

## Revisioning Buddhism 4

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

### **Are Bodhisattvas selfish?**

While I was having a meal at a mixed rice stall, a person comes up to me and asked me to pay for his meal. I agreed and asked him to order what he wanted to eat. However, he said he wanted to buy his meal elsewhere: he was asking for money, and I don't think he's honest about it. So I said no. It is wrong because the message would be that it is all right to lie.

This set me thinking about some of the Bodhisattva stories we read or hear about. The Vyaghri Jataka, a Sanskrit tale from the Jatakamala, for example, tells of how the Bodhisattva sacrifices his own life to a hungry tigress that was too weak to even attack him. So he cut himself up so that the tigress drinking his blood, would gain strength and devour him.

So the Bodhisattva, it is said, practises his perfection of giving to the highest level, giving his own life away to others. The question now is, what happens to the tigress? What is her karma? Isn't it karmically horrible to eat a Bodhisattva's flesh. The tigress will face even more painful rebirth on account of the Bodhisattva's giving. Anyway, this is just a story, which should help us think deeply.

Compassion unguided by wisdom easily make pious fools of us, fearing bad karma even in criticizing evil and wrong, and so become easy lackeys of the cunning and canny. Wisdom untempered by compassion turns us into clever talking heads who would give the best explanations for a problem without raising a finger to solve it. We need to have a right balance of wisdom and compassion when examining or executing a skillful means.

With such an understanding let us now examine an oft-quoted Zen story; indeed, popular enough to be cited by even non-Buddhist writers as their own.

Two Zen monks, Tanzan and Ekido, traveling on pilgrimage, came to a muddy river crossing. There they saw a lovely young woman dressed in her kimono and finery, obviously not knowing how to cross the river without ruining her clothes. Without further ado, Tanzan graciously picked her up, held her close to him, and carried her across the muddy river, placing her onto the dry ground.

Then he and Ekido continued on their way. Hours later they found themselves at a lodging temple. And here Ekido could no longer restrain himself and gushed forth his complaints:

"Surely, it is against the rules what you did back there.... Touching a woman is simply not allowed.... How could you have done that? ... And to have such close contact with her! ... This is a violation of all monastic protocol..."

Thus he went on with his verbiage. Tanzan listened patiently to the accusations.

Finally, during a pause, he said, "Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?"

(Based on an autobiographical story by Japanese Zen master Tanzan)

## Revisoning Buddhism by Piya Tan

Tanzan (1819-1892) was a Japanese Buddhist priest and professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) during the Meiji period. He was regarded as a Zen master, and figured in several well-known koans, and was also well-known for his disregard of many of the precepts of everyday Buddhism, such as dietary laws. I'm not sure if there is anything virtuous in this.

The first thing we should note is that this is an autobiographical Zen story; it probably did not happen, not exactly in this manner, anyway. For if it did, then it has a serious ethical problem, where one is good at the cost of the perceived evil or foolishness of another. I think it was the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) who quipped, "There are bad women because there are good women."

Indeed, a bodhisattva who is regarded as good or compassionate on account of the evil or lack in others, would actually be a selfish person, as the bodhisattva is not independently good. A true bodhisattva is one who, being himself highly virtuous, is capable of inspiring goodness in another, even if it is to the bodhisattva's apparent disadvantage.

Tanzan's self-told tale has a serious moral flaw if he made himself appear virtuous on account of Ekido's concern for the Vinaya. Such a person as Ekido, however, was simply rare in Meiji Japan, where priests were as a rule non-celibate (on account of the nikujiki saitai or "meat-eating and marriage" law of 1872). As such, it was likely than Tanzan had invented a Vinaya-respecting monk as a foil for his self-righteousness.

On the other hand, Tanzan's tale also evinces his serious lack of understanding of the Vinaya rules. For, in a real life situation, even a Vinaya-observing orthodox Theravada monk would help this lady in every way he could, or he would ask his colleague or some other suitable persons to help the woman. If a Vinaya-keeping monk has helped the woman, he has done a good deed by breaking a minor rule, for which he only needs to confess before another monk, and remind himself not to wander into improper places the next time. There is no need of any skillful means here, only common sense.

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This is a slightly excerpt from Piya Tan's article "Skillful Means" (SD 30.8).