THE BUDDHIST DOCTRINE OF VICARIOUS SUFFERING

I

By "Vicarious Suffering" is meant that the Bodhisattva wishes himself to suffer on behalf of sentient beings in order to save them. This idea of "vicarious suffering" is expressed in many canonical books, and the following quotation is from the *Avataṁsaka-sūtra*, (Chinese translation by Śikshānanda, 實叉難陀, Chap. X, on Pariṇāmana):

"The Bodhisattva thinks thus: all sentient beings commit innumerable evil deeds, and on account of which they suffer innumerable sufferings, do not see the Tathāgata, do not hear of the Good Law, do not recognise the pure Sangha. As they are loaded with innumerable evil deeds and their Karma, they are bound to suffer infinite pains. Therefore, I will stay for them in the evil paths and suffer their sufferings so that they may enjoy emancipation. I will never abandon them because of my incapacity of bearing all these "vicarious sufferings" which may cause my retrogression or fear or negligence. Because it is my desire to bear all sentient beings on my shoulders and to save them from such ills as birth, old age, sickness, and death, and to release them all from false philosophy, ignorance, and evils....."

But in Buddhism the Bodhisattva seems to denote the historical Buddha Śākyamuni himself as he was intent on the attainment of Enlightenment. Bodhisattva literally means a being who aspires for Enlightenment, and the notion of Enlightenment is generally made to imply the salvation of sentient beings. Therefore, originally, Bodhisattva was the name given to Śākyamuni while he was still in his disciplinary stage before he became the Great Teacher of the

world. But the life of Śākyamuni while still in his disciplinary stage was not confined to this life only, but meant the many lives in the past which he spent practising all the virtues in order to save sentient beings. Hence the origination of the Jataka tales. In the Jataka tales we see many instances where he suffered for the sake of all sentient beings—not only human beings but all creatures endowed with life; thus he came to be saviour of the world as well as its teacher.

But in Mahayana Buddhism the name Bodhisattva is not confined to Śākyamuni in his disciplinary stage, but given to any one who is a true seeker of the Dharma, that is, who disciplines himself with the desire to benefit not only himself but others. Bodhisattvaship must then be considered consisting in the spirit of vicarious suffering. Now let us ask how we can take this vicarious suffering for the principle of Bodhisattvaship.

If pain is everywhere caused by an external cause, vicarious suffering may be to a certain extent possible, as we see in the story of Prince Zempuku, 善伏[1] who suffered the punishment in the place of the real culprit. The rich can taste the distress of the poor by giving up all their property. To give a part of one's skin or blood to others who need them for some medical purposes may be said to be a case of vicarious suffering.

But these things are practised in some extreme cases not commonly met with in our ordinary life, and it is naturally impossible to practise this kind of things for all our fellow-beings. Vicarious suffering will be altogether impossible (it seems to me) when pain is produced entirely by an interior cause: the pain of old age, the pain of an incurable disease,—who could suffer this for the actual sufferer? This

[1] Śikshānanda's translation, Chapter on "Entrance into the Dharmadhatu."

impossibility will become all the graver when pain comes from the inmost recesses of conscience which grieves not over the consequence of evil deeds but over the fact of their at all being committed; that is to say, the more inner the seat of pain, the more impossible its vicarious suffering will be.

Even when this vicarious suffering is confined to the person of Śākyamuni who is said to have gone through a life of sacrifice, the problem remains unsolved as long as we are on the plane of common sense. One may say this is a matter of religious faith. If so, how can we have this justified in our religious experience?

II

To inquire into this problem I will take as the basis of my study Genju's (賢首) noted commentary on the *Kegon* (*Avataṁsaka Sūtra*) and that by Chōkwan (澄觀), in which various opinions are enumerated concerning the doctrine of vicarious suffering. In these enumerations no particular interpretations of the doctrine are offered, but they are rich in suggestion.

According to Genju and Chōkwan, vicarious suffering is desired by the Bodhisattva. In Maitreya's treatise on Yogācāra philosophy we read: the Bodhisattva with his excellent wisdom and deeds accumulates the pabulum necessary for his Enlightenment and has no other thoughts but pity and sympathy with all suffering beings. He vows to be in the evil paths in order to save suffering beings therein: fixing his abode in these evil paths he stays there and attains Enlightenment. He vows again to bear on himself the outcome of all the evil deeds committed by them in order to save them from sufferings. He wishes to atone for their evil Karma. The idea is through this vow not to let all suffering beings be actual sufferers of their own evil Karma, but to let them enjoy only the result of their good Karma. The Bodhisattva has destroyed all the seeds of

passions and gone beyond all the evil paths. According to this, it is evident that to suffer pain for others is the vow of the Bodhisattva.

Genju and Chōkwan seem to regard the vow as a fact of experience actually gone through by the Bodhisattva himself, and they are inclined to understand Maitreya in a somewhat superficial manner. But as we know that the doctrine advanced in the treatise on Yogācāra is representative of the views held by the Indian Buddhist philosopher, due respect is to be paid to it, and I wish to elucidate first of all what is meant by the vow (*praṇidhāna*). We already know in the *Avataṁsaka-sūtra* that vicarious suffering is vowed by the Bodhisattva: what is this vow, generally speaking? What does it mean to save all sentient beings through this vow? When this question is made clear, we may perhaps understand what is really meant by vicarious suffering.

The term Bodhisattva means the one who seeks for Enlightenment. Enlightenment is the ideal of Bodhisattvahood and original reason of his being. Therefore, the vow of the Bodhisattva is to realise the original reason of himself, that is, unfold the Buddha-nature in himself. But how does he realise it with the consciousness that it is for his own benefit? As long as we are conscious of the fact that anything is done for the sake of self, in whatever sense this may be understood, there is no way for us to escape the bondage of this self. In order to realise the Original Self it is necessary to deny the notion that it is for one's self. What takes place in our consciousness in the denial of self is no other than the notion that it is for all suffering beings. The realisation of the Original Self may thus be possible only when the narrower self is given up and replaced by the notion of all sentient beings. Accordingly, the vow to save all suffering beings means truly to attain Enlightenment.

The idea advanced in the treatise on this interpretation will grow clearer, when we know that the original reason of Selfhood is Enlightenment which is the awakening of the transcendental self, while what it actually experiences in this world of senses constitutes this world of suffering beings. Therefore, the salvation of all suffering beings must come from the eternal vow of the Bodhisattva, and this vow is expressed in his deep feeling towards all sentient beings for whom he desires to suffer vicariously. This is truly the vow of the Bodhisattva, and that it shows no retrogression in its intensity is the very condition of its fulfillment. Therefore, the Bodhisattva entertaining the vow destroys as the first thing all the seeds of passions in himself and goes beyond all the evil paths; it is not thus quite fair to consider his vow a merely idealistic vow which is fine in sentiment but in fact utterly ineffective because suffering beings actually suffer. For as long as the Bodhisattva, through his vow, personally expresses all the sufferings in this world of the senses, he is, in the most realistic sense of the word, vicariously suffering for all sentient beings.

This is evident from those passages in the *Avataṁsaka-sūtra*, to which reference has already been made. In them the reasons are enumerated why the Bodhisattva desires to be the saviour of all beings, and from them we also learn that his heart of deep compassion never shows retrogression in the face of every possible harm and enmity. His large heart is there likened to the sun that does not refuse to shine because of the presence of the blind; the sutra then goes on to speak about the Bodhisattva's desire to suffer for others, and his irrevocable determination that "Even when I am all alone in this resolution I will not falter." According to these statements in the sutra, it appears that from the desire for Enlightenment there issues the vow to save all beings; while the latter are not actually and perceptibly benefitted by the ardent desire of the Bodhisattva to save

them, the Bodhisattva never ceases to wish eternally for the benefit of all sentient beings; this is due to the fact that Enlightenment is essentially and ultimately for all beings and not for oneself. Therefore, in spite of the fact that beings to be saved are immeasurable in number, the Bodhisattva, ever intent on saving his fellow-beings, perfects, innerly in himself, through his vow and virtue, his own being. In other words, while always suffering for others the Bodhisattva realises his Original Self.

Thus we are able to understand the meaning of the truth constantly reiterated in the sutra, that the Bodhisattva, while all the time desiring to save all beings infinite in number, fufills his vow and attains his Buddhahood even before all suffering beings are actually saved. This appears to our common-sense view quite self-contradictory. When, however, the Bodhisattva realises the eternal nature of his vow, he realises at the same time that Enlightenment is the ultimate end of the vow as well as its own reason; hence the fulfillment of the vow means no other than penetratingly understanding the inmost meaning of the vow itself.

III

Even when vicarious suffering is regarded as the essential intent of the vow of the Bodhisattva, is it possible from the practical standpoint of view for him to say that he vicariously suffers for others if the latter are not thereby benefitted in any demonstrable manner? That is to say, the idea of vicarious suffering must have two factors: the consciousness of suffering in the one who vicariously suffers and the acknowledgment of the fact by the one whose suffering is vicariously suffered by the former. It goes without saying that the fact of vicarious suffering has nothing to do with its acknowledgment on the part of the vicariously suffered; but there must be some meaning in deeds of vicarious

suffering, which is to be acknowledged by the vicariously suffered in their inmost hearts.

As long as the vow of vicarious suffering leads to deeds, the latter are as a matter of fact to be recognised by those whose suffering is vicariously suffered. A deed, however great and far-reaching it may be in its influence on society, is not to be considered representative if the motive, that is, the vow is not real and sincere; on the contrary, a deed may not be one of great outward consequence, but if the motive is true and sincere it is the one that is to be thanked for by all people. Therefore, every true and sincere deed must be recognised as containing in itself something representative, and through this medium we find our way of salvation for ourselves. So we read in Chōkwan's Commentary: "When the Bodhisattva disciplines himself in asceticism in order to seek the Dharma for the benefit of all beings, this we have called 'vicarious.' This practice later becomes an ever-excellent guidance for all beings, as they strive after Enlightenment, and in this sense also the Bodhisattva may be said to 'vicariously suffer' for others. When we read the lives of self-sacrificing Buddhists who perseveringly sought after the path in the face of every possible hardship, we unfailingly feel that their heroic deeds were meant for us, and that but for their efforts how little should we know now of the meaning of our own lives?"

Vicarious sufferers are not necessarily limited to such personalities as are known as saintly or worthy. When our spiritual eye opens we shall be able to discover those worthy sufferers everywhere; they are not to be limited to a few historical figures. The question will then turn on the presence of the spiritual eye which detects our vicarious sufferers. The detection is possible only when our spiritual eye partakes the same nature as that which constitutes the fundamental spirit of the vicarious sufferer himself. And as we can conceive this perceiving eye as a reflection of the

pure spirit of the vicarious sufferer we may conclude that to recognise the virtue of the vicarious sufferer is in itself due to the action of this virtue. Then what is the deed of vicarious suffering ?

IV

As long as deeds issue from the vow, what is the most essential is naturally the vow itself and not deeds. But it is also important to investigate into the several forms the deeds assume. We see a sort of answer to the question in the Commentaries on the *Avataṁsaka-sūtra* by Genju and Chōkwan.

One of the forms assumed by deeds of vicarious suffering is sympathetic cooperation. This mean " living in the same way." Now to save others, one is naturally expected to surpass them in wisdom and virtue, for it is a good swimmer that can save the drowning. But the saver, in order to save the drowning, must throw himself into the rapids and fight with the waves. Therefore, an excellent saviour of mankind must have within himself a world which is not of this world though in his outward life living the life of a mortal being which does not differ from that which is lived by his fellow-creatures. By thus transcending the world the saviour has in himself something not bound by pleasure and pain, but by thus conforming himself to the world he is capable of suffering pleasure and pain. If this apparent contradiction is not permitted, it will be impossible for the vicarious sufferer to save others. Then, in what sense is this " transcending and conforming " possible ?

To transcend the world means inwardly to abandon all passion, that is, to be delivered from all desires and thoughts, whereas to conform to the world means to have various passions and not to be delivered from desires and thoughts. Thus to conform while transcending means not to abandon passions unnaturally, and to transcend while conforming

means in no time to be controlled by passions. Hence the doctrine of "intentional retention of passions." It means that the Bodhisattva retains passions and not purposely annihilates them in order to conform to the ordinary life of the world. The vow of salvation which has the Bodhi as its basis is infinite, and as our actual life evolves with nothing to hinder its course, passions are stirred without a moment's stoppage. But from the Bodhi which is the foundation of humanity issues wisdom whereby all these passions and worldly turmoils are kept under control. Therefore, passions are absorbed in the Bodhi just as they are and digested therein making the latter ever richer. We read in Asanga's *Mahāyāna-Saṁgraha-Śāstra* (Chinese translation):

> "All passions have already been subjugated:
> As poison by itself loses its own poisonous nature,
> So ignorance is exhausted by its very ignorance;
> And the Buddha attains his all-knowledge.
> All confused thoughts become factors of Enlightenment,
> And Birth-and-Death (*saṁsāra*) turns into Nirvana;
> The Buddha who accomplishes the great skilful means of salvation (*upāya*),
> He is indeed beyond comprehension."

This doctrine of "intentional retention of passions" may sound strange when we understand it as meaning that when one is left to oneself no passions arise but they are needed for the benefit of others; for this is a sort of self-justification. If the doctrine is understood in this way, that is, while morality based on utilitarian principles is not good, the total absence of practical consideration may cause the motive of doing anything good to wither away, and for this reason the Bodhisattva retains all his passions—if the doctrine is to be understood thus, it will greatly lose in its spiritual signification. The essence of the doctrine, as I take it, lies in the ultimate control of passions by means of wisdom.

Desires and passions are, so to speak, raw materials of life which are purified by wisdom. No one can exterminate his desires and passions. The wise will not be led astray by them, keeping them always under control. They will thereby enrich the content of their experiences. As long as they have desires and passion they will have to suffer sufferings inherent to life. When sufferings are purified by wisdom. they not only become their own spiritual possession but are offerings to all humankind. Those to whom we pay our homage as the spiritual representatives of all sentient beings were not exempt from bitter experiences of life, but in them all the sufferings and tribulations were purified through true wisdom.

Genju and Chōkwan recite the following cases as deeds of vicarious suffering, which are however quite problematical. The first one may be termed "intentional commitment of evils." The Bodhisattva purposely commits crimes in order to attain a certain object, and the consequence of it he is made to suffer; in other words, he commits an evil deed to fulfil his vow of salvation preparing himself for its bitter retribution. If this is morally permissible, it comes to this that evil deeds are morally justified for the realisation of a lofty enhanced ideal as long as one is ready to suffer penalty as the outcome of his evil deed.

Shuncho, a devotee of the *Puṇḍarīka*, is said to have been often in prison on the charge of slight crimes, the idea was to approach the jail-birds and save them from spiritual suffering. It is reported that an Indian Buddhist philosopher justified murder for the love of the murdered. And in this case the Bodhisattva would go to hell in a most exalted state of mind. He maintains that such deeds are to be recognised as those of the Bodhisattva inasmuch as a victim of his purposeful crime is thereby relieved of his own suffering due to his past Karma.

If such substitution is possible and is acknowledged as

Bodhisattvaic morality here we have an adequate example of vicarious suffering. But we feel that the problem is highly pregnant of grave consequences. We can say that, strictly considered, the deliberate commitment of evil deeds is an impossibility. True morality is to be regulated according to ideas universally acceptable and cannot be specified by any definitely itemised clauses of morality. For this reason, unwritten laws of morality are variously applicable according to time and situation. Or the specified items of morality may be idealised so as to mean that the killing of the body is compatible with the saving of the soul. Therefore, if the Bodhisattva is really awakened to the true ideals of humanity, whatever deeds he commits cannot be designated as evil. Consequently, in whatever way the Bodhisattva may act, no retribution can ever be his lot just as a good physician never suffers pain on account of the operation he may perform on his patient.

But the question is more concrete and realistic. What should the Bodhisattva do if the view which he conceives true is unfortunately against common sense and the tradition of his time? In point of fact, such disagreements are rather a matter of common occurrence. In this case the Bodhisattva, as the representative of his time and society, must hold himself also responsible for evils of his own time. But this is the negative phase of his moral consciousness; though it is of more significance than is ordinarily imagined, requiring more serious considerations. Still he is required to make some positive assertion that may seem on the surface to contradict the so-called common-sense view of things as well as the tradition of his time. And in this case he is naturally expected to suffer all the bitter consequences of his deeds; for were they not crucified by their contemporaries,—they who rendered great real services to humanity?

As is seen here, what is considered an evil deed is not

necessarily evil in the moral consciousness of the Bodhisattva himself, being only so when judged by the moral standard of the time. To judge however the conduct of the Bodhisattva, we must resort to the absolute standard of morality and not in its accidental relations to the views cherished by his contemporaries. Behind his positive conduct thus we can see his self-sacrificing spirit with which he is willing to bear on himself all the ills of his time.

The last form of vicarious suffering we may mention, is the self-sacrificing deeds of the Bodhisattva, by which he is himself willing to offer his own life, for the execution of anything that is needful for humanity, regardless of personal hardships and dangers. The welfare and progress of society owes a great deal to the conduct of the masses whose merits are usually unrecorded in all history. If the farmer entirely gives up his profession what should become of us? All kinds of labourers form the foundation of society. However magnificent a mansion may be, it cannot retain its splendour if no drudges are available for keeping the establishment in good and clean and sanitary conditions. The smooth working and orderliness of social life will at once be put out of gear if every woman wants to be a lady and every man to be a gentleman of leisure. We know that the stage is not set up for the sake of a curtain-raiser and a utility-man, but without them we cannot have any sort of play. For that very reason, however, there are very few persons who are willing to be curtain-raisers or general utility-men. Therefore, those who perform such parts may regarded as placed on the sacrificial altar when they are evaluated from the general economy of the stage. Fully recognising the importance of such parts and yet not unconscious of public frigidity, the Bodhisattva offers himself to perform all the ignominous functions in the orderly evolution of the great drama which is known as human life. The original vow of Kshitigarbha and the universal manifestation of Avalokiteś-

vara exemplify in the most familiar manner cases of vicarious suffering.

We all know that hidden conduct is the basis of any successful achievement. In all departments of human activity anything worth reputation is preceded by many hard experiences. Social morality is sustained by silent workers who go their own way not demanding wealth or fame as reward. There is no enterprise that does not require perseverance and silent suffering on the part of the workers. Therefore, generally speaking, no work can be accomplished without the spirit of self-sacrifice. Further, when one realises that the basis of any undertaking is laid in self-sacrificial conduct, the worker must be free from the consciousness that he is doing self-sacrificing work.

V

By the foregoing explanation we have come to understand what are some of the forms of vicarious suffering; showing that importance is to be attached more to the motive or vow (*praṇidhāna*) which is the basis of conduct, than to conduct itself. That is to say, men of vicarious suffering to whom we feel greatly indebted, realise the vow in their conduct. From this point of view, whatever conduct it may be, as far as it issues from a true sincere vow, it must be regarded as a form of vicarious suffering. While human conduct in general may be regarded in the light of vicarious suffering, it does not follow that the general mass of people are all Bodhisattvas of that order. Very few of them are worthy of our respect and reverence as self-sacrificing and vicariously suffering Bodhisattvas. Most people are just living under the stimulation of personal desires. That is, few in number are real Bodhisattvas and many indeed those who are to be saved by them. When the matter is critically examined vicarious sufferers grow less and less in number until we know two or three really such in the whole history of mankind.

If so, is the ideal Bodhisattva so rare as we have to consider him an impossible specimen of humanity? The thing is, however, to turn this critical way of judging human conduct and direct it on ourselves and not on a generality of people moving towards the gratification of their own egotistic passions. So when we critisise others we are really critisising ourselves. To declare that there is no spirit of vicarious suffering in the world is to confess that we have no such spirit within our own hearts. The criticism must be directed on ourselves. It must be self-reflection. Now let us ask whence this self-reflection comes. It is no other than the working of the Bodhi which makes the Bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings. The subject of self-reflection is the Bodhisattva and its object is all beings. While in this concrete self itself we may naturally find the unity of subject and object, in our empirical consciousness the "I" as an objective existence is entirely individualistic. Some may think that even this "I" may not be lacking in the spirit of vicarious suffering; but here we find that the light of self-reflection has not yet penetrated deep enough into the recesses of consciousness where there lurks a trace of self-conceit which is really self-deception. The genuineness of the spirit is no longer there. However, if there is no Bodhisattva's vow lying perhaps still dormant deep in our hearts and not yet recognised by our self-reflecting consciousness, we shall have no occasion to lament our personal defects, nor may we be able to discover any vicarious sufferers however scarce they may come to us.

At the same time, the more this will become clear in our practical reason, the more will be the number of vicarious sufferers acknowledged as such until we come to recognise the meaning of vicarious suffering in the whole body of humanity. In other words, our self-criticism wonderfully makes it clear that all sentient beings are to be saved as well as ourselves, and also that the Bodhisattva of vicarious

suffering is the taproot of their existence. However few may be exemplars of vicarious suffering, that which makes up the essence of vicarious suffering is no other than the *apriori*-self of all sentient beings. It is for the maturest realisation of this apriori-self in the vicarious sufferers that we especially admire and respect; that is to say, that which we worship in all wise and holy beings is found reflected in our own souls while what constitutes our *apriori*-self is found realised in the Bodhisattva. This is the reason why in Buddhism the historical Buddha Śākyamuni is not recognised as the vicarious sufferer. All the innumerable Bodhisattvas referred to in the sutras are the ideal of all sentient beings that makes up their transcendental-ego. The names of the Bodhisattvas mean various desires and hopes of humanity. The name Samantabhadra in the *Avataṁsaka-sūtra* represents the virtue of the Bodhisattva in general, and Dharmākara-Bhikshu in the *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* means the most fundamental unity of all Bodhisattvas. As to the number of Bodhisattvas, whether one or many, it is not to be predetermined. As far as each living individual is expression of a desire, or hope, or will, there must be so many corresponding Bodhisattvas, but when all those desires or hopes are regarded as unified in one fundamental will there is but one Bodhisattva. When we thus understand the meaning of Bodhisattvahood, we are also able to comprehend the meaning of vicarious suffering.

We have understood the term "vicarious" in the sense of "representative." Of course these two concepts are to be distinguished the one from the other. As we recognise a deep meaning in the various stories of vicarious suffering as told in the Jataka-tales, the former is not to be confused with the latter. If a man acts for others with the heart of a Bodhisattva, we can read here his desire to save all sentient beings. This is what we may call a "representative deed." So, the essential meaning of "vicarious suffering" must be

sought in the idea of its being representative for all beings so as to bear their evil Karma for them. And the real vicarious sufferer in this empirical life is no other than our transcendental ego itself, which constitutes the "not-I" in me.

Now we come to understand the explanation given by Genju and Chōkwan that "Samantabhadra makes the spiritual universe his own body, which is constituted by all sentient beings; thus Samantabhadra is always the sufferer for all sentient beings, and in this sense his suffering is called 'vicarious.'" What is the most direct sufferer in this vicarious suffering is not what we understand by "others," nor is it sentient beings themselves; it is Samantabhadra himself who suffers vicariously in sentient beings. In other words, when we are awakened to the sufferings we are actually experiencing and bear them, this is said to suffer spiritually aided by Samantabhadra, for we by ourselves have no power of enduring sufferings. Forgetting Samantabhadra, however, who wants to suffer vicariously for us to an infinite degree, we externally seek for the means of removing our sufferings.

But to seek for the vicarious sufferer too near ourselves may seem to disregard the true sense of "vicarious suffering"; for each individual is a complete being by himself. In this case, that there is something still not quite clear in the meaning of "vicarious suffering" is because one understands it in the sense of "substitution": when it is understood in the sense of "representative" the idea grows more intelligible, because the vicarious sufferer is near enough to us and in this again we are able to see such a vicarious sufferer in others. In those whom we esteem as vicarious sufferers there is no need to cherish the consciousness that they suffer for others. We see that the true vicarious sufferers have not such a self-conceit and move according to the vow and conduct of Samantabhadra. And

we may take part in the great and sacred movement by aspiring for the deed and the vow of Samantabhadra. Herein we must seek for Life and Light Eternal.

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