

The Voice of the Silence:
Bringing the Heart Doctrine to the West

Among the many works that Madame Blavatsky brought before the public, *The Voice of the Silence* was unique in its appeal to the heart and spirit of humanity. Throughout, it repeatedly demands the greatest compassion that one is capable of towards one's fellow man.

According to Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence* comes from "The Book of the Golden Precepts" which "forms part of the same series as that from which the 'Stanzas' of the *Book of Dzyan* were taken, on which the *Secret Doctrine* is based."¹ She says that The Book of the Golden Precepts "contains about ninety distinct little treatises," thirty-nine of which she had memorized.² Three of these she translated into English for us in *The Voice of the Silence*, which we know as the "Three Fragments." One can surmise that she studied these treatises under the tutelage of her Adept teachers during her stay in Little Tibet and Tibet proper which she makes reference to in her writings.³

Boris de Zirkoff, in preparing an edition of *The Voice of the Silence*, yet unpublished, wrote an informative Introductory titled "How *The Voice of the Silence* Was Written," which has been published in two places.⁴ Here he cites some interesting accounts given by several people who visited H.P.B. at some point during her writing of *The Voice*, much of which took place in Fontainebleau, France during July of 1889. Several visitors were asked by Blavatsky to read portions of *The Voice* while the manuscript was in progress, and they all had a similar reaction: they were deeply moved by the beauty and depth of compassion this work evoked.⁵ When asked by H.P.B. what he thought of it, G. R. S. Mead said, "it was the grandest thing in all our theological literature."⁶

In their Foreword to the Peking edition of *The Voice of the Silence*, Alice Cleather and Basil Crump convey the Panchen Lama's endorsement of this work as the "only true exposition in English of the Heart Doctrine of the Mahāyāna and its noble ideal of self-sacrifice for humanity."⁷

What is the Heart Doctrine spoken of by the Panchen Lama? In the *Voice of the Silence* H.P.B. distinguishes between the Head Doctrine and the Heart Doctrine in Fragment Two titled "The Two Paths" where she says:

Learn above all to separate Head-learning from Soul-Wisdom, the "Eye" from the "Heart" doctrine. . . . even ignorance is better than Head-learning with no Soul-wisdom to illuminate and guide it. . . .⁸

"Great Sifter" is the name of the "Heart Doctrine," O disciple. . . . True knowledge is the flour, false learning is the husk. . . .⁹

And again:

The Dharma of the "Eye" is the embodiment of the external, and the nonexisting. The Dharma of the "Heart" is the embodiment of Bodhi (True, divine Wisdom), the Permanent and Everlasting.¹⁰

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the tradition of which the Panchen Lama is a major representative in Tibet,¹¹ the Heart Doctrine is extremely well-developed. Here we find it in the teaching of the Bodhisattva and the Bodhisattva Path; that is, the Bodhisattva—a spiritual being dedicated to alleviating the suffering of humanity; and the Bodhisattva Path—the course of action tread by a Bodhisattva to eliminate this suffering.

In fact, within the Mahāyāna tradition there is an entire lineage which emphasizes the culture and development of a Bodhisattva. This "compassion lineage" was inspired by the writings of Maitreya.¹² This is complemented by a corresponding "wisdom lineage" inspired by Mañjuśrī in which the philosophical writings of Nāgārjuna are prominent.¹³ These two lineages

of wisdom and compassion are not intended to be developed in isolation from one another, but instead function as complementary parts of a unified whole.

These two lineages have together produced entire treatises delineating 1) the course of action of a Bodhisattva, and 2) the stages of the Bodhisattva Path.¹⁴ Among these, the most popular and widely read is a Sanskrit work known as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Its title literally means “Entrance into the Conduct of the Bodhisattva,” or “A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life.”¹⁵ It was written by Śāntideva, a Buddhist monk who lived in India during the eighth century.¹⁶

So here in Mahāyāna Buddhism we find works that serve as guides for our own training in the same noble ethics and compassion that H.P.B. urged us to practice in *The Voice of the Silence*. As Blavatsky says,

Thou canst not travel on the Path before thou hast become that Path itself.¹⁷

Although there are differences in style and genre¹⁸ between *The Voice of the Silence* and the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, they are similar in that they each *serve the same function* in their promotion of altruism. For comparison, let us look at some passages from each.

The Voice: Help Nature and work on with her; and Nature will regard thee as one of her creators and make obeisance. (p. 14)

Bodhicaryāvatāra: Wherever the heart’s desire of those who perform virtue goes, there its own merits honor it with an offering of its results. VII.42.

The Voice: Give light and comfort to the toiling pilgrim, and seek out him who knows still less than thou; who in his wretched desolation sits starving for the bread of Wisdom and the bread which feeds the shadow, without a Teacher, hope or consolation, and—let him hear the Law. (p. 37)

Bodhicaryāvatāra: May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over. May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant. III.17–18.

The Voice: And then, O thou pursuer of the truth, thy Mind-Soul will become as a mad elephant, that rages in the jungle. . . . Beware, lest in forgetting SELF, thy Soul lose o'er its trembling mind control, and forfeit thus the due fruition of its conquests. (p. 62)

Bodhicaryāvatāra: Untamed, mad elephants do not inflict as much harm in this world as does the unleashed elephant of the mind in the Avīcī hell and the like. But if the elephant of the mind is completely restrained by the rope of mindfulness, then all perils vanish and complete well-being is obtained. V.2–3.

The Voice: The fearless warrior, his precious life-blood oozing from his wide and gaping wounds, will still attack the foe . . . Act then, all ye who fail and suffer, act like him; and from the stronghold of your Soul, chase all your foes away—ambition, anger, hatred, e'en to the shadow of desire . . . (p. 63)

Bodhicaryāvatāra: Let my entrails ooze out and my head fall off, but by no means shall I bow down to my enemies, the mental afflictions (such as ambition, anger, and hatred). IV.44.

The Voice: Now bend thy head and listen well, O Bodhisattva—Compassion speaks and saith: “Can there be bliss when all that lives must suffer? Shalt thou be saved and hear the whole world cry?” (p. 71)

Bodhicaryāvatāra: When fear and suffering are equally abhorrent to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I protect myself but not others? VIII.96.

Now we have seen some of the similarities and differences in presentation between these two works. Because *The Voice of the Silence* is filled with references to the self-sacrificing nature of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as to the Pāramitās, its Mahāyāna Buddhist character was easily recognized.¹⁹

In *The Voice of the Silence*²⁰ H.P.B. takes the spiritual seeker through the Three Halls of the Probationary Path; the choice between the Two Paths—Open and Secret, the Secret being the path of the highest altruism of a Bodhisattva; and then on through the Seven Portals, which are the Pāramitās or Perfections of Mahāyāna Buddhism.²¹

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* extols the virtues of Bodhicitta, which is the altruistic intention to become enlightened in order to benefit all sentient beings, encourages the spiritually-minded person to take up the path of unselfish service to others, and warns of the dangers in turning back once one has set out. Four of the Pāramitās are each represented by a chapter in this work: Kṣānti, Vīrya, Dhyāna, and Prajñā, by chapters 6–9, respectively. Throughout, the Pāramitās or Perfections are cited as virtues to be cultivated, in the same way as the Seven Portals of *The Voice* are the gateways of virtue leading to the path of highest altruism and compassion. As H.P.B. says:

To live to benefit mankind is the first step. To practice the six glorious virtues is the second.²²

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, representative of the Heart Doctrine, has enjoyed a long history of popularity dating back to the eighth century when it was composed. Soon after, it was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan and continues to the present day in an unbroken tradition. Its popularity flourishes today as it is promoted by H. H. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama in public teachings,²³ and new translations of it are produced.

In comparison with its Mahāyāna Buddhist counterpart, *The Voice of the Silence* has a relatively short public history, beginning in 1889.²⁴ After it was published, Blavatsky said in a letter to her sister:

The Voice of the Silence, tiny book though it is, is simply becoming the Theosophists' bible.²⁵

By the 1960s the editor of the Buddhist magazine *The Middle Way* had commented that *The Voice of the Silence* was such an exquisite work, why hadn't the Buddhist community embraced it?²⁶

Unlike the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, a text whose Sanskrit original has a 1200-year unbroken tradition, we don't have an original language manuscript for *The Voice of the Silence*. It has come to us as a translation of a "secret" work, unknown to the public. It is no doubt true that if such an original of *The Voice* did exist, *The Voice of the Silence* would reach a much greater audience, just as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* does.

Although the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has this longstanding tradition, and *The Voice* doesn't, it was *The Voice of the Silence* that first brought the Heart Doctrine to the English-speaking Western public. We know that *The Voice of the Silence* was originally published in 1889. At about the same time, the original Sanskrit text of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was also first published.²⁷ The first English translation of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was published in 1909, though somewhat abridged.²⁸ Since 1970, when the first complete English translation of it was published, interest in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has greatly increased in the West.²⁹

In contrast, *The Voice of the Silence* has not received widespread public interest. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that we have no original language manuscript for *The Voice*. Having one, *The Voice of the Silence* would gain the acceptance of scholars, and thereby the widespread attention of the public.

In the meantime, it is only those who have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the heart to respond that can truly appreciate *The Voice of the Silence* and its sublime message of compassion. And for that, we are deeply indebted to Madame Blavatsky who first brought us that treasure of the Heart Doctrine which we know as *The Voice of the Silence*.

Notes

1. *The Voice of the Silence*, by H. P. Blavatsky, London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Ltd., 1889; New York: W. Q. Judge, 1889; Peking: The Chinese Buddhist Research Society, 1927, p. vi. The Peking edition is reprinted from the original, retaining the same pagination, with notes and comments by Alice Leighton Cleather and Basil Crump. All further references are to the Peking edition.

2. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

3. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. VI, ed. Boris de Zirkoff, Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1954; 2nd ed., 1975, p. 272: “. . . I have lived at different periods in Little Tibet as in Great Tibet, and that these combined periods form more than seven years. . . .”

4. Boris de Zirkoff’s “Introductory: How *The Voice of the Silence* Was Written” was published in *The American Theosophist* 76:9 (Nov.-Dec. 1988), pp. 230-237, and as the Introduction to *The Voice of the Silence*, Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1992, pp. 11a-33a. A copy of Boris de Zirkoff’s manuscript edition of *The Voice of the Silence* with Introductory has been kindly provided by Dara Eklund. All further references to Boris’ Introductory are from this manuscript edition.

5. Boris de Zirkoff, “Introductory: How *The Voice of the Silence* Was Written,” pp. 6-9. Herbert Burrows and Annie Besant were among those who read portions of the manuscript of *The Voice of the Silence* while in progress. Of this work Annie Besant said: “It moves us, not by a statement of facts gathered from books, but by an appeal to the divinest instincts of our nature . . .” (p. 9)

6. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

7. Editorial Foreword, May 1927, to *The Voice of the Silence*, (unnumbered), Peking: The Chinese Buddhist Research Society, 1927.

8. *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 25.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

11. The two highest representatives of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy are the Panchen and Dalai Lamas. Buddhism flourished for a millennium in Tibet, until the Chinese takeover in 1959.

12. The writings attributed to Maitreya are said in the Tibetan tradition to be written down by Ārya Asaṅga. See: *The Door of Liberation*, by Geshe Wangyal, New York: Maurice Girodias Associates, Inc., 1973, pp. 26-27. For the story of Ārya Asaṅga, see pp. 52-54.

13. For the story of Nāgārjuna see: *The Door of Liberation*, pp. 44-46.

14. These include the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*. There are several English translations of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, many of which are listed below. (See notes 15, 23, 28, and 29.) There is no complete English translation of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.

15. The latter is the title of a new translation: *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, by Śāntideva, translated from the Sanskrit and Tibetan by Vesna Wallace and B. Alan Wallace, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1997. The verses that follow are cited from this translation. The word “Bodhi” in “Bodhicaryāvatāra” is understood to mean “Bodhisattva,” which is spelled out in full in the title of the Tibetan translation of this work.

16. There is an interesting story of how Śāntideva brought the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* before the world. Thinking he was lazy, his fellow monks at Nālandā challenged Śāntideva to recite a text from memory. Śāntideva asked if he should recite an existing work or a “new” one. The monks replied, “a new one,” and Śāntideva then began reciting his own composition, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Everyone was amazed. As he neared the end, he rose up into the sky. After disappearing, he continued to recite until the text was completed. (Adapted from *Tāranātha’s History of Buddhism in India* as retold in: *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, p. 12.)

17. *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 12.

18. In an interesting lecture given by Bhikshu Sangharakshita, he discusses the two broad divisions of Buddhist literature, *sūtra* and *śāstra*; *sūtra* being the words of the Buddha, and *śāstra* their explanatory treatises by others. Here, he likens *The Voice of the Silence* to the *sūtra* class of literature: “*The Voice of the Silence*, though it does not claim to be the utterance of a Buddha, is nevertheless akin to the *sūtra* rather than to the *śāstra* group of texts. Like the longer and more celebrated discourses, it seeks more to inspire than to instruct, appeals to the heart rather than to the head.” (*Paradox and Poetry in “The Voice of the Silence,”* by Bhikshu Sangharakshita, Bangalore: The Indian

Institute of World Culture, 1958, p. 1.) In contrast, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, being written by Śāntideva and expounding the Path through reasoning, is a *sāstra*.

19. Boris de Zirkoff, “Introductory: How *The Voice of the Silence* Was Written,” pp. 15–16: “Much has been said and written about the nature of the teachings contained in the ‘Voice.’ Their general trend as well as many specific thoughts and ideals contained in this work have been the basis for identifying it with the vast realm of teachings and precepts known as Mahāyāna Buddhism, and this can hardly be denied or set aside.”

20. A. J. Hamerster has outlined the contents of *The Voice* in his Introduction to the 1939 edition of *The Voice of the Silence*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1939; reprint 1953.

21. The six Pāramitās and their cultivation are a major feature of the Mahāyāna tradition. They are: dāna, śīla, kṣānti, vīrya, dhyāna, and prajñā. In *The Voice of the Silence* an additional pāramitā has been added to the traditional list of six, that is, *virāga*—“indifference to pleasure and pain, illusion conquered, truth alone perceived.” (*The Voice*, p. 48.) Here, Virāga becomes the fourth Portal, making a total of seven.

22. *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 33.

23. “It is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* which supplies the ideals and practice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who so frequently cites as his highest inspiration *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 10.55:

As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world.”

—from the General Introduction by Paul Williams in: *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. ix.

24. See: Boris de Zirkoff, “Introductory: How *The Voice of the Silence* Was Written,” p. 15.

25. As cited from *The Path*, December 1895, in: *HPB: The Extraordinary Life & Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*, by Sylvia Cranston, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1993, p. 397.

26. From an entry titled “The Voice of the Silence,” in *The Middle Way*, vol. XL, no. 2, August 1965, p. 90: “For reasons we have

never understood Buddhists in England seem reluctant to accept this exquisite small work as part of the literature of Buddhism.”

27. By I. P. Minayeff in *Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdeleniya Ruskogo Imperatorskogo Archeologicheskogo Obschestva (Transactions of the Oriental Section of the Royal Russian Archaeological Society)*, vol. 4, pp. 153-228. Volume 4 of this journal was published in 1890, although the individual issue containing the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* may have been published in 1889.

28. *The Path of Light*, trans. L. D. Barnett, London: John Murray, 1909. It was earlier translated into French: *Bodhicaryāvatāra: Introduction à la pratique des futurs Bouddhas, Poème de Çāntideva*, trans. Louis de La Vallée Poussin, Paris: Librairie Bloud et Cie., 1907; and later into German: *Der Eintritt in den Wandel in Erleuchtung (Bodhicaryāvatāra) von Śāntideva*, trans. Richard Schmidt, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1923, *Dokumente der Religion*, vol. 5.

29. *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, trans. Marion L. Matics, New York: Macmillan, 1970, from the Sanskrit. The first English translation from the Tibetan followed shortly in 1979: Acharya Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. Stephen Batchelor, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1979.

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