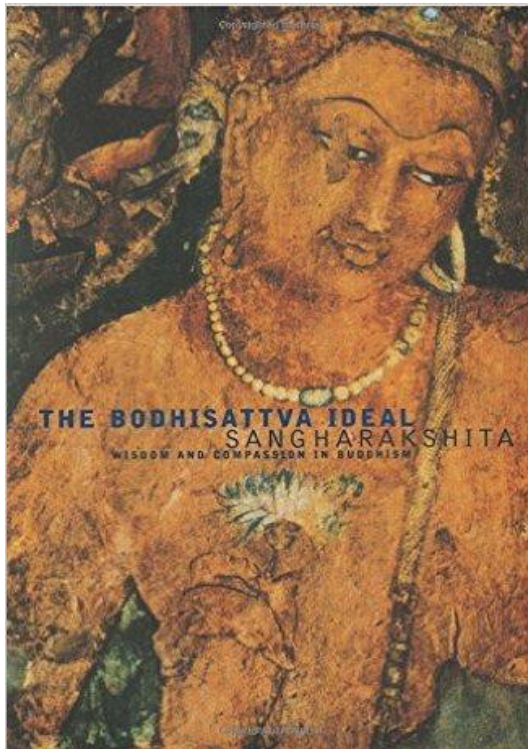


## BOOK REVIEW

### THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL : Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism

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### Introduction

The book titled “THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism” was the work of Sangharakshita, a Buddhist teacher and writer and founder of the Western Buddhist Order (WBO) and Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in Britain. Sangharakshita is a Dharma name of Dennis Lingwood, a British who was ordained as Theravadin bhikkhu in the period

following the Second World War, which took him as a conscript to India. After studying for some years under leading teachers from the major Buddhist traditions, he went on to teach and write extensively and he spent over 20 years in Asia. He has authored more than 60 books, including compilations of his talks, and has been referred as “one of the most prolific and influential Buddhists of our era” (Smith & Novak, 2004) and as “the founding father of Western Buddhism” (Berkwitz, 2006).

This book is based on lectures given in London in 1969, supplemented by points from seminars on the Bodhisattva Ideal given by Sangharakshita in 1984 and 1986. The combination of the teachings provides an assessment of the Bodhisattva Ideal which is thoughtful and pragmatic. Sangharakshita places the ideal of the Bodhisattva within the context of the entire Buddhist tradition, demonstrating how we can engage with the vision of our potential and make our lives worthwhile. The book of 245 pages comprises eight chapters. The first three chapters address the origin and development of the Bodhisattva ideal, the awakening of the Bodhi heart, and the Bodhisattva vow, respectively. The next three chapters focus on the six Perfections which are described in three pairs, i.e., dana & sila, ksanti & virya, and dhyana & prajña. The last two chapters deal with the Bodhisattva hierarchy and the Buddha and Bodhisattva, respectively.

### **The Emergence of the Concept**

The concept of ‘Bodhisattva ideal’ emerged a few hundred years after the Buddha’s parinirvana to represent the ideal of the Buddha. The emergence of concept was in response to dissatisfaction toward a narrow, individualistic conception of Enlightenment. Ananda was said to be the first exemplar of the Bodhisattva ideal in that he looked after the Buddha all the time rather than thinking about his own needs. The Bodhisattva ideal is described as an ideal Buddhist who recognizes that to gain Enlightenment; he/she must develop both wisdom and compassion, both the self-regarding and the other-regarding aspects of the spiritual life. This is the basic polarity: Enlightenment within, through wisdom, manifesting without, through compassion.

One becomes a Bodhisattva upon the awakening of the ‘Bodhicitta’, which was translated by Sangharakshita as the ‘will to Enlightenment’. The

author characterizes the arising of bodhicitta as a profound spiritual non-personal experience. To the contrary of general understanding, he emphasizes that individuals do not possess the bodhicitta. There is only one bodhicitta, in which individuals participate, or which individuals manifest, to varying degrees and this means that the bodhicitta is more likely to arise in a spiritual community, a situation of intense mutual spiritual friendship and encouragement. He viewed that from a purely spiritual perspective, what was originally meant by Stream Entry [Skt: Srotapanna] is more or less the same as what is meant by the arising of the bodhicitta and in a sense the two ideas are interchangeable. Both involve a transcendence of the concepts of self and others. There is only one spiritual path for all- the conventional two paths (Arhant and Bodhisattva) are simply different ways of looking at the one path.

### **The Contradictions inherent in the Path and the Synthesis**

The Bodhisattva ideal is viewed as the synthesis of the contradictions inherent in the path: the contradiction between dana and Sila, and the contradictions apparently inherent in the so-called goal, such as those between wisdom and compassion, samsara and nirvana. While dana – literally giving or generosity- is the practical, altruistic aspect of the Bodhisattva's life and activity, Sila embodies the more self-regarding aspect of the Bodhisattva's life and is connected with the idea of self-purification. Whereas dana is the antidote to craving, ksanti, the third perfection, is the antidote to anger. Three principal aspects of ksanti: forbearance, tolerance, and spiritual activity, have been mentioned. To balance ksanti in all its forms, virya is needed. The words 'virya' means potency, driving force, energy, vigour. In a sense, all the other paramitas depend upon virya. Spiritual life requires spiritual energy. There are various ways of unblocking, conserving, and refining one's energy. When one's energies are all flowing in this one direction, no longer divided, the Bodhisattva becomes the embodiment of energy for the benefit of all sentient beings. Virya and ksanti are viewed as representing a definite polarity in the spiritual life, and two radically different approaches to spiritual practice, one [virya] stressing self-help while the other [ksanti] emphasizes dependence upon a power outside oneself. A Bodhisattva combines both approaches, practicing both patience and vigour,

because both are necessary. The successful outcome will be finding a balance between these two perfections.

To help understand the fifth and sixth perfections, dhyana and prajña, the author refers to two principal modes of human communication which are of equal importance. The language of concepts engages the conscious mind, the rational intelligence, while the language of images or symbolism, being more concrete, immediate, and vivid, tends to move us at deeper levels; it appeals to our unconscious depths. Dhyana is referred to as basically comprising two things: states of consciousness above and beyond those of the ordinary mind, and meditation practices that lead to the experience of these higher states of consciousness. None of the superconscious states constitutes Enlightenment; they involve no direct contact with ultimate reality. Prajña is knowledge in the extreme, that is, knowledge of reality, of sunyata. While dhyana and prajña are distinct paramitas, they can also be considered as a unified pair.

When the author addresses the subject of Bodhisattva hierarchy, he focuses on the spiritual hierarchy, which was described as: a spontaneous feeling of devotion when one encounters something higher; a spontaneous overflowing of compassion when one is confronted by other people's distress or difficulty, and a spontaneous welling up of love and sympathy when one is among one's peers. These are the emotions that should influence the whole Buddhism community. The Bodhisattva hierarchy concentrates all this into a single focal point of dazzling intensity.

### **Difference between the Bodhisattva's path and goal**

The last chapter attempts to describe the difference of Bodhisattva path from the goal in that the path is in the dimension of time, while the goal is in the dimension of eternity. The two -eternity and time, the goal and the path- are by definition discontinuous, discrete. The Bodhisattva represents the dimension of time because the Bodhisattva path is followed in time. But the Buddha represents the dimension of eternity. The Buddha represents the goal, and the goal is attained out of time. Nevertheless, the author concludes that Buddha and Bodhisattva represent different aspects of one- the same- reality. It

is this realization that constitutes the arising of the absolute bodhicitta [Enlightenment].

### **Overall Evaluation**

Overall, the book of Sangharakshita shows [seemingly] contradictory or distinct concepts of Buddhist schools in which he later on presents the Bodhisattva ideal as the one who synthesizes or unifies these concepts. The author's premise is that the Bodhisattva is a living contradiction, a living union of opposites at the highest possible level. The author starts with the concept of the Bodhisattva ideal which originated from the dissatisfaction of the Arhant ideal in terms of the latter's focus on self-regarding aspect. The author argues that though the Pali canon does not emphasize compassion as much, the canon does not ignore compassion aspect as this is obviously shown in the quality of the Buddha. The implication is that the Arhant ideal has other-regarding aspect while the Bodhisattva ideal synthesizes opposites- other-regarding and self-regarding. Based on the indiscrete distinction between the Bodhisattva ideal and the Arhant ideal, the Bodhisattva path and the Arhant path are explained as simply different ways of looking at the one path.

The experience on the path was suggested as being multifaceted where the Stream Entry being one of the facets and the arising of bodhicitta being another. The method that Sangharakshita used to unify or synthesize the distinct concepts is to point out factors that are common across the concepts. In terms of practice, his suggestion is also based on the combination of the concepts from distinctive schools, that is, to practice like the Theravada while holding a vision of the Bodhisattva.

### **Contributions and Some Weaknesses**

The comparison and combination of the contrasting concepts mainly from the Theravada and the Mahayana Buddhism can contribute to better understandings of the audience towards the aspects of the concepts. The author, however, did not stop at only the distinct concepts between these two Buddhist schools, he also addresses the distinct concepts within Mahayana Buddhism itself. For instance, he indicates that dhyana and prajña are distinct

paramitas but can also be considered as a unified pair citing from Hui-Neng, the sixth Patriarch of the Chinese Dhyana School who said that in name they are two things, but in substance they are one and the same. Besides the method of synthesis, the author also shows that in some cases distinct concepts coexist.

For example, the author specifies that together, the bodhicitta and the Bodhisattva vow make provision for both unity and variety. While the source of unity comes from the Bodhisattvas all participating in one bodhicitta, the variety occurs at the same time since each Bodhisattva expresses or manifests that one bodhicitta in his or her own way in terms of life and work. Despite the author's attempt to unify concepts, some rationales for unifying concepts are weak and the author's logic seems to fall through along the explanation process. For instance, the author states that from a purely spiritual perspective, the idea of the Stream Entry and the arising of the bodhicitta is more or less the same and the two ideas are interchangeable.

However, the author also posits that individuals do not possess the bodhicitta; rather they participate in or manifest the bodhicitta. This position is not the quality of the Stream Entry where each individual can attain Enlightenment by himself/herself and not by participating in the higher universal spiritual qualities. The two concepts still remain distinctive, though. The author made quite a good job in explaining the origin and development of the Bodhisattva ideal as well as the two key qualities under the book's title: wisdom and compassion. Wisdom and compassion are vivid in the Buddha's life and character.

The Bodhisattva ideal, which is viewed as representing the Buddha, synthesizes the opposites: helping others and also helping oneself, compassion and wisdom, altruism and individualism. Wisdom is necessary for own enlightenment whereas compassion is necessary for leading others to enlightenment. Altruism and individualism are synthesized in particular through the practice of the first two of the six perfections: dana and Sila. Dana is the practical, altruistic aspect of the Bodhisattva's life and activity while Sila embodies the more self-regarding aspect of the Bodhisattva's [moral] life and is connected with the idea of self-purification. The possibility of conflict between

dana and Sila is to be resolved based on Santideva's suggestion of doing everything mindfully, with thought, reflection, care and awareness.

Besides the pair of dana and Sila, the author addresses the other four perfections by pairing them in two pairs of contrasting perfections: ksanti (forbearance) and virya (vigor), and dhyana (consciousness) and prajña (knowledge of reality) and then attempts to have the Bodhisattva ideal combine them. The point is that these pairs of perfections can be viewed as supporting rather than contrasting each other in their functions. Sangharakshita views that virya is clearly the more active, assertive, creative while ksanti is the more passive, receptive, and quiescent of the pair and they represent a definite polarity in the spiritual life, the former stressing self-help and the latter stressing power outside oneself. This statement is arguable since both ksanti and virya stress self-help. A bodhisattva needs to restrain own self and needs to be vigorous in practicing the paramitas. In addition, from the functional aspect, virya and ksanti are not polarity; rather ksanti and other perfections depend upon virya. Similarly, the pair of dhyana and prajña does not represent polarity. Dhyana can provide a basis to cultivate prajña, which is knowledge in the extreme, knowledge of reality.

In addition to the unification theme all across the book, the book has another interesting feature. It was written by the westerner whose root belief was in Christian religion but was exposed to the teachings of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism for a long life period. His book thus reflects here and there the view of Christianity, the Pali canon, a few Mahayana sutras, and the Tibetan view with regard to a few subjects. Frequently, the questions will be raised from the aspect of laity who needs to know more about the concepts or subjects and the answers will be provided and compared from a variety of perspectives. For example, the author states that the arising of the bodhicitta is analogous to the descent upon, in full force, of the Holy Spirit.

His explanation is that if the term God is used to signify some sort of spiritual transcendental element in the universe, the two notions which generally express quite contrary spiritual positions can be viewed as having something in common. Some reviewer such as Hayes (2001) shares the view that Sangharakshita attempt to find common things across schools. He describes

Sangharakshita as manifesting the non-sectarian spirit by, for example, showing that the practices and basic attitudes of all forms of Buddhism were remarkably similar, so that the differences in doctrine can be seen more as differences in emphasis and literary style than differences in how Buddhists lived and practiced. (Hayes, 2001 : 220- 221)

### **Arguable Aspects**

While the book makes good contributions to the audience in terms of contrasting concepts, it also comes with weaknesses in the explanations as previously mentioned. The notion of three contrasting pairs which comprise the six Perfections is also not supported by the others. Oldmeadow (1997), for example, states that the practice of the six Perfections is simultaneous, all of them being informed by the all-embracing ideals of karuna and prajna. Besides, some concepts of Sangharakshita, especially those that are contrary to general understandings, need more elaboration. For example, the author emphasizes that individuals do not possess the bodhicitta; rather individuals participate in or manifest the one bodhicitta. He used this notion of one universal bodhicitta citing the incident of 500 Licchavi youths who present their 500 parasols to the Buddha who then turns the parasols into one spectacularly huge canopy according to the Vimlakirti-nirdeSa sutra to support his claim. However, this seems contradictory to the notion that each individual has Buddha nature within, the notion of the sutra such as the Tathagatagarbha sutra. (Williams & Tribe, 2000: 162)

The inconsistency and arguability of several conceptual standpoints can lower the usefulness of the book for practitioners. At first the book seems to provide good ideas about the spiritual life of a Bodhisattva ideal who is depicted as a representative of the Buddha and a model to be followed by practitioners. However, as one reads through the book, one may be confused of how to follow the practice of the Bodhisattva ideal since the Bodhisattva ideal is viewed as a vision (a guide) and the author suggests that the Theravada Buddhism is closer to actual situation in every day practice. The audience may be left somewhat confused as a result of the author's attempt to collapse two notions or two paths into one path.



The implication is that the practitioner selects between the Bodhisattva practices or Pali canon, whichever fits the situation. The practitioner can swing back and forth between these two paths, which in a sense, as the author initially indicates, there is one path, and finally at the end of the path, one do not find anything at all. In the last chapter, the author indicates that the Bodhisattva path and the goal of Enlightenment are discontinuous; the former represents the dimension of time while the latter represents the dimension of eternity. The author thus can unify only the two paths but he stops at unifying the goals. It seems obvious that the goals are distinct since according to the Theravada Buddhism, the goal of Enlightenment is within the dimension of time- it can be achieved within the life time while the Enlightenment of the Bodhisattva is stated by the author to be attained out of time.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the book of Sangharakshita contributes in its coverage of contrasting key concepts in rival Buddhist schools and within the Mahayana school although the concepts (such as compassion and wisdom) may not seem contrasting by others. Despite the logical inconsistencies and weaknesses in some rationales for the concepts, the author can write an interesting book that is not too lengthy about the Bodhisattva ideal based on his view as a westerner who used to be ordained and learnt about Buddhism. The concepts of the Bodhisattva ideal and the three pairs of Perfections have been addressed while other key concepts such as Sunyata, Buddhahood, and ultimate reality had been mentioned to some extent with the backdrop of the importance of spiritual community.

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