

Do Bodhisattvas exist?

One of my most dramatic religious experiences occurred deep in the Malaysian jungle. In the 1980s, when I was still a monk, I led a group of NUS medical students in a meditation retreat in the National Park in Pahang, Malaysia. One of the students, unable to swim, had fallen into a river, and was under water for some moments. While a couple of boys jumped in to save him, I stood on the bank invoking Guanyin to save him.

After the boy was safely back on dry land, he told me that he actually felt very peaceful while submerged, and did not feel like coming up again! He felt just like letting go of everything. Then a radiant lady in white appeared above him (in the water) with outstretched hands. And he found himself on the water surface again! Only then I told him that I had desperately invoked Guanyin while he was underwater.¹

The question now is: Did Guanyin actually appear in person to help the drowning boy? If we care to research into the literature of other religions, even those writings by the faithful within living memory, we would find similar stories of rescue by divine figures. So we can perhaps say that such stories are not limited to the Buddhists.²

Now we have a more difficult question: Does Guanyin or any of the helpful divine figures actually exist? The faithful would of course swear by their “personal experiences” that they do exist. If we accept that they are all telling the truth, we can only surmise that they *believe* that such beings exist. Whether all such believers are right or not is entirely another matter.

A Theravada monk speaking in a Chinese Mahayana temple in Singapore was once asked whether Kshitigarbha (or “Earth-store”) Bodhisattva, the liberator of hell-beings, exist. At first, he politely avoided answering the question, but the questioner pressed him for an answer: yes or no? In that case, he replied, he must say “no.” The questioner was simply upset.

It was clearly improper of the questioner to have pressed a Theravada monk for an answer about a Mahayana belief. In giving an honest answer to a devout Bodhisattva believer, the monk was simply saying he did not think the Bodhisattva existed. Theravada and Mahayana are like two different archaic computer operating systems (OS) (say, Apple and Windows). The software of one OS would not work on the other computer. In other words, it is meaningful here to speak of different “Buddhisms.”³

In our own times, however, it is possible for computers of different operating systems to share their software. We could say that stories of divine help are universal, and that everyone is right. The question now is in what way are they “right”?

We could perhaps say that all such divine beings exist. If this were the case, then all such religions are true, at least in terms of such divine beings—which is helpful in inspiring us to respect all religions.

Or, we could say that these faithfuls, each believe in their respective divine beings. In their belief and faith, they see such events to be true, or they connect their good fortune to the divine beings of their own faith. In 13th-century Japan, for example, when Kublai Khan’s invading fleets were twice routed by “divine winds” at sea, the different religious and Buddhist groups claimed that it was their prayer that brought it about. The problem is that if their prayers could bring about the divine winds, why not use such prayers to prevent the typhoons and tsunamis that frequently ravaged Japan?

In our spiritual weakness, we might seek any semblance of power in any form, worldly or religious. In our desperation, we imagine God or the gods to be on our side; we have externalized our inner refuge. The sad reality

¹ See “Who really is Guanyin?” (R32) in *Simple Joys* 1, 2011: 4.6: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40a.8-Emotional-independence.-piya.pdf>

² This is of course to discount pious attributions, exaggerations and fiction common in hagiography.

³ More simply, there are only two kinds of Buddhisms: “mine” and “yours,” and mine is the only right one. See *Upaya, Skillful means*, SD 30.8 (7): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/30.8-Upaya-Skillful-means.-piya.pdf>

is that we have not learned to truly love, to love unconditionally. Instead of accepting others as we would accept ourselves, we measure and manipulate them. We have taken the world to be our goal, instead of a learning ground.⁴

Let us return to the question of divine beings. Who or what are they? Notice how throughout all the world's mythology, theogony, folklore and fairy tales, a common recurrent theme is that of good ultimately triumphing over bad. The gods and non-humans of Buddhism, too, as a rule, play this role of spiritual exemplars and the powers of the heart of peace and love.

It is also interesting to note that as Buddhism grew outside of itself, into Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and various ethnic forms of Buddhism, their respective populations of gods and demons also increased. Characteristically, these gods and demons hypostatize (or "thingify") what their believers value highly or fear deeply, and their real aspirations in life.

While with the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1990s, I participated in a native American Indian drumming ritual (performed by my sponsoring professor's wife) to discover what my totem animal or guardian spirit was. During the "death-sleep" that I went through during the ritual, I had a vision of an idyllic garden with a cataract. Out of its waters there sprang a most magnificent Malayan tiger, fiercely roaring with open jaws. Then I awoke to find my own jaws wide open, too!

It is not surprising that I dreamed of a Malayan tiger since I was born in Malaysia and spent my first five decades there. Moreover, as a child, my mother often brought me to the tiger god in the oldest Chinese temple in the region, the Cheng Hoon Teng, for blessings. As a child I was also given a tiger's claw as a sort of protective amulet.

Stories of gods, demons and good fortune abound in the early suttas. Their contexts are always clear: they are not ends in themselves. They are means for the more worldly to deal with the situation at hand. Underlying such stories are clear hints of the human potential for greater good and higher reality, even of nirvana itself.

Understandably, to be stuck with such beliefs of gods, demons, sacred animals, and luck, or worse, to see them as our ideals would mean that we would not be able to evolve beyond what they really are, that is, archetypes, images and values that we look up to in our collective unconscious.

These are but visions of the mundane wellbeing and goals. It is like wandering around the inclement foothills when we could and should be making an effort to ascend the mountain where the air is cleaner, the ambience fresher – and where we can have a breath-taking panorama of the world below.

A good story is not to be worshipped, but to inspire us to true happiness and liberation. Understanding such stories brings us closer to the Bodhi tree, so that the Buddha's voice becomes clearer to us, so that we are able to let go ever more of self and the world.⁵ Then even our own lives can become stories for the happiness and liberation of the generations to come.

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⁴ There is also the unwholesome tendency to demote the Buddha to being a God or deity, to whom we supplicate for favours, as is common in later Buddhism. See SD 40b.3 (3.1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40b.3-Cosmic-Buddhas-and-Paradises.pdf>

⁵ The "self" here is a shorthand for notions and actions that contribute to a "self-identity view"; "the world" here refers to seeking answers to life's questions outside of ourselves, in short, superstition. Strong notions of self and the world lead us to doubt our own spiritual potentials and become stuck in the ignorance and craving. See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40a.8-Emotional-independence.-piya.pdf>