

Visions of Mahayana Buddhism: Nagapriya
Talk 2: the Bodhisattva Ideal

Bodhisattva = Awakening Being

Recap of First Talk

- Mahayana as a dimension of the imagination as well as historical traditions
- Mahayana and Triyana system
- Six distinctive features of Mahayana Buddhism

Bodhisattva Ideal

- Most sublime spiritual ideal ever conceived?

Aims

- Outline background/context for BSI – especially Arhat Ideal
- Describe the bodhisattva path/goal – six (ten) perfections and ten stages
- Explore evolution of BSI

Background to the Bodhisattva Ideal

- Early Buddhism: Arhat Ideal (Shravaka-yana; 'Way of Hearers')
- Four Stages:
 1. Stream Entry
 2. Once-returner
 3. Non-returner
 4. Arhat
- Arhat ideal emphasised release from cycle of birth/death
- Emphasised renunciation
- Awakening took place within Buddha's dispensation
- Arhat does not play cosmic role of a Buddha
- Seeds of fully developed Bodhisattva Ideal (BSI) evident in Nikaya canons
- In Nikaya canons the BSI was for the exceptional few (such as the Buddha)

Features of Bodhisattva Ideal (bodhisattva-yana)

- COMPASSIONATE: emphasised RETURN to help beings - Vow
- Does the bodhisattva 'postpone' awakening?
- COSMIC: BS aims to save all beings
- TRANSHISTORICAL/ETERNAL: Takes a long time (eons)
- Culminates in becoming a Buddha, not just an Arhat
- In early MY texts, such as Ugra's Questions, BSI is for exalted few – spiritual superhero
- UNIVERSAL: later BSI became the universal ideal for MY

- Spiritual life unfolds in a cosmic context
- MYTHIC: unrealisable? Cosmic myth rather than human goal?
- Many of BSI practices same as Arhat practices
- Difference is: imaginative context

Bodhichitta: 'mind of Awakening'

How does BC arise?

- Anuttarapuja (supreme worship); devotional (*Bodhicaryavatara*)
- Rehearsing bodhisattva path

The Bodhisattva Vow

Four Great Vows:

May I deliver all beings from difficulties (compassion)

1. May I eradicate all defilements (ethics)
2. May I master all dharmas (wisdom/skilful means)
3. May I attain complete Enlightenment (liberation)

The Six Paramitas

1. Generosity
2. Ethics
3. Patience
4. Energy
5. Meditation
6. Wisdom

The Ten Bhumis (grounds/stages)

- Stages or stations of awakening
- Mythic presentations of sublime spiritual states

Skilful Means (Upaya Kaushalya)

1. Ethical principle: skilful means is the activity of a bodhisattva, which is oriented towards the liberation of all other beings; may transgress conventional ethics

Keown's concept of Upaya¹ and Upaya²: normative ethics and awakened ethics.

Upaya²: province of transhistorical bodhisattvas?

2. Magical performances/supernormal powers (see *Vimalakirti Sutra*)
3. Teaching strategy

Cosmic Bodhisattvas

- Idea that BSI beyond the reach of mere mortals - suprahuman
- Notion that higher beings are 'reaching down'
- Cosmic figures emerge in texts
- Seen as capable of helping beings/fulfilling worldly ends
- BSI fulfilled vicariously

Three bodhisattvas

- Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin/Kannon: bodhisattva of compassion
- Manjushri/Wenshu/Monju: bodhisattva of wisdom
- Kshitigarbha/Dizang/Jizo: bodhisattva of 'underworld'; protector of deceased children

Further Reading: Nagapriya. 2009. *Visions of Mahayana Buddhism*, Cambridge: Windhorse, chapters 3-4.