

Bodhisattva Zen

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To understand bodhisattva action we must first understand bodhisattvas. A common definition of a bodhisattva is one who vows to postpone her complete liberation in order to help all sentient beings realize enlightenment. This is usually taken to mean that the practitioner aspiring to the bodhisattva path vows to return to samsara lifetime after lifetime until all beings have been completely liberated. At first glance, this seems like the ultimate sacrifice and self negation—kind of a Super Suffering Grandmother (Q: How many Suffering Grandmothers does it take to screw in a lightbulb. A: “Never mind me, I’ll just sit here in the dark”) who takes on the enormous task of universal salvation to remain in the darkness of samsara for an eternity. This bodhisattva’s action also seems dualistic. We imagine there are countless beings here at point A in samsara. I, the bodhisattva, will get them over there to point B in Nirvana, but then they will be free and I the bodhisattva will remain bound.

As we imagine the bodhisattva doing her job, it seems that it will take quite a while, æons in fact; not quite the instantaneous quality of which the Zen Masters speak. As we see our model bodhisattva going about her job, we can imagine oceans of thoughts, discriminations, choices and judgements about just how to go about one’s task. Even the largest supercomputer would lack the capacity to store all these pieces, let alone put them together. If we then hear Zen Master Seung Sahn say, “just do it” or “put it all down,” we might assume that he couldn’t be using such simple direct words to teach this seemingly complex task. And so we might decide that Zen and bodhisattvas or bodhisattva action have little to do with each other. Perhaps being a bodhisattva is some preparatory phase of practice, perhaps Zen is just something done to oneself—a one-seat rocket to the moon of peace and tranquility. But of course this isn’t true, for the heart of Zen practice is nothing other than

the bodhisattva path. And the ultimate fruit of Zen is the salvation of *all* beings:

“...someone who has set out in the vehicle of bodhisattva should think in this manner. As many beings as there are in the universe of beings... as far as any conceivable form of beings is conceived: All these I must lead to Nirvana, into that Realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, in fact no beings at all have been led to Nirvana. And why? If in a bodhisattva the notion of a ‘being’ should take place, he could not be called a bodhisattva, in whom the notion of a self or of a being should take place, or the notion of a living soul or a person.”

The Diamond Sutra

We can see from this quote that while a bodhisattva engages in the paramitas or virtues of generosity, morality, patience, vigor and meditation again and again in thousands of ways, she “seals” all of these actions with the sixth paramita: wisdom that perceives the emptiness of self and other. One thus avoids what we call the “Suffering Grandmother Syndrome” of self-abnegation and deprivation. The combination of compassion, which acts in countless ways, and wisdom, which is “not doing,” provides a perfect balance between the extremes of “is” and “is not.” The bodhisattva poised here at this middle point is not thinking that by helping all beings, she herself is being neglected or left “in the dark.” Here, form (compassion) is emptiness and emptiness form.

If we look at the wisdom of emptiness a bit more deeply, the non-self of bodhisattva actions and of sentient beings all seem more and more of one piece.

Our concept of samsara and nirvana or bodhisattvas and sentient beings as separate begins to dissolve. It begins to seem that we all breathe together, suffer together, and we are liberated as one body. The bodhisattva here is not thinking that by helping all beings she is left behind in anyway. Nirvana is not “over there,” nor is samsara “over here,” and there is no real coming and going between them. As the bodhisattva continues down this convergent path, she comes to an experience without form (i.e. compassion or bodhisattva action) and without emptiness. Just HIT.

“One evening... a student asked Seung Sahn Soen-Sa, ‘When you say you are here to help save all people, does that mean only to help them get enlightened or also to save them from hunger, war and pain?’

Soen-Sa said, ‘I have already finished saving all people.’

There was a long silence.....

‘Do you understand what this means?’

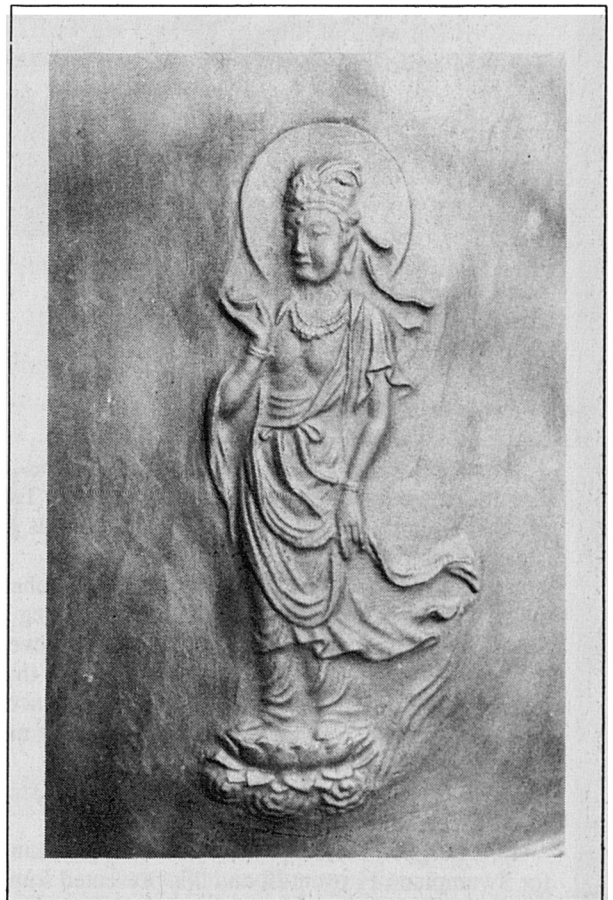
Another long silence.....

‘Put it all down. Okay?’”

Here Zen Master Seung Sahn is showing the face of a Zen bodhisattva. There are no æons of time spent in bodhisattva action here. There is no need to sift discriminations or judgements, no need to decide intellectually how to best help.

This is the pinnacle of bodhisattvahood—as completely natural and spontaneous as the growth of an apple on a tree or the falling of spring rain. By remaining completely one’s true self, benefit naturally arises—benefit has already arisen. By letting one’s mind remain clear like a mirror, one’s actions naturally reflect the situation one is in. Not holding to any concept of self, the bodhisattva rests in the “big I” that

The bodhisattva on the outside bell at Providence Zen Center



already saves all people. So here simple words work best: “put it down,” “just do it,” “only go straight.” These phrases point directly to the deepest and most direct bodhisattva action—the action of Zen. ☸

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