

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Encouragement from the Bodhisattva Universal Sage

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Now we have come to the end of the Lotus Sutra, and the final figure to appear is the Universal-Sage Bodhisattva. The sutra says, "Thereupon Universal-Sage Bodhisattva, who was famous for his virtues and supernatural powers without hindrance, came from a world [in the distance of many worlds] to the east [of this Saha World]." Universal-Sage is a translation of Samantabhadra, which has also been translated as Universal Virtue, Universal Worthy and Universal Good. In Japan, he is known as Fugen. For various reasons, I prefer the Thomas Cleary's translation, Universally Good, so I will refer to Samantabhadra as Universally Good from this point on. Now that we know what to call him, let us ask the more essential question. Who is he and why is he so famous? If we could understand this, it will help us to realize the full impact of his appearance at the end of the Lotus Sutra.

The Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universally Good gives us a few more clues in our search to discover the true nature of Bodhisattva Universally Good. The Meditation Sutra explains that:

The Bodhisattva Universally Good is boundless in the size of his body, boundless in the sound of his voice, and boundless in the form of his image. Desiring to come to this world, he makes use of his free transcendent powers and shrinks his stature to the small size [of a human being]. Because the people in Jambudvīpa have the three heavy hindrances, by his wisdom power he appears transformed as mounted on a white elephant."

Already, we can see that we are dealing with a being of cosmic proportions and implications. This is no garden variety bodhisattva that we are dealing with here. The Meditation Sutra also tells us where we may go to learn more about him:

*"The Bodhisattva Universally Good was born in the eastern Pure Wonder Land,
whose form I have already clearly and extensively explained in the Flower
Garland Sutra."*

So, the Flower Garland Sutra will be our next stop in our search for the full meaning of the appearance of Bodhisattva Universally Good.

The Flower Garland Sutra comprises the first of the five periods of the Buddha's teachings according to Chih'i. In this sutra, the Buddha's enjoyment of his enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree is expressed and revealed in its full grandeur and cosmic scope. The bodhisattva practices are also expounded in great detail in this sutra, and it is here that the Bodhisattva Universally Good becomes important. There is no question of the Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas or other beings attaining enlightenment here. This is strictly the way of the bodhisattvas that is expounded here; nevertheless, it is quite an impressive way as the description of Universally

Good as the bodhisattva par excellence in the Flower Garland reveals. The third chapter of "The Meditation of the Bodhisattva Universally Good" the Buddhas of the ten directions state:

*Universally Good is present in all lands
Sitting on a jeweled lotus throne, beheld by all;
He manifests all psychic powers
And he is able to enter infinite meditation.
The Universally Good always fills the universe
With various bodies flowing everywhere,
With concentration, psychic power, skill and strength,
In a universal voice teaching extensively without hindrance.*

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*The knowledge, virtue, and powers of all Buddhas,
Their various great qualities, he has all fulfilled;
By the medium of techniques of all meditations
He shows his past enlightening acts.*

Universally Good is then praised by all the bodhisattvas in the following verses:

*Born from the teachings of the Enlightened,
Also originating from the will power of the Buddha,
The womb of space, the equality of real thusness:
You have purified the body of reality.*

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*The child of Buddha, with an all-pervading body,
Can go to the lands in all directions,
Liberating all the oceans of living beings,
Entering into all the parts of the cosmos.
Entering into all particles of the cosmos,
The body is endless and undifferentiated;
Omnipresent as space,
It expounds the great teaching of the realization of thusness.*

(Flower Ornament Scripture pp. 179-180)

As these praises of Universally Good reveal, he is no ordinary bodhisattva, but a kind of cosmic entity embodying all the bodhisattva practices and merits which must be fulfilled in order to attain Buddhahood. The sutra even states that one must in a sense become Universally Good, in order to truly take up the bodhisattva way. The chapter entitled "Ten Dedications", for instance, teaches that one must dedicate all of one's efforts to the enlightenment of all sentient beings and sacrifice everything for the welfare of all. Similarly, the Bodhisattva Universally Good's omnipresent body of virtue is available for all to enter into. In this way, the boundaries of selfhood and the limitation of self-effort are transcended, and one enters into the ocean of merits of all beings, an ocean of merits which is the all-pervasive body of Bodhisattva Universally Good. To be a bodhisattva is to give up everything and become Universally Good. The mindset of the bodhisattvas who set out to accomplish this self-sacrifice for the sake of attaining to the state of Universally Good is very movingly portrayed in the following passage:

"They also form this thought: 'I should accept all sufferings for the sake of all sentient beings, and enable them to escape from the abyss of immeasurable woes of birth and death. I should accept all suffering for the sake of all sentient beings in all worlds, in all states of misery, forever and ever, and still always cultivate the foundations of goodness for the sake of all beings. Why? I would rather take all this suffering on myself than to allow sentient beings to fall into hell. I should be a hostage in those perilous places - hells, animal realms, the nether world, etc. - as a ransom to rescue all sentient beings in states of woe and enable them to gain liberation."

(Flower Ornament Scripture pp. 534-535)

This description of the bodhisattva is extremely reminiscent of the "suffering servant" imagery which is found in the book of Isaiah, where it pertains to Israel's mission to the world, and throughout the New Testament, where it pertains to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It would seem, then, that the practice of Universally Good has truly been felt and expressed throughout the world in different ways. Just like the suffering servant or the crucified Lord, Bodhisattva Universally Good represents the power of sacrifice for the sake of others. It is a transfer of merit from a being of universal proportions to those who are so immersed in suffering that they are unable to help themselves.

Bodhisattva Universally Good also has a cosmological in addition to a salvific function, however. His body is coextensive with the whole universe and is also a causal factor which gives rise to the universe. The chapter called "The Formation of Worlds" lists "ten kinds of causes and conditions by which all oceans of worlds have been formed, are formed, and will be formed." the last of which is "the independent power of the vows of the Universally Good." (FOS p. 185) The Bodhisattva Universally Good is now beginning to resemble the Cosmic Christ of the New Testament as well. Also like the Body of Christ, Bodhisattva Universally Good is the repository and source of all virtuous activity in the world. In the "Ten Concentrations" chapter, the Bodhisattva Universal Eye asks the Buddha why he cannot see Bodhisattva Universally Good. The Buddha answers telling him that, "his body is the matrix of the cosmos, on which all enlightened ones concentrate together... This is why you cannot see him." (FOS p.814) The Buddha then recommends that Universal Eye and the other bodhisattvas vow to emulate and enter into the practice of Universal Good in order to see him. Upon doing this, Bodhisattva Universally Good finally appears to them. At this point, he and the Buddha enable innumerable bodhisattvas to fulfill the vows of Universally Good and to attain complete perfect enlightenment. So here we see the mutual penetration of the aspiration to enlightenment represented by Bodhisattva Universal Eye and the fulfillment of the bodhisattva vows represented by Universally Good Bodhisattva.

This aspect of Bodhisattva Universally Good is even more graphically revealed at the climax of the pilgrimage of Sudhana in the "Entry into the Realm of Reality" which is the last and most famous chapter of the Flower Garland. At the end of Sudhana's pilgrim's progress in search of enlightenment, he beholds the appearance of Bodhisattva Universally Good:

"Then Sudhana, having seen this manifestation of Universally Good's mystic power, happy, fulfilled, enraptured, uplifted, delighted, joyful, contemplated the body of Universally Good further and saw, from every part of his body and every pore, the billionfold world, with its masses of air, earth, and fire, its oceans, continents, rivers, jewel mountains, polar mountains, peripheral mountains, villages, cities, towns, communities, districts, forests, dwellings, populations, hells, animal realms, underworlds, realms of titans, dragons, birds, humans, and celestials, realms of desire, formless realms, its bases, foundations, and forms, its clouds, lightning, stars, nights, days, and fortnights, half years and years, intermediate eons and eons. And as he saw

this world, in the same way he saw all the worlds to the east, and as in the east he saw all the worlds in all directions, in the south, west, north, northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest, the nadir and the zenith. By way of reflections he saw the emergence of all buddhas, along with their circles of enlightening beings, as well as other beings, and he saw the succession of all worlds in past eons in this world, all that in one mark of greatness of the body of Universally Good - the emergence of all the buddhas, the circle of enlightening beings, the sentient beings, the abodes, the days and nights, the ages. In the same way he also saw all the buddha-lands of the future. And just as he saw the successions of all past and future worlds in all worlds in the ten directions, through each mark of greatness and each pore on the body of the enlightening being Universally Good, all in perfect order, not mixed up with one another."

(FOS p. 1507)

After this, Sudhana listens to Bodhisattva Universally Good's instructions and then enters into the myriad worlds contained within, wherein he fulfills all the practices and vows of Universally Good himself and attains equality with the buddhas. At this point we can return to the Lotus Sutra, for the appearance of Bodhisattva Universally Good in the 28th chapter also represents a culmination of revelation in the conferral of all the merits of the bodhisattva way. In that chapter, the Bodhisattva Universally Good states:

"Anyone who keeps the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma [while it is] propagated in the Jambudvīpa, should think, 'I can keep [this sutra] only by the supernatural powers of Universally Good.' Anyone who keeps, reads and recites this sutra, memorizes it correctly, understands the meaning of it, and acts according to it, know this, does the same practices that I do."

Now that we have seen the vast implications of the practice of Bodhisattva Universally Good, this statement begins to take on a whole new dimension of meaning. It is essentially a statement promising that anyone who upholds the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Age of the Law will have the support and will gain the merits of all conceivable vows and practices needed to accomplish complete and perfect enlightenment.

What is more, the Buddha himself states that even Bodhisattva Universally Good should respect those who uphold the Lotus Sutra as if they were the Buddha himself:

"Therefore Universally Good! When you see the keeper of this sutra in the distance, you should rise from your seat, go to him, receive him, and respect him just as you respect me." (Lotus Sutra p. 341)

Now that we know the position of Bodhisattva Universally Good, we can appreciate what an honor this is! Essentially, the testimony of Bodhisattva Universally Good and that of Shakyamuni Buddha in this chapter is an assurance that the practice of Namu Myoho Renge Kyo is the correct way to access all of the inconceivable merits, attain the perfections and fulfill all of the vows that lead to complete and perfect enlightenment. Namu Myoho Renge Kyo is the One Vehicle whereupon one can reorient one's life from the mundane and finite possibilities of the self to the infinite virtue of Universally Good and the attainment of Buddhahood. If we were to attempt to fulfill the bodhisattva vows and the six perfections through our own efforts and willpower, I think that we would quickly burn ourselves out and quit out of frustration and despair. However, when we practice Namu Myoho Renge Kyo, the power of our faith allows us to transcend the limited perspective of selfhood, we are then open to the practice of Bodhisattva Universally Good. Then, just like Bodhisattva Universal Eye or the pilgrim Sudhana, we will be able to see Bodhisattva Universally Good and enter into his cosmic body of virtue in order to attain Buddhahood.