

A Savior on Earth: The Meaning of Dharmākara Bodhisattva's Advent

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Translated by Jan Van Bragt

I

Towards the beginning of July last year (1912), at the home of my friend Kaneko in Takada¹, I intuited the words “The Tathāgata is myself.”² Then, towards the end of August, this time at Akegarasu’s place in Kaga³, I was handed the phrase, “The Tathāgata becoming me saves me.” Finally, around October, it dawned on me that “When the Tathāgata becomes myself, it signals the birth of Dharmākara Bodhisattva.” This may not mean much to other people, but for me—who for twenty years had been plagued by sickness and worldly worries, and who had not understood the meaning of the scriptures on this point, even though I made it my task to read from them daily—the insight I received made me feel as if I were handed a torch that all of a sudden lit up a room that had been kept in darkness for a thousand years. I lacked the capacity to express that feeling but could not keep it to myself either. Thus, from October of last year, I have set forth part of it in a series of short pieces in *Bōfūshiu* (Tempest)⁴. Also, in the January 1913 issue of the

¹Kaneko Daiei (1881–1976), born in Takada, present-day Jōetsu City in Niigata Prefecture, is one of the representative Shin Buddhist scholars of the Ōtani denomination, along with Soga. He laid the grounds for the modern Shin Buddhist Studies based on a wide foundation of Buddhist Studies in general as well as on modern Western Philosophy. His works include *Bukkyō Gairon (An Outline of Buddhism; 1919)*, *Shinshūgaku josetsu* (Introduction of Shin Buddhist Studies; 1923). His works are gathered together in *Kaneko Daiei chosakushū (The Collected Works of Kaneko Daiei, 16 volumes)*.

²“Tathāgata” is here used as a synonym for “Amida Buddha.”

³Akegarasu Haya (1877–1954), born in Ishikawa Prefecture. Under his teacher, Kiyozawa Manshi, he assists in the publication of the journal *Seishinkai* (Spiritual World). In 1950, he becomes the head of the administration of the Ōtani denomination. Among his writings are *Tannishō kōwa (Lectures on Tannishō)*. His works are gathered together in *Akegarasu Haya Zenshū (The Complete Works of Akegarasu Haya, 27 volumes)*.

journal, *Mujintō* (Inexhaustible Light), I published an article, entitled “The Present Monk Dharmākara as the Revealer of the Eternal Buddha Mind.” I am overwhelmed by the many expressions of sympathy and demands for further explanation which I received from friends in the Dharma far and near, just as I am still surprised by the boldness and assertiveness of my own thought.

II

As you know, the figure of Dharmākara Bodhisattva appears in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, in terms of the following myth.⁵ At the time of the fifty-fourth Buddha, Lokeśvararāja, there was a king who appreciated his preaching so profoundly that there sprang up in his heart an eagerness to seek supreme enlightenment. So, he renounced the world and his kingdom and became a way-seeker (*śramaṇa*) or monk (*bhikkhu*), calling himself Dharmākara.⁶ One day, he went before Lokeśvararāja Buddha and expressed his aspiration as follows: “I wish to become a buddha so as to deliver all suffering beings. In order to fulfill my purpose, I wish to establish a land, pure and peaceful.” Thereafter, he meditated for five aeons (*kalpas*) until he realized in detail which qualities a perfect Pure Land should have. On the strength of this he specified his Vow of saving all sentient beings in forty-eight articles (the “48 Vows”), and then went on to engage in the meritorious practices of the bodhisattva path for innumerable kalpas. Thereby, his Vow came to be fulfilled and he himself (already ten kalpas ago) became Amida Buddha, dwelling in his Pure Land, ten billions of lands to the west.

To be honest, this figure of Dharmākara Bodhisattva has for a long time been a big concept I did not know what to do with. Of course, I do not understand either the meaning of a paradise myriads of miles to the west but, as a person who cannot consider

⁴*Bōfūshiu* (Tempest), a series of essays on Buddhism by Soga published in *Seishinkai* (Spiritual World) from 1908 to 1913. The word *bōfūshiu* comes from a passage in Daocho's *Anleji* (J: *Anrakushū*).

⁵Soga himself does not tell the Dharmākara story since he supposes it to be known. The story is inserted here in an abbreviated form, because some readers may not be familiar with it, and a knowledge of it is essential to understand Soga's text.

⁶“Dharmākara” would translate as “Dharma-mine.”

the present world as a paradise, I cannot but surrender to the idea of the Paradise in the West. However, I could not believe, and did not think I had any obligation to believe, in the figure of Dharmākara Bodhisattva, the Primal Vow he took after five kalpas of reflection, and the impossibly long period he is supposed to have devoted to ascetic practice in order to gather merits for the salvation of all. In my childhood, on hearing the passage about him in Hymn of True Faith (*Shōshinge*),⁷ I was moved without really understanding. Indeed, simple believers are often moved to tears by the mere words “five kalpas of reflection.” On reaching the years of discretion, I lost all interest in Dharmākara’s practice as the causal stage of the Vow.⁸ It was, then, simply the name “Unhindered Light in the Ten Directions” that became attractive to me. Adducing meaningless categories such as the great law of causality, I reasoned that since humans cannot think without basing themselves on causality, the Tathāgata, in order to make known to us humans his Primal Vow, had revealed his Will by way of the law of causality, that law of all human thinking. My true heart in all this was to do away with the causal Vow-practice of Dharmākara, while yearning as before solely for the unhindered light.

Namely, while heralding my faith as being centered in the Primal Vow, in fact the Primal Vow was for me nothing but simply the great spirit of the enlightened Tathāgata. The monk Dharmākara was an illusory figure, a fictive name, and his five kalpas of reflection and innumerable kalpas of practice were nothing more than a theater act of the Tathāgata, or rather a play of my own brain. In spite of all the talk on Dharmākara, the savior was and remained for me the eternal Tathāgata of Unhindered Light.

⁷A hymn, written by Shinran, which is a compendium, as it were, of the Shinshū doctrine. It is often recited in Shinshū religious services so that the faithful are familiar with it.

⁸Buddhist doctrines are often systematized by means of the categorical scheme: “causal stage” (*inni*) and “resultant stage” (*kai*). In this case, the same entity, in the causal stage, is called Dharmākara and, in the resultant stage, Amida Buddha.

III

However, the eternal Tathāgata of Unhindered Light stays on the level of an object of our yearning, in other words, on the level of our ideals, and as such cannot be our savior. Such a faith is indistinguishable from the “self-nature mind-only” enlightenment which is envisaged by the Path of Sages.⁹ Salvation, on the other hand, is a matter of manifest reality, the great problem of the self as subject of actual human life. We cannot be saved by a baseless ideal of the self. The gods, buddhas, and bodhisattvas of the ten directions and the three periods of time are all fragments of the human ideal. The name “Buddha of Unhindered Light” encompasses all these names of gods, buddhas, and bodhisattvas, and thus has the meaning of the sum and unity of all human aspirations. As such we cannot but direct to it our deepest yearnings as to the greatest and highest human ideal. Yet, the mere ideal of light, while sufficing to be the light of wisdom that illuminates the darkness of the long night of our ignorance—the antipode of our ideal world — could not be the active vessel that takes away the pain and suffering of the actual great ocean of birth-death (*saṃsāra*).

Only when we are taken up into the Vow-ark of Great Compassion,¹⁰ the ideal becomes one with reality. Then the sea of human life, that is full of real suffering, interpenetrates as it is and unhinderedly with the Light, so as to become itself a wide ocean of light. Away from the Vow-ark of Great Compassion, human life remains a sea of suffering, sinfulness, and hindrance. Even supposing that the unhindered light illuminates the sea of suffering of actual existence, what benefit would that bring to the self that is drowning at the bottom of the sea? Indeed, what is truly demanded by actual present reality is not light in the sky but the ark of the Vow on the sea of real human life. It is not the eternal Dharmākaya Buddha¹¹ who is the savior of the real

⁹“Path of Sages” (self power path) is a term often used by Pure Land people to refer in general to the other schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in contradistinction with their own “Pure Land Path” (Other-Power path).

¹⁰Pure Land religiosity often pictures Amida’s saving activity in the form of a vessel big enough to save *all* sentient beings by taking them into itself.

¹¹“Dharmakāya” (Dharma-body, *hosshin*) is the Buddha as absolute reality, identical with the Dharma-nature, in contradistinction with, mainly, the “nirmāna-kāya” (personified body, *ōjin*): the Buddha appearing in the world.

self; the savior of the real world must be a human Buddha who deigns to appear in the real world.

That Christianity speaks of a Trinity, posits Jesus as the mediator between God and human beings, and considers this God-man Jesus as the true and direct savior certainly is for the sake of satisfying this demand. The Father, the Supreme God, being eternal light, is not a being to be in intimate contact with the real world. Supposing even that this world is among the works of the Supreme God's hands, from the moment that the real world has come into actual existence, Supreme God and world are totally apart and mutually independent. Thus, this Supreme God in his own primal nature has already lost the capacity to rule, elevate, and save human beings. It is for this reason that He conceived the plan to send his specially beloved Son Christ into the real world, to make him the savior of that world and the unifier of the spiritual world, and in that way to reunite himself above and human beings below, who had been alienated from one another for a long time.

Between the Father, who is eternal light, and us human beings, who are foundering at the bottom of the ocean of samsara, there is a distance as between heaven and earth. The majesty of the Father cannot reach us directly. That is why He, dimming his light and adapting to the dust, deigned to appear as Dharmākara Bodhisattva, this savior who is a human Buddha.

IV

If so, what kind of person is this Dharmākara Bodhisattva? Where did he appear, where did he make his Vows, where did he engage in ascetic practice, where did he reach enlightenment? His enlightenment evidently points to the Pure Land in the west that lies infinitely beyond the realities of this world. The problem, however, is the place of the birth of this human Buddha, Dharmākara Bodhisattva, namely, Amida Buddha in the causal stage.

In Christ's case, no matter how much he bathes in an ideal light, it is clear that he is after all one historical person. He owes his capacity of being the savior of the real world, for one, to the fact that he has a foundation in that real world. On the other hand, however, it is due to his being one historical person that

he cannot perfectly fulfill the role of savior. No matter how superior a man one makes him out to be, he is after all a man, and must therefore be equal with us all in the point of needing salvation. And if one posits him between God and man as a mediator, he immediately loses the capacity of saving the real world. Moreover, he is and remains he, while I am and remain I. Thus, even while being a manifestation of a celestial world, from the moment he is one individual person he cannot be the savior of other individuals, the savior of me who is a different individual. If in this way he cannot be near enough to us to be our savior, it follows that he is nothing more than a precursor in enlightenment, who shows us that the Supreme God is near to us human beings as a Father. Thus, while outwardly showing the appearance of a religion of salvation by Other-Power, Christianity ends up being in fact an idealistic doctrine of self-power effort when that mask is finally taken away. The Supreme God, who is the ideal world, by his light only makes clearer and clearer the depth and weight of the karmic hindrances of human beings; and to us nothing is left but crying out the pain of vain effort, while yearning for the light of the Supreme God.

Dharmākara certainly did not appear as one historical human being. He deigned to be born directly in the heart-mind of us human beings. The calling voice directed at all sentient beings of the ten directions did not come from the high world of pure light, nor was it uttered objectively by one human person. This voice arose from the dark breast of suffering of each human being. That the Primal Vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva is called the ark on the great ocean of samsara intimates that calling voice arose from the depth of my soul, from right under my feet. While all the world's idealistic religions are "religions of heaven," our religion of salvation by Dharmākara Bodhisattva has the honor of being the only "religion of the earth." "Religions of light" are many; our Shinshū is the only "boat religion." Only our Shinshū is a religion of manifest reality, a religion of true salvation. [. . .]

Why is it that there are so many people in the world who go to their perdition in the depth of the ocean of samsara, while vainly praising and putting their trust in a future light? Truly, together with the many religions in the world that praise the light, our Shinshū too adoringly trusts in the light of the Tathā-

gata that penetrates all ten directions. But, we who praise the eternal and everlasting light do not reside in the sky. We find ourselves in the ark that sails the great ocean of reality, and there is not a single one in this ark who will perish forever. While being in the midst of the great ocean of life, the people in the ark of the Great Vow are far away from samsara. When I forget that ark, I can no longer be a person who praises the light. For, my real self, weighed down as it is by aeons of karma, cannot but naturally drop down as far as it can. I am not a being in the sky.

The buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gods of the ten directions and the three periods of time all equally call out from heaven: "Come!" Each of them shines on us with its particular light. And Amida Buddha of the regally burning light, which unifies all these lights, is supreme among them. Still, yearning and salvation are not one and the same thing. It may be true enough that all gods and buddhas do not reject us but forever call and enlighten us, but when we, powerless beings, meet the problem of the salvation of the real self, when it comes to the matter of praxis, we must reject and do away with the gods and buddhas by ourselves. To speak plainly, in all these gods and buddhas we find an ideal calling voice but no Primal Vow of real salvation. In its true sense, the Primal Vow is limited to the sole 48 Vows of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. We may speak lightly of salvation by Other-Power, but there is no true Other-Power besides the "Primal Vow-power" of the Tathāgata which our founder Shinran (1173–1262) has revealed to us.

But, what is this Primal Vow-power? It is the power that saves the real self. But is this not a beautiful and idle thing like a painted dumpling? The power of the compassionate Kannon (Guanyin) is, indeed, such a painted dumpling; it has no real basis anywhere. It is nothing but a beautiful metaphor. The Primal Vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva is totally different. As a human Buddha, Dharmākara Bodhisattva is, as such, the eternally existent Amida Buddha; at the same time, in another aspect, he is the true subject of the self that seeks salvation. I have expressed this idea with the words "the Tathāgata is none other than myself," and again have sensed it as "the Tathāgata becomes me." In other words, as savior he is the figure of the unity of *ki* (faith) and *hō* (Tathāgata)¹². Or again, on the side of the human being to be saved, he is the figure of the unity of

Buddha Mind (faith) and *bonbu*¹³ mind (sinful karma).

In the single figure of Dharmākara Bodhisattva we worship the majestic power of the eternal Dharmakāya Buddha and see the figure of the self that, awakened to its sinful self in the midst of evil karma, surrenders itself wholeheartedly. In him, while seeing the figure of the exalted Parent, we discern, in another aspect, the figure of the favorite child. Dharmākara Bodhisattva is not a third person that stands as mediator between the Tathāgata, the eternal Father, and us sentient beings; in his one person he is precisely the Tathāgata *and* us sentient beings. He is, at one, the first person and the second person; while being the object of our faith, he is at the same time the subject of our faith; he is the savior and the saved, the relier and the relied on, in one. He is, at once, a guest in the ark and its captain; the master of the Primal Vow and its intended object. When I start thinking of the person of this Dharmākara Bodhisattva, and the reason and meaning of his birth, I am overwhelmed by strong feeling and a sense of awesome wonder.

V

When I am struck with amazement at the inconceivable figure of this Dharmākara Bodhisattva, I feel awe before the inconceivable figure of the eternal Tathāgata and, at the same time, am amazed about my own inconceivable existence.

What, then, is this Dharmākara Bodhisattva? None other than the subject of the surrendering faith that is mindful of the Tathāgata. His 18th Vow is the expression of the Tathāgata's loving experiment with the entrusting child-mind of the sentient beings. Our founder Shinran stated that the 18th Vow realizes the faith of a person (*ki*), but what does it mean, after all, to

¹²*Kihō ittai* (the unity of faith and Tathāgata) is a concept, which explains the meaning of the six characters of *Namu Amida Butsu*. The first two characters, *Namu*, refer to the faith of sentient beings (*ki*) and the last four characters *Amida Butsu*, refer to the workings of Amida to save all sentient beings (*hō*). In other words, faith and the Tathāgata's power become one through the calling of Amida's Name.

¹³"Bonbu" is used in contradistinction with "Buddha" (enlightened being). It thus denotes an unenlightened being, with all the karmic burdens, passions, and sufferings this implies in the Buddhist worldview. In Shinshū, where it is used constantly, it also connotes the idea of "being unable to gain salvation by its own power." Here, "common mortal" is sometimes used as a translation.

realize the “entrusting person” (*tanomu ki*)? What does it mean to say that the Tathāgata has deigned to realize or accomplish the faith that we were supposed to arouse? If it were said that the Tathāgata had realized the vow and practice that we were supposed to bring forth, we could still understand that in an objective way, since vow and practice are objective to some extent. It is a different matter with faith, however, since this cannot be conceived at all apart from the subject. What could it mean, then, that an objective Tathāgata has realized in the subject’s place the real one-moment of faith of the true subject, whereby the self entrusts itself intimately to the Tathāgata? Is not precisely faith the true life of our pure subjectivity? It would appear, therefore, that this at least cannot be realized on the side of the objective Tathāgata.

Indeed, Master Shan-*tao* (613–681) and Master Hōnen, in their interpretation of the three aspects of faith and the ten moments of invocation of the 18th Vow (which proclaims faith, vow, and practice [*nembutsu*] to be the causes of Birth in the Pure Land) make a distinction on this point: of the three causes, faith as pertaining to the believing subject is detached from the Primal Vow as object of faith. They, then, consider the Name, as endowed with both vow and practice, to be realized by the Tathāgata, and therefore call the 18th Vow the “Vow of Birth by *Nembutsu*.” Only our founder Shinran, experimenting with this Vow in the depth of his own heart and discovering the Primal Vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva in his own subject, resolutely called this Vow the “Primal Vow of Faith.” Truly, in his self-awareness, Shinran was not only the “true guest” (object) of the Primal Vow, but also its “master” (subject). At this point, for one, we feel that, when the doctrine of our founder is said to be directly transmitted by Amida, these are certainly no mere words of idle praise. For, he discovered the Great Spirit wherein the Vows of Dharmākara were made precisely in his own one-moment faith. As our savior, Dharmākara is none other than the eternal Tathāgata but, when in his experiment with entrusting he is turned towards the eternal Tathāgata, he is none other than the faith, which is the subject’s true self for us sentient beings.

Among the words of the 18th Vow, the oath, “if there are sentient beings that are not born in my land, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment,” presents Dharmākara Bodhisattva

directly in his capacity of Father of eternal light, and the summons, “with sincere mind entrust yourselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying My Name perhaps even ten times,” directly shows him as coming into the subject of the sentient beings of the ten directions and experimenting with the stirrings of the hearts of us children. [. . .]

Especially in connection with the very “subjective” act of faith, it is not fitting to speak of “the Tathāgata acting in my place,” instead, we better speak of “the Tathāgata directly becoming me.” Precisely the true self of entrusting faith is the core of the 18th Vow, and what is called “Other-Power salvation of the Primal Vow” is ultimately nothing but the Tathāgata deigning to become the subject of the surrendering faith of the nembutsu practitioner. As long as one places Dharmākara Bodhisattva or his Primal Vow simply on the objective level, in the rank of object of faith, one cannot yet call him somebody who has experimented with the Primal Vow and has entrusted himself to it.

As to why the Tathāgata made the oath of faith, how He made it, and why He did not simply pledge Birth by Nembutsu, those are profound questions that deserve further deep reflection. [. . .]

Precisely by experimenting with the true subject of the practitioner, which is entrusting, the Tathāgata fulfilled and revealed the parental heart that makes Him pronounce the Vow; at the same time, precisely through his parental heart, He experiences the children’s heart of entrusting. Truly, the 18th Vow attests to the fact that Dharmākara Bodhisattva is the unhindered unity of the children’s heart of entrusting and the parental heart of the Vow, and shows that his personality consists in the self-awareness of the unity of Parent and child. Dharmākara Bodhisattva is the figure of the unity of Dharma and sentient beings, of the Buddha Mind and the mind of the common mortal (*bonbu*). He directly feels the karmic evil of all sentient beings as his own; he does not blame us, but only himself. By experimenting with the sinfulness of common mortals, he arouses the Buddha Mind on the side of the children, which is entrusting; and by experimenting with that entrusting, he brings forth the eternal parental heart that prompts him to make the Vow.

Dharmākara Bodhisattva is the *figure* of the Tathāgata

deigning to become me; and, at the same time, he is the manifestation of the Tathāgata having become us sentient beings—as indicated in the 18th Vow.

VI

In order to save me, who from time immemorial up to the very present have been tossing about in the ocean of samsara, burdened with the weight of karmic evil, the Tathāgata who is the eternal Father has projected himself into this ocean of samsara, has become intimately my true and ultimate subject, and thereby has awakened me from the dream of the beginningless night of ignorance. On the surface, the Tathāgata has called me “Thou,” but in his hidden depths he has deigned to consider me directly as “I.”

In connection with Dharmākara Bodhisattva, the sūtra speaks of “five kalpas” (of reflection) and “innumerable kalpas” (of practice). On hearing this, people are apt to consider this as an old tale that has nothing to do with their present self. In fact, however, the one-moment wherein Dharmākara Bodhisattva evoked the faith of sincere entrusting is an absolute moment that embraces innumerable kalpas. And equally the first moment wherein we are made to experience faith is an absolute moment that covers innumerable kalpas. [. . .] The present of faith is the Great Present of immeasurable life. There are no later moments that can be added to this moment. [. . .] Apart from that first one-moment there is no faith; the living reality of faith is only in the present. Why, then, view faith, which is the highest and only subject, as something in the past, as if it were a “thing” that has raised you once and for all to a peak of attainment, towards which only gratitude is in order (*hōshasan*). Faith is the ultimate subject, the true self. Therefore, when we distance ourselves from the one-moment of faith, we are already far from the Tathāgata, away from the self, and are living in a sky of illusory dreams. [. . .]

When we consider the moment when, innumerable kalpas ago, Dharmākara Bodhisattva made his Vow and the moment wherein we obtain faith as one absolute moment, the Vow of Dharmākara comes to lie within our present faith-moment. Both these moments are the beginning and aftermath of the same one-

moment. The innumerable kalpas of Dharmākara's practice and the ten kalpas that already elapsed since he obtained buddhahood (may seem to lie in between but they) cannot separate the two.

Truly, the five kalpas of reflection on the Vow, the innumerable kalpas of practice, and the ten kalpas since the obtaining of buddhahood are all finally included within the one-moment of faith of the Great Present. Dharmākara Bodhisattva is no ancient myth; he is a reality of present faith. If we conceive of him apart from the one-moment of faith, he becomes a mere mythological figure. The other Pure Land sects are religions of childish myth, since they distanced themselves from the one-moment of faith and became religions of idle yearning. In them, there is no real basis for the Dharmākara figure and, consequently, for them the Primal Vow, the Bodhisattva's practice, his attainment of buddhahood, the Pure Land, even salvation and Birth, all become mere ideals. [. . .] In fact, the ten kalpas and many eons, and also the moment of death (which many tend to see as the real moment of salvation), do not exist apart from the self-awareness of the present one-moment of faith. [. . .]

Dharmākara Bodhisattva's Primal Vow of the realization of entrusting, while being a thing of the beginningless past, is totally embraced by the one-moment of our self-awareness. The Bodhisattva first experiments with the beginningless reality of the deluded heart of common mortals, directly brings forth therein the Buddha Mind of entrusting, and from the midst of that mind of wholehearted surrender arouses the heart of the eternal Tathāgata that makes the salvation of all the condition of his own attainment of Buddhahood.

VII

When all is said and done, the yearning for light is a common trait of all religions, not a characteristic of Other-Power religion. By truly returning to our self, we must turn from a religion that praises light to a religion that takes us up into the ark. When we awaken to our present innermost reality and discover ourselves at the bottom of the ocean of samsara, then, surprisingly enough, we find ourselves sailing on the ark. [. . .] The ark of the Vow is really there in the present, and as long as

there is this boat, the Pure Land of Bliss, while being far, is close at hand. The great and only problem is not whether the Pure Land and the Tathāgata are far or near, but whether we ourselves are aware of the ark of the Vow or not.