

08 Jan Nattier: Explorer of the Mahayana and the Bodhisattva Way

In my last talk I spoke about Rita Gross, Buddhist scholar and practitioner. She argued that if we wish to make sense of the development of Buddhist teachings over the centuries after the Buddha Shakyamuni's death, then we must apply western historical consciousness and the Buddhist notion of conditionality.

In this talk I will speak about Jan Nattier, an American scholar of Buddhist Studies.

To my mind she is a kind of detective, engaged in discovering threads in the development of Buddhism from its early origins in India through to its later Mahayana forms, especially in China.

She applies the methods advocated by Rita Gross, combined with the skills of an expert translator of different languages.

To my mind, she also writes and explains things with a very persuasive clarity.

One of the most controversial claims that she has made from her detective work, concerns what is called "The Heart Sutra", one of the most well-known and most chanted sutras amongst Mahayana practitioners and cultures across Asia.

This sutra, which we chant at Budakoda and in Triratna around the world, in the context of our seven-fold puja, is a pithy condensation of the key teachings of what are known as "The Perfection of Wisdom" sutras that emerged hundreds of years after the death of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Although the early teachings of the Buddha were first written down in Pali, a language closer to local dialects, over time the more scholarly language of Sanskrit became dominant. The newer teachings such as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras were written in Sanskrit.

The Heart Sutra is known from its Sanskrit versions and from its Chinese language versions.

Scholars have naturally assumed that the Chinese versions were translated from the original Sanskrit versions.

But, in an audacious and detailed scholarly work, Jan Nattier claims that the Heart Sutra was first created and written down in Chinese. In order to give the sutra authenticity, it was then back-translated into Sanskrit!

Not all scholars agree with her claim which is still controversial. But it's an example of her independent mind.

In this talk, though, I am going to accompany Jan Nattier in her much more widely accepted exploration of the Mahayana, as it relates to the development of the notion of the Bodhisattva.

First, a bit of historical background.

From the Pali Canon, the collection of teachings of Early Buddhism, these were accepted facts:

- (i) However long their lives, Buddhas must die. After their death the Dharma declines and eventually disappears. Only then does a new Buddha appear.
- (ii) Buddhas are exceedingly rare. There can only be one Buddha at a time.
- (iii) A Bodhisattva is one who dedicates themselves to be a future Buddha; to be one who rediscovers the Dharma when it has been lost, gains enlightenment and teaches others the path to enlightenment.
- (iv) To this end a Bodhisattva foregoes the possibility of gaining enlightenment in an earlier lifetime. In technical terms they decline the possibility of becoming an *arahant*. They are willing to wait until such time as they are ready to become a Buddha who rediscovers the Dharma.

- (v) The Bodhisattva path is therefore very long, traversing many thousands or even millions of lives, and entails enormous suffering and heroic self-sacrifice.

This much we can learn about the notion of the Bodhisattva from Early Buddhism. But how does the notion develop in the various schools which are included under the umbrella of the Mahayana?

Let's turn now to Jan Nattier.

First, I will be referring to her book "For a Few Good Men", which presents a translation and discussion of an early Mahayana sutra "The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariprccha)". Second, I will bring in additional material from an article of hers "The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism". And third, I will refer to another of her articles, this time on the White Lotus Sutra.

In her book on the Ugra Sutra Jan Nattier acknowledges that for the first ones who embarked upon the path of the Bodhisattva, their model was very much the model of the Bodhisattva in the Pali Canon.

And it was a path that was seen as only being suitable for a few good men (hence the title of Jan Nattier's book on the Ugra Sutra). So what can we learn from the Ugra Sutra about the early formulation of the Bodhisattva path?

First of all we can see some continuities with the spirit of the writings contained in Early Buddhism.

The path of someone who does not wish to be a Bodhisattva, someone who seeks enlightenment in this life as an arahant, is not looked down upon. Such a path is seen as leading to a limited but still worthy and genuine enlightenment.

Indeed those who choose the Bodhisattva path are specifically warned against looking down on those who do not follow the Bodhisattva path.

Choosing the path of the Bodhisattva was seen as a goal suitable only for a few heroic, and maybe even ambitious, men.

In the Ugra Sutra the path of the Bodhisattva is restricted to men only; to monks who pursue a strict solitary and renunciant lifestyle whilst maintaining good contact with their teachers and others in their monastery.

This is very different from what Nattier describes as the Bodhisattva Universalism of other, later Mahayana Sutras such as the Lotus Sutra.

In the Ugra Sutra the path of the bodhisattva is not open to all; women and lay people are not part of the Bodhisattva path.

In the Lotus Sutra women and lay people can be Bodhisattvas.

Jan Nattier traces how this change came about.

Let's remind ourselves of what it meant to be a Bodhisattva in the Ugra Sutra.

It meant committing oneself to an immeasurable number of lifetimes, enduring considerable sacrifice, in order to become a Buddha who rediscovers the Dharma.

But, according to tradition, the next Buddha-to-be is Maitreya, who is already waiting in the Tusita heaven to descend to this world when the Dharma of Shakyamuni Buddha is lost.

So, an aspiring Bodhisattva must wait for at least as long again after the death of Maitreya and the disappearance of his Dharma before he can become a Buddha himself. And, of course, if others also undertake the path of the bodhisattva there can be no guarantee that any particular Bodhisattva will become the next Buddha after Maitreya. The goal of Buddhahood may become very, very distant indeed!

But then around the beginning of the common era an important change occurred.

Some Bodhisattvas emerged from deep meditation with visions of other world systems in addition to our own. And in some of these other world systems there are Buddhas alive and teaching the Dharma, and in some there are no Buddhas and no Dharma.

This altered things in several important respects.

First, the rule that there can be only one Buddha at a time is changed. Now the rule is that there can only be one Buddha at any point in time *within a particular world system*.

Second, if there are Buddhas alive and teaching in different world systems then the chances of a Bodhisattva being born in such a world are dramatically improved.

Being present to hear teachings from an existing Buddha, to make a vow to become a future Buddha and have that vow confirmed by the existing Buddha, can be of great benefit to a Bodhisattva and help speed their journey to full Buddhahood.

Third, if there are world systems where there is no Buddha and the Dharma has been forgotten – if there are, if you like, “Buddha-free zones” – then the possibilities of fulfilling the wish to full Buddhahood are also increased.

In other words, the potential time on the path to Buddhahood is dramatically shortened with the existence of other world systems.

In the jargon of modern physics, we could say that the shift from one universe to the multiverse, dramatically changed the nature of the path.

Jan Nattier gives us two examples of the first sutras featuring other world systems and other Buddhas; Abhirati with the Buddha Akshobya (Akshobyavyuha sutra), and early and later versions of Sukhavati with the Buddha Amitabha (Sukhavativyuha sutra).

What similarities and dissimilarities exist between these sutras and their portrayal of the Bodhisattva path?

First, when the future Akshobya makes his initial resolution to become a Buddha before the Buddha “Great Eyes”, Great Eyes initially tries to dissuade the young devotee from the Bodhisattva path, emphasising its great difficulties.

In contrast the Buddha Lokeshvararaja makes no attempt to dissuade Dharmakara (the future Buddha Amitabha) from his objective and nothing is said about the difficulties of the Bodhisattva path.

This contrast is emphasised when we examine the vows made by the two Bodhisattvas. The future Akshobya vows to undertake ascetic practices in life after life, whereas Dharmakara's vows deal primarily with the features of his future Pure Land and the means by which his devotees will gain rebirth there.

So, the Akshobya sutra emphasises the traditional elements of the Bodhisattva path that can be traced back to Early Buddhism, whereas the Sukhavativyuha sutra does not.

Second, to be reborn in Abhirati with the Buddha Akshobya, is a result of the generalized gaining of merit, from lifetimes of ethical practice. No knowledge is required of the existence of Akshobya. But to be reborn in Sukhavati depends on knowing about Amitabha and bearing his name in mind.

Third, in both the Akshobya sutra and the early version of the larger Sukhavativyuha sutras the rules that there can only be one Buddha at a time, and that Buddhas eventually die, are still in effect. In the early version of the Sukhavativyuha the Buddha Amitabha dies and his place is taken by the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

However, with the later versions of the larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra important changes take effect.

According to Jan Nattier the authors of the later larger Sukhavativyuha seem to understand the Bodhisattva path as being accessible to all, so that looked at overall, a version of the Bodhisattva path emerges that is very different from the ascetic and challenging model of the path found in the Akshobya sutra, and in the model of early Buddhism.

Moreover, in the later version of the Sukhavativyuha Sutra no reference is made to the death of Buddha Amitabha. Indeed his other name "Amitayus", which means "limitless life", suggests immortality.

This process of universalisation and opening up of the Bodhisattva path reaches its culmination in the Lotus Sutra, which emerged in the first or second century of the Current Era, where every man, woman and child is on the way to Buddhahood.

The spiritual ideal of enlightenment in this life, the apparent goal of becoming an arahant, is shown to be merely an illusion.

Moreover, Buddhahood is not the result of aeons of self-sacrifice but is far, far easier than supposed. It's said that even a child who builds a stupa out of sand will one day become a Buddha.

So, it's not only the path of the arahant that is overturned in the Lotus Sutra. The whole notion of a Bodhisattva path with its many lifetimes of sacrifice is also overturned in the Lotus Sutra.

Something of just how shocking a change the Lotus Sutra must have represented to some followers of the Mahayana when it first appeared, can be gauged from a story Jan Nattier tells about teaching a university class in North America on the Lotus Sutra.

In her class was a highly qualified Tibetan Buddhist monk. He was a Geshe, the Tibetan equivalent of holding a PH.D in Buddhism.

The Lotus Sutra, although very popular and influential in Eastern Buddhism, is rarely studied by Tibetan Buddhists. Jan Nattier describes what happened:

“As we worked our way through the text, [he] looked baffled, even worried. At one point, he told me that he had gone to the library to check out the Tibetan version of the sutra, for he thought he must not be understanding the English version correctly. Finally one day in class he simply shook his head in amazement and exclaimed, “I can't believe the Buddha would *say* such things!”

To me, as a western Buddhist, this story brings home just how privileged we are in being able to have an overview of the development of Buddhism.

We have a Treasure House of Buddhism available to us. With the help of scholars and practitioners like Jan Nattier, Rita Gross, Sangharakshita and others, we can have a much better sense of the diversity of Buddhist traditions and how that diversity came about.

We can distinguish between what seems to be historical fact and what is legend and myth. We can value the truths contained in both historical narrative and in myth and legend. And, if we wish, we can choose to follow a Buddhist path that best suits our temperament and circumstances, whilst understanding and respecting other people's different choices.

References:

Jan Nattier, "A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariṣcchā)"
University of Hawaii Press 2005

Jan Nattier, The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the Larger Sukhavativyuha (http://www3.nccu.edu.tw/~ckeng/doc/Nattier_PureLand.pdf)

Jan Nattier, "A Greater Awakening", (<http://www.tricycle.com/special-section/greater-awakening>)

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/z6ic6uzdfsl4tdk9zng9u/o8-English-Only-Jan-Nattier.MP3?rlkey=j2o2yasjpdfewt4ctas9l2200&dl=0>