama* (mental control), *dama* (control of action), *uparati* (tolerance - accepting people as they are), *titiksha* (endurance of all pain and sorrow with equanimity), *samadhana* (one pointedness) and *shraddha* (trust in the Master and oneself). Through the daily practice of these virtues an inner process of purification takes place.

The third virtue is *kshanti* or patience sweet that nought can ruffle. It is the cultivation of that state of mind where no ups and downs of life, no successes or failures and pains can influence the peace and harmony of the being and the mind remains like the placid waters of a translucent lake.

The fourth virtue is that of *viraga* or *vairagya* that is indifference to pleasure and to pain. It is the realisation of the transitory-ness of worldly life, resulting in a state of dispassion and indifference to things, which commonly sway men. With a deeper understanding, the aspirant realises that pleasures and pains are illusory and result from incorrect perceptions of the nature of things.

The fifth virtue is *virya*. As the *Voice of the Silence* states, "it is the dauntless energy that fights its way to the supernal truth, out of the mire of lies terrestrial." It is dauntless courage under every kind of trial and tribulation in life.

The sixth virtue is *dhyana*, a state of deep contemplation that leads to the realm of *Sat* (truth) eternal. It is dhyana or meditation that leads to the realisation of the higher self.

The seventh being the state of *prajna*, which means wisdom as a state of consciousness. This last paramita is the resultant state of wisdom after the attainment of the other virtues that the aspirant on the path develops.

Some scriptures refer to ten stages or virtues of development that lead to Buddha-hood (Avatamsaka Sutra-Note 1). The development of these virtues to their perfection is an effort that spans over many life times; but the aspirant perseveres with dedication and faith to reach his goal.

This is the path of the Bodhisattvas and the Mahatmas who are the guardians and protectors of mankind.

Dr. Annie Besant was once asked a question:

Who will be the builders of the new civilisation?

Her reply was very pertinent:

Those who are growing into the spiritual life, those who cannot be happy while others are miserable, those whose meals are rendered bitter by the starvation of the poor, those whose luxury is a burden because of the wants of the miserable and only those who shall sacrifice that others may be happy.



Annie Besant

Dr. Besant set up The Theosophical Order of Service to ensure that the wisdom teachings of Theosophy did not remain mere ideals

but living tools of service for the less fortunate members of humanity and other forms of life. The duty of the Theosophist is to develop the virtues required for the path of service by a determined and conscious effort. It is also to learn the divine wisdom that is Theosophy so that he may teach and enlighten the minds of men towards a more spiritual and harmonious way of living.

The Buddha's advice for the development of sensitivity, compassion and love of the Bodhisattva was the practice of the four meditations of love, pity, joy and equanimity. The first meditation is the meditation of love in which the aspirant must so adjust his heart that he longs for the weal and welfare of all beings. The second meditation is that of pity in which the aspirant thinks of all beings in distress, vividly representing in his imagination their sorrow and anxieties so as to arouse a deep compassion for them in his soul.

The third meditation is that of joy, in which the aspirant thinks of the prosperity of others and rejoices with their rejoicings. The fourth meditation is the meditation on serenity, in which the aspirant so adjusts the heart that it rises above love and hate, tyranny and oppression, wealth and want, and regards its own fate with impartial calmness and perfect tranquillity. The practice of these meditations and the cultivation of the Paramitas leads to the awakening of the Buddha or Christ Consciousness within the aspirant's heart and places the person on The Path of The Bodhisattva's or Mahatmas.

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Notes:

1. The 10 grounds or 10 stages to Bodhisattvahood are:

1) Pramudita (Great Joy): It is said that being close to enlightenment and seeing the benefit for all sentient beings, one achieves great joy, hence the name. In this bhumi, the Bodhisattva's practice all perfections (parmitas), but especially emphasizing generosity (dana).

2) Vimala (Stainless): In accomplishing the second bhumi, the Bodhisattva is free from the stains of immorality, therefore the bhumi is named "stainless". The emphasized perfection is moral discipline (sila).

3) Prabhakari (Luminous): The third bhumi is termed "luminous", because for a Bodhisattva who accomplishes this bhumi, the light of Dharma is said to radiate for others from the Bodhisattva. The emphasized perfection is patience (Ksanti).

4) Arcismati (Radiant): This bhumi is called "radiant" because it is said to be like a radiating light that fully burns that which opposes enlightenment. The emphasized virtue is vigour (virya).

5) Sudurjaya (Very difficult to train): Bodhisattva's who attain this bhumi strive to help sentient beings attain maturity, and do not become emotionally involved when such beings respond negatively, both of which are very difficult to do. The emphasized perfection is meditative concentration (dhyana).

6) Abhimukti (Obviously transcendent): By depending on the perfection of wisdom, the Bodhisattva does not abide in either samsara or nirvana, so this state is "obviously transcendent". The emphasized perfection is wisdom (prajna).

7) Durangama (Gone afar): The particular emphasis is on the perfection of skilful means (upaya), to help others.

8) Acala (Immovable): The emphasized virtue is aspiration. This, the "immovable" bhumi, is the bhumi at which one becomes able to choose his place of birth.

9) Sadhumati (Good discriminating wisdom): The emphasizes virtue is power

10) Dharma-megha (Cloud of Dharma): The emphasized virtue is primordial wisdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
BHUPENDRA VORA

Bhupendra Vora has been a member of the Theosophical Society since 1976. He has served as Chairman of the Nairobi Lodge of the TS in Kenya and also as General Secretary of The TS in East & Central Africa. He is currently a member of the General Council of the International Society at Adyar.



Bhupendra has been writing regularly for the Society's international magazine, *The Theosophist* published in Adyar, India. His articles have also been published in many of the Theosophical journals around the world and a book titled *Healing the Planet*, showcasing a collection of his various talks and articles, was published by the East African Section in 2005.

Bhupendra is a popular speaker - having lectured all over Africa, at the International Conventions in India and recently at the World Congress in Rome and at last years Foundation For Theosophical Studies Summer School in Liverpool.

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