

THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL

By C.T. Shen

A huge mansion is on fire. There is one door which leads to safety. Many people – men, women and children are playing in the mansion and only a few of them are aware of the danger of the fire. Those few who are aware of the danger try hard to find a way out. The way is long and tricky. They finally get out of the mansion through the heavy smoke and while breathing in the fresh open air again, they are so delighted that they just lie on the ground and do not want to do anything more. One of them, however, thinks differently. He remembers that many people are still in this mansion and are not aware of the danger of the fire and that even if they were aware they do not know the way that leads to the door. So without considering his own fatigue and risk he goes back into the mansion again and again to lead the other people out of this dangerous place.

This man is a Bodhisattva.

There is another famous story which has been introduced to Western readers by Prof. Houston Smith in his distinguished book, “The Religions of Man”. It goes as follows: three men are travelling across a desert in search of a treasure at a remote destination. They have walked a long distance under the hot sun and are tired and thirsty and desperately need some shaded place to rest and some water or fruit to quench their burning thirst. Suddenly they reach a compound surrounded by walls. One of them climbs to the top of the wall, cries out joyfully, and jumps into the compound. The second traveller follows him and also jumps into the compound: Then the third traveller climbs to the top of the wall where he sees the beautiful garden shaded by palm trees and with a large pond of spring water. What a temptation! While about to jump into the compound, he remembers that many other travellers are still wandering in the horrible desert without the knowledge of this oasis. He refuses the temptation to jump over the wall, and goes back into the immense burning desert to lead the other travellers to this resting place.

I believe that everyone here will have no difficulty in understanding that the third one is a Bodhisattva.

It should be pointed out here that such compassion is not superficial but is deep and fathomless. It has no prerequisite such as “because I like you” or “because you obey me”. It is non-discriminative and unconditional. Such compassion and love arises from the direct experience of Sunyata, the state of perfect harmony, of perfect equality, and of no attachment of whatever nature.

