

Was the Bodhisattva a Wuss ?

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Go to any evening cocktail or dinner party attended by the successful or wannabe successful. There is an almost macho like tendency to share stories of how people have made good on a windfall opportunity, that essentially involved capitalizing on someone else's misfortune. During the height of the recent housing-finance crisis several TV and news channels ran series on how to close on foreclosures (properties where the owner was not able to pay the mortgage and the bank was taking over) and take over the property at a windfall gain (what is a windfall gain to one person, we must remember, is another person's windfall loss).

Some two years ago, when the housing market was still booming in North America, a lot of us were buying and selling houses. I often heard stories of people who have successfully sold houses, and, of all the street smartness they have shown in doing so. Needless to add my wife tells me these stories in the fond hope that one day I will be able to emulate such smartness. For me things were a little different. I also had my house up for sale, and, did expect a 'decent' price that would not put me out of pocket.

At the same time, what was equally important for me was that the new resident of the place experiences peace and contentment. That is about as important as the price I got. I do hope that the upgrades brought that person a greater sense of satisfaction, and, not the feeling that he or she was gypped in the transaction. The intention we bring to a process will define its outcome. With this in mind, for a period after the house had been sold and awaiting transfer of ownership, I used to go to the house and meditate, trying to leave behind positive vibrations. In a similar spirit (crazy some would say) whenever I leave a home or even a hotel room, I offer a small prayer for the next resident's peace. Living in the competitive world, I have often struggled with such wuss-like behaviour. I do often recall the Serivaniya Jataka

Serivániya Játaka

The Bodhisattva was a hawker of Seriva, and was called Serivá. Once, in the company of a greedy merchant of the same name, he crossed the Telaváha and entered Andhapura. In that

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city was a family fallen on evil days, the sole survivors being a girl and her grandmother.

The greedy merchant went to their house with his wares. The girl begged her grandmother to buy her a trinket, and suggested that they should give the hawkers in exchange the bowl from which they ate. This was an heirloom and made of gold; but it had lost its lustre, and the women did not know its value. The hawker was called in and shown the bowl. He scratched it with a needle and knew it was of gold, but, wishing to have it for nothing, said it was not worth one half farthing. So saying he threw it away and left.

Later the Bodhisattva came to the same street and was offered the same bowl. He told them the truth, gave them all the money he had and his stock, leaving only eight pieces of money for himself. These he gave to a boatman, and entered his boat to cross the river. Meanwhile the greedy merchant went again to the old woman's house, hoping to get the bowl in exchange for a few trinkets. When he heard of what had happened he lost command of himself, and, throwing down all he had, ran down to the river, to find the Bodhisattva's boat in mid stream. He shouted to the boatman to return, but the Bodhisattva urged him on. The merchant, realizing what he had lost through his greed, was so upset that his heart burst, and he fell down dead.

The story was told to a monk who had given up striving. The greedy merchant is identified with Devadatta, and this was the beginning of his enmity towards the Bodhisattva.

The struggle with this story is Was the Bodhisattva a wuss ? He could have taken the

gold utensil, like every good MBA is taught to 'capitalize on an opportunity' or 'carpe diem...' The little hitch that my linear mind sees in the situation is the demonstration of such wuss-like behaviour comes from a deeper awareness of what happens. If, one is to believe the story the greedy merchant turned out to be Devadatta whom we all know was the Buddha's counterpoint, and, struggled through many lives.

In my linear way, I think that the Bodhisattva realized the longer term consequences of taking the golden utensil. Yes. It would have brought him tremendous pleasure in the moment. However, imagine the suffering it would have also brought..

Our birth into this life is part of a pattern, a part of a pattern that repeats itself time and time again because of the force of habit and conditioning. It is part of the phenomenon we call life, a very limited part of the reality of God. Somewhere as we repeat our patterns a flash comes to us telling us that things can be done differently and that once can seize the day in a different way...And, in that lightning flash, which may not reappear for aeons, lies the potential of freeing ourselves of patterns...doing so may involve wuss like behaviour of caring for others...

Butter and Buttermilk

When there is conflict between the heart and the brain, let the heart be followed, because intellect has only one sate, reason, and within that, intellect works, and cannot get beyond. It is the heart which takes one to the highest plane, which intellect can never reach; it goes beyond intellect, and reaches to what is called inspiration ... Men of the heart get the 'butter,' and the 'buttermilk' is left for the intellectual

– Swami Vivekananda