

Humanism, Buddhism, and the Bodhisattva Ideal

by Tim Barger

Gerald Larue categorizes Buddha as a freethinker, noting “when the Buddha rejected Hinduism with its multitude of gods and began his independent quest for the meaning of human existence, he became a freethinker or an independent thinker within the social and religious context of ancient India.” But Larue ascribes... a belief in gods that have limitations: “Buddha rejected religious devotion to a god as a way of salvation. He accepted a practical atheism; the universe abounded in gods, goddesses, demons and other nonhuman powers and agencies, but all without exception were finite, subject to death and rebirth.”

I am a religious humanist. My religion, like Buddhism, is not theistic. Like Buddhism, my religion is spiritual. However, I struggle with the concept of the supernatural in Buddhism. I am a humanist who does not give credence to the supernatural as an actuality. I can discuss the concept; I see mythology and allegory in things not explainable by science, logic, and reason; but I recognize that we 21st-century humans have not discovered all there is to be discovered in the natural realm, and we haven't explained everything that happens or could happen in the world. I am content that some things cannot be explained—yet—and I resist attributing something unexplained to the supernatural as a form of justification. Recognition of Siddhartha Gautama as a human who achieved ultimate knowledge is something I can grasp. What I have trouble understanding are the bodhisattvas when they're considered to be supernatural beings.

Translated from Sanskrit, *bodhisattva* means “enlightenment being,”¹ a being we normally think of in human form who chooses not to enter nirvana—chooses not to be a buddha—but who instead practices the bodhisattva ideal: actively guiding others along the path to buddhahood, taking on the suffering of others, and giving the bodhisattva's own merit to others. Some bodhisattvas are said to have been real people—as the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Shakyamuni Buddha, was—but others are considered mythical or existing in other realms. In the stories of bodhisattvas, the beings are often given supernatural qualities. It is the supernatural aspect that gives me pause; I look for the human qualities in these stories, and for inspiration in my spiritual practice I look to the bodhisattvas whose work is said to be on the human plane.

Vimalakirti is the bodhisattva I see as the best fit with humanism (along with Shakyamuni Buddha), and in Vimalakirti's story I can consider humanism and Buddhism, the supernatural aspects of Buddhism, bodhisattvas, and the bodhisattva ideal.

There are many ways to define the term humanism, both as a philosophical concept and a religious one. The American Humanist Association states, “Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.”² The Unitarian Universalist Association describes humanism on its Web site:

Humanism is a philosophy that stresses the human aspect of life here and now, and puts the responsibility for ethical behavior upon each individual. Humanism also focuses on rational rather than supernatural religious explanations. Modern-

day Religious Humanism is largely derived from the writings of early American Unitarian Humanists, including Joseph Priestley, Thomas Jefferson, and John Haynes Holmes.³

There is also Buddhist humanism, with varying definitions, practiced in the Soka Gakkai movement and by other Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama. One definition of Buddhist humanism, from the Mahbodhi Maitri Mandala in America, states:

Buddhist Humanism is a philosophy which encompasses all Buddhist teachings from the time of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, to that of the present day. The goal of Buddhist Humanism is expressed within the Bodhisattva ideal, by becoming an energetic, enlightened, and endearing person dedicated to the welfare and liberation of all sentient beings.

Buddhist Humanism focuses more on issues of the world, the suffering which occurs, rather than on how to leave the world behind; on caring for the living, rather than the dead; on benefiting others, rather than benefiting oneself; and on universal liberation, rather than cultivation for only oneself.⁴

This entry goes on to ascribe six characteristics to Buddhist humanism: humanism, emphasis on daily life, altruism, joyfulness, timeliness, and universality. For the humanism characteristic, it states:

The Buddha was neither a spirit, coming and going without leaving a trace, nor was he a figment of one's imagination. The Buddha was a living human being. Just like the rest of us, he had parents, a family, and he lived a life. It was through his human existence that he showed his supreme wisdom of compassion, ethical responsibility, and prajna-wisdom. Thus, he is a Buddha who was also a human being.⁵

Daisaku Ikeda, the president of Soka Gakkai International, compares the humanisms of the West and the East:

The humanism of the modern West—that is, the nontheistic philosophy advocating the possibility of human self-fulfillment without reliance on supernatural beings—is different from what I call the humanism of the East largely because of differences in origin. Humanism in the West came into being as a reaction against the doctrinaire suppression of freedom of thought and expression imposed by the Christian Church. In that it inspired earnest striving for objective truth and encouraged creativity in artistic, literary, and social fields, it produced much of value. The way in which humanism recognized the dignity of humanity and liberated human beings from slavery to God is laudable.

...
In general, in the Orient, in spite of despotic politics, and a tendency to formalism and ancient superstitions, religions have not attempted to put men's minds in bondage, to postulate faith in absolute gods, or to impose ethical codes in an

authoritarian manner. At least in the spiritual realm, they have consistently centered on humanity. In other words, the foundation of Oriental civilizations has been, in this sense, humanistic. But this Oriental version of humanism has never assumed the form of a philosophical movement and has never stimulated keen awareness nor upsurges of activity.

Far from attempting to impose bondage on the human mind, Buddhism, among the Oriental religions, teaches the importance of developing profound, rationally guided wisdom to overcome greed, the source of inner human bondage, and of harmony with the great rhythm of all things. This teaching has never, however, manifested itself as a consciously humanistic philosophy.

Nonetheless, realizing the nature of Western humanism, I feel certain that the theory and practice of this Buddhist teaching could become the basis for a new kind of humanism manifesting true human independence and dignity.⁶

Some scholars perceive the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Buddhism to be humanist. In *Engaged Buddhism: The Dalai Lama's Worldview*, Bharati Puri analyzes the Dalai Lama's recorded thought:

One distinct feature in the thought of the Dalai Lama is his flexible attitude to religion. His thoughts on religion are ruled by his consideration of the tolerance of dissent. His thought lacks the polemic rigidity that dogmatism would otherwise entail. In this sense he is also not strictly attached to the letter of Buddhist scriptures. He responds to queries about whether he is moving away from the "words" of the scriptures, which amounts to sacrilege, thus: "On the contrary, you would have to be crazy to maintain them with all your might in a world swept away by the movement of time. (For example, if science shows that the scriptures are mistaken, the scriptures have to be changed)."⁷

...

The Dalai Lama's contribution to religion primarily consists in conceiving a humanistic religion that centers on man and his life in this world. According to him, religion should pervade all human activity since it is not separate from life's other activities and cannot be pursued in seclusion from one's fellow beings.⁸

In a survey of the history of freethinking in the world, Gerald Larue categorizes Buddha as a freethinker, noting "when the Buddha rejected Hinduism with its multitude of gods and began his independent quest for the meaning of human existence, he became a freethinker or an independent thinker within the social and religious context of ancient India."⁹ But Larue ascribes to Buddha a belief in gods that have limitations: "Buddha rejected religious devotion to a god as a way of salvation. He accepted a practical atheism, which to say that 'He believed that the universe abounded in gods, goddesses, demons and other nonhuman powers and agencies, but all without exception were finite, subject to death and rebirth' [citing John B. Noss¹⁰]."¹¹

Having reached the pantheon of gods and goddesses, I bring bodhisattvas into the discussion. Bodhisattva archetypes which fit within my conception of humanism have some history as

possibly having been human, such as Shakyamuni Buddha, Manjushri, Maitreya, and Vimalakirti. For Shakyamuni, Larue states, “While... evidence does not prove the existence of Buddha, it does lend credibility to his life by demonstrating that Kapilavastu [said to be his birthplace] did exist and that shortly after Buddha’s death it became a shrine associated with his birth, life and death.”¹² Manjushri “is sometimes considered to be based on a historical person associated with Shakyamuni Buddha.”¹³ Maitreya was predicted by Buddha to “become the next incarnated Buddha in the distant future.”¹⁴ Vimalakirti “is not a cosmic, mythic bodhisattva, but is depicted in the [*Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra*] as a historical lay follower of Shakyamuni who lived in the town of Vaishali in northeastern India (although in terms of modern historical studies there is no basis for believing he was an actual historical disciple of the Buddha...).”¹⁵ While there is no solid evidence that any of these bodhisattvas actually existed, in the sutras they all are described as having a human existence. In my struggles to accept the concept of bodhisattva in my humanist orientation, I remember that, as Leighton wrote, “Bodhisattvas can be awesome in their power, radiance, and wisdom; or they can be as ordinary as your next-door neighbor,”¹⁶ and I feel affinity for the ordinary ones, possibly based on historical people, who are also awe-inspiring in their acts.

As I stated above, Vimalakirti is the bodhisattva whom I see as fitting well in a humanist orientation. I see his position, a lay disciple of the Buddha, as adding to Vimalakirti’s credibility, for that put him in the secular world. Leighton states, “Vimalakirti’s teaching is about seeing through the trappings of religion to the spiritual heart of the wonder of reality. Vimalakirti playfully and magically demonstrates that this truth is always available to people and is not dependent on priestly intercession of hierarchical status, either worldly or spiritual”¹⁷—a humanist sentiment, though the magic is a challenge to science and reason. His altruism (using his wealth to benefit the impoverished, while living simply and advocating right mindfulness), his aligning with ordinary people, and even his job as a government official to take advantage of the official system for others all indicate someone with a deep purpose of helping others, which is both a humanist good deed and the bodhisattva ideal.

Key to the nature of Vimalakirti is his example to other bodhisattvas. While he lives his life, and “... in all his activities embodies the Mahayana view of being in the world but not of it, [he] fulfills liberative work without being trapped or fettered by worldly desires or attachments. But a central point of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* is that the bodhisattva can *only* awaken in the context of intimate contact and involvement with the follies and passions of the world and its beings.”¹⁸

Vimalakirti’s relationships with the Buddha’s disciples and fellow bodhisattvas is where my struggle with the supernatural comes in. My idea of a supernatural that I can accept as a concept is the story of Layman Pang, a lay practitioner and follower of Vimalakirti:

When his teacher asked Layman Pang about his daily activity, Pang responded that he did nothing special, but was naturally harmonious, neither grasping nor rejecting anything. Then Layman Pang uttered the famous line that his supernatural powers and wondrous activity were simply carrying water and chopping firewood. Layman Pang thus became the Chan/Zen model for seeing all the miraculous activity of Vimalakirti as incorporated nondualistically into common, everyday work activities.¹⁹

I have some discomfort in stating that I have rejected the supernatural in the religion of my heritage, and therefore by extension, that I reject the supernatural in all others. In a way, I think

that this is not respectful of others' beliefs, but I cannot believe just because others do. Instead, I translate for my own understanding, such as considering that supernatural sometimes means unexplained, unknown, or even mystery. Stephen Batchelor discusses the supernatural and (lack of) belief:

Despite our domination of the forces of nature and our highly developed technology, we have come to feel ourselves as empty, alienated, anxious, and lonely, without any real inner purpose or meaning to our existence. Therefore, to be viable and relevant, the religious answer needs to be constellated around the central themes of purposeful and meaningful existence, and has to be formulated without recourse to supernaturalistic doctrines and speculative metaphysics. It is no solution to naively adopt a belief-structure which was formulated for a different time when man was primarily concerned with the sufferings of embodied existence and salvation in an after-life.²⁰

When considering lessons in some of the stories of Vimalakirti, such as his room which he can transform to emptiness and then to hold 3.2 million thrones for all his bodhisattva guests in the room, I see illustrations of purpose and meaning, such as hospitality and nonattachment. But I struggle with hearing the stories and wondering about literalism. I know that this is, in part, storytelling. I don't know how many Buddhists consider the sutras to be literal, but I think many would understand much like I do that these tales that recount incidents of awe and wonder, describing beings that are in a way humans of a higher realm, are instructive to us who do all we can to help those close to us and keep ourselves from slipping into neglect. But this is also a non-Western approach. We in the West likely don't question our relation to reality enough. Olendzki explains:

... Buddhists regard every moment of consciousness as a synthetic event that is cobbled together out of presenting conditions, only to pass away as those conditions change to make way for the creation of a new configuration. The name given to this process... is *parikalpa* [from the *Madhyantavibhaga*, attributed to Maitreya], a constructed, arranged, worked-out fabrication of some feasible or appropriate version of things that we can take as a plausible semblance of reality for the purposes of stumbling from one moment to another. Such is the nature of human experience, all wishful thinking or projected hopes aside. It is an illusion, the outcome of a potent imagination.

...
Even though the mind is synthesizing a virtual world, and *even though* this imaginative connivance is ultimately ungrounded in anything "out there," it *nevertheless* is phenomenologically present.²¹

So reality itself is questioned as a concept. But it's difficult for me to reorient my thought process and break the familiarity of time and space as I live it. And in considering the supernatural aspect of bodhisattvas, once I set the (perceived im)possibilities of literalism aside, I do have ways to grasp the writings.

I can certainly comprehend archetypes, and Leighton's book presents major bodhisattvas as archetypes. Fictional or factual, it doesn't matter for a character who is representative of certain

qualities and illustrative of certain values. In my work, I speak of characters in fiction, and refer to characters in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures of the heritage in which I was raised. I don't believe that most of those characters existed in this world, particularly not in the manner in which they are depicted. Why then do I have trouble referring to the bodhisattvas and their supernatural qualities? I think it has to do with respect for the other, that I don't have the background in the Buddhist experience to speak of what might have cultural meaning for me, but no longer holds religious import in my theology. With Christian writings, I can say "this might hold importance for you" while having studied and rejected the importance in my life. I cannot do that with Buddhist texts, for I don't have familiarity with the writings or depth of practice in Buddhism. But I have begun to view the archetypes and the stories about them in my Western orientation, understanding there is a cultural divide—not just East/West, but differences in thinking that go beyond location. I can set aside supernatural skepticism, suspend my disbelief as I have frequently done in reading, watching, and hearing stories. Then I can build in the allegory and allusion, the elements of storytelling that support the point of the tale.

I acknowledge a tendency to put a dualistic frame around the concepts of natural and supernatural, ascribing something as either natural or not. That is limiting. I can tie thoughts of "natural" to permanence, which does not acknowledge the Buddha's proclaiming "the universality of impermanence (*anitya*) rather than permanent being..."²² although this concept of permanence more aptly is applied to the human condition than the state of the cosmos. Taitetsu Unno notes Vimalakirti's approach to dualism:

The criticism of dualistic or dichotomous thinking was...succinctly made by Vimalakirti when he said, 'Enlightenment is without duality, since there are no minds and no things' [citation omitted]. This refers to the lack of a conceptualized subject (no minds) and a conceptualized object (no things). When we no longer live in the realm of abstractions and conceptualizations, having broken through them by living the life of non-duality, we walk the Middle Path, realizing for the first time our true subjectivity, as well as the true subjectivity of others.²³

I guess my work, even if subconscious, has been to realize the Middle Path within my humanism. Batchelor's writing on unbelief is helpful here:

An agnostic Buddhist eschews atheism as much as theism, and is as reluctant to regard the universe as devoid of meaning as endowed with meaning. For to deny either God or meaning is simply the antithesis of affirming them. Yet such an agnostic stance is not based on disinterest. It is founded on a passionate recognition that *I do not know*. It confronts the enormity of having been born instead of reaching for the consolation of a belief. It strips away, layer by layer, the views that conceal the mystery of being here—either by affirming it as something or denying it as nothing.²⁴

Andrew Olendzki describes the reorientation of religious thought:

It is often taken for granted that all religion points beyond the here and now to something wholly other, and that the value of this is entirely derived from the value of that. I think the Buddha had a very different view, one that is

particularly suited to the postmodern world we are beginning to inhabit. The ontological ground has been pulled out from under us by every discovery of the new sciences over the last century, and increasingly isolated islands of religious bedrock are surrounded by shifting currents of diversity. The conventional wisdom has always been that we would be lost without some kind of transcendent grounding, and that human values, aspirations, and responsibilities would flounder without divine guidance.

The Buddha appears to have seen it the other way around. Clinging to a rock while being battered by waves only causes damage, while letting go and learning to swim freely in the changing waters can result in a great sense of meaning and well-being. We can accept the fact that our world-building apparatus is imperfect (*parakalpa*), and even that our world and our selves are ultimately not real (*abhuta*), while at the same time learning to pay ever closer attention to the flow of experience that is presenting itself to awareness (*asti*). We can rely upon the self-organizing principles of nature to build for ourselves a meaningful world, as long as we take care to do so in healthy rather than unhealthy ways. Having seen the empty nature of it all a long time ago, Buddhists went on to organize a way of life around such qualities as kindness, compassion, truthfulness, understanding, and, above all, around practices of heightened awareness. These factors are inherently valuable because they contribute to skillful living.²⁵

Skillful living, or skillful means, is one of the parameters emphasized by the Vimalakirti archetype. In his “magic,” he provides the precise answer or object that best addresses the need or dilemma. Such an action is part of the bodhisattva ideal: “A bodhisattva, carrying out the work of buddhas, vows not to personally settle into the salvation of final buddhahood until she or he can assist all beings throughout the vast reaches of time and space to fully realize this liberated experience.”²⁶ For humans, living the bodhisattva ideal translates to working and living for the benefit of others, which, incidentally, brings merit to oneself. And a Buddhist belief is that humans can reach buddhahood. As Batchelor writes, Indian Tantrism and Chinese Ch’an Buddhism “were definite existential movements that emphasized the *experience* of the Buddha, and firmly relocated it within the concrete sphere of actual human existence. Both movements affirmed that awakening to Buddhahood was possible in this very life and, consequently, focused on the Buddha-potential present within each human being as opposed to the alien and remote Buddhas and Bodhisattvas dwelling in their transhuman pantheons.”²⁷

My task, as a humanist Unitarian Universalist minister who has a Buddhist meditation practice, is to understand, comprehend, and live Buddhist concepts such as the bodhisattva ideal, while keeping the human aspect prominent.

The greatest danger inherent in any presentation of Buddhism is that of unconsciously creating an unbridgeable gulf between the concrete living Buddha and the abstract ideal Buddha. Nowadays, in many traditional schools of Buddhism, the man who walked throughout Northern India with a group of disciples, begged for food, gave clear and practical teachings, and finally died of dysentery, seems to have been forgotten. In his place one finds a semi-divine being who is visualized as bearing numerous extraordinary physical

characteristics, and whose life is described in fantastic mythical imagery. The essentially human element of the Buddha is dissolved in an impressive, but humanly unobtainable, idealized state of being. Simultaneously with this gradual process of abstraction, the concrete human Buddha slowly fades away and dies.²⁸

This discussion of humanism, Buddhism, and the bodhisattva ideal has helped me to reach an understanding of how I can view bodhisattvas in light of my skepticism about the supernatural. But while conducting research for this paper, I was amused to read a pronouncement of the Buddha on theological discussions such as this:

The Buddha's teachings were intensely practical. He avoided philosophical discussion and theological speculation. Questions concerning whether or not the world is eternal, or whether the soul has an identity apart from the body and whether or not the soul is immortal, whether or not gods or goddesses exist, he dismissed as queries that did not "edify," thereby signaling that they were irrelevant and meaningless.²⁹

Notes

¹ *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, translated by Michael H. Kohn. Boston: Shambhala, 1991, p. 24

² www.americanhumanist.org/humanism

³ www.uua.org/visitors/beliefswithin/6642.shtml

⁴ www.mahabodhi.net

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gage, Richard L., ed. and trans. *Search for a New Humanity: A Dialogue Between Josef Derbolav and Daisaku Ikeda*. New York: Weatherhill, 1992, pp. 43, 44-45.

⁷ Puri, Bharati. *Engaged Buddhism: The Dalai Lama's Worldview*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 128.

⁸ Puri, *ibid.*, pp. 128, 133.

⁹ Larue, Gerald A. *Freethought Across the Centuries: Toward a New Age of Enlightenment*. Amherst, N.Y.: Humanist Press, 1996, p. 5.

¹⁰ Noss, John B., *Man's Religions*, London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969 [Larue, 302].

¹¹ Larue, *ibid.*, p. 302

¹² Larue, *ibid.*, p. 299

¹³ Leighton, Taigen Dan. *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression*, rev. ed. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

-
- ¹⁴ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 241
- ¹⁵ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 275
- ¹⁶ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 26
- ¹⁷ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 276
- ¹⁸ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 277
- ¹⁹ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 292
- ²⁰ Batchelor, Stephen. *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1983, p. 43
- ²¹ Olendzki, Andrew. "Unreal Imagination Exists: Understanding the Buddha's Paradoxical View of Reality." *Tricycle* (Spring 2008), pp. 86-87.
- ²² Unno, Taitetsu. "The Middle Path of Buddhism." *Religious Humanism* XXVI, no. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 36-47.
- ²³ Unno, *ibid.*, p. 45
- ²⁴ Batchelor, Stephen. *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1997, p. 19
- ²⁵ Olendzki, *ibid.*, p. 87
- ²⁶ Leighton, *ibid.*, p. 25
- ²⁷ Batchelor, *Alone with Others*, p. 50
- ²⁸ Batchelor, *ibid.*, p. 50
- ²⁹ Larue, *ibid.*, p. 302