

## THE SERVICE THING: BODHISATTVAS

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One thing I noticed a great many years ago but seldom talk about is this whole being-of-service thing. Americans are not comfortable serving others, despite what their lip service proclaims. Sure, we like to think we are all community workers at heart, but when it comes down to owning the 'service' label, uhh, uhh. We don't like it. We are just uncomfortable as servants, serving others. We like to "be served." Perhaps it is just our heritage of independence.

I might never have even noticed this except for my deep interest in Asian philosophy, which finally got around to actually looking at some Asian persons. I have traveled in countries like Tibet, China, Sikkim, India, and Nepal, some of them a number of times.

Asians have a very different take on service and they actually walk their talk. If you feel that this is just some "the grass is greener over there" talk, just consider the Buddhist concept of a Bodhisattva and you may see where I am coming from. The entire concept of the bodhisattva is serving others. In fact, the bodhisattva vow is to never leave this world of samsara (suffering) and accept enlightenment until every last sentient being has awakened and is safely enlightened, and that includes bugs and microbes. Think about that for a millisecond, if you will.

I know that we have some Mother-Teresa types to our credit and the Pope (not so sure about him), but no religious (or secular) order I know of with a vow like that. I am not interested in bashing Western ideas of compassion, but just contrasting the marked difference I see (and have experienced) between Eastern and Western society. And a question I had way back then was, why is that?

And it comes down to this concept of being of service. Servants in America, well, I don't have to go there, at least not much. We all know our own history well enough to know that being a servant in America has a checkered past. If you need a reminder of this, see my essay "Juke Joints and Saturday Nights" here;

[http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150797445967658&set=pb.587252657.-2207520000.1355126543&type=3&src=http%3A%2F%2Fsphotos-b.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-prn1%2F534776\\_10150797445967658\\_1092493230\\_n.jpg&size=720%2C480](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150797445967658&set=pb.587252657.-2207520000.1355126543&type=3&src=http%3A%2F%2Fsphotos-b.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-prn1%2F534776_10150797445967658_1092493230_n.jpg&size=720%2C480)

And before some of you get your undies all in a bundle, I am not saying the Asians don't have servants; they do, but there is a difference and that is what I am writing about, so please hear me out.

It came to me that just as nature and natural law is a worldwide thing, plus the fact that the Tibetans have these wonderful beings called bodhisattvas that exist only to help others, that

then there must be some bodhisattvas here in the West, somewhere, at least in nascent form. Where are the American Bodhisattvas, for example? So I poked around and here is what I came up with.

The Asian culture has been around for thousands of years, while America is two hundred or so years old. There is that. And then there is the idea I ventured earlier that we Americans have a tendency to look down on servants of any kind. Certainly we don't elevate service in practice. Yes, when it comes to lip service, we are all about extolling serving others above all things. "The Bible even tells me so," especially helping those less fortunate than ourselves. But servants and service are linked in our tradition, and perhaps it is not written down, but the rule of thumb is that of course it is better to be served than to serve.

So, if Mother Nature naturally offers us our quotient of bodhisattvas, what happens to them? This could be a long article, but in a word, we simply don't recognize them. I believe it is a little worse than that. Not only are we not aware enough to recognize bodhisattva tendencies in our culture, but even when we encounter them we purposely don't recognize them as valuable. And we sure don't (as the Tibetans do) scour our small children looking for bodhisattva tendencies and then feed them the royal jelly, training them up into full-blown bodhisattvas. Hardly. And what might those tendencies be?

How about an abnormal interest in others? I agree that (at this point in time in America) such an interest may appear as a perversion, someone who cares more about what others think of them than they should. But who is responsible for that perversion? It is my conviction that we have labeled such tendencies as weakness and never allowed them to grow into what they really represent, a greater concern for others than yourself, like: seeing yourself in others. For boys, especially, this is seen as weakness, not manly.

Our more macho society has at best ignored such tendencies and at worst persecuted and perverted them. Shunned would be a good word. My thought is that we have as much natural material for budding bodhisattvas as any other society, including Tibet and India, and are just waiting for them to be recognized and developed. In 1974, when the 16th Karmapa (like the Dalai Lama, but the head of another lineage) was asked why he came to America, his response was "if there is a lake, the swans would go there." That statement says it all.

My point is that we have all the natural resources (bodhisattva-wise) that we need. We just require enough awareness to stop ignoring (or worse) our budding bodhisattvas and get busy nurturing them. For starters, we could stop labeling those who are overly concerned with what others think, and their welfare, as neurotic, and start recognizing these feelings for what they, in fact, are, the opposite of what we call macho.

Talk about minorities that are persecuted. This is another one, and just like the other ones, the result is that we deprive society from the means to know and care for itself. As a lapsed Catholic, I continue to be amazed that the Catholic Church requires at least 40 years to pass after the death of any somewhat enlightened being in that faith before they label them a saint,

while the Tibetan saints are found as infants, usually recognized and empowered by the time they are eighteen-months old, and spend their lives traveling in real-time through life caring for and loving those around them. What a perfect dream come real! How did we get that wrong?

Folks, these are just my opinions. Consider the source.