

Summer 2004: Buddhas and Bodhistvas

QUESTION: Buddhism says that there are all kinds of beings out there - buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities - but I can't perceive them. Is there something wrong with me? How do I work with this discrepancy? What do I need to do to be able to feel or perceive them? What will it do for me when I can?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: First of all, there is nothing wrong with you. There are differing views as to whether these entities exist as psychic phenomena or whether they are states of mind, and thus expressions of buddhanature. Sensing the existence of celestial beings is said to sometimes occur when there is strong samadhi. And of course, recognizing that we are always being helped by others, whether visible or invisible, nourishes our faith and gratitude. But the deliberate attempt to perceive psychic phenomena is usually considered a distraction because it can divert one from the real focus of practice, which is to awaken.

The Buddha is said to have been fully endowed with psychic powers. Yet he did not emphasize this in his teachings. When asked why, he said that doing so would be like a doctor who healed his patient of a minor illness only to let the patient die of a major ailment. The ailment of which he spoke, of course, is ignorance. And the medicine the Buddha offered was the noble eightfold path of wisdom and compassion.

There is a story about a monk named Vikkali. A disciple of the Buddha, Vikkali was entranced by the Buddha's appearance. Instead of meditating like everyone else, he spent his time simply staring at the Buddha. His staring was so obvious that the Buddha finally asked Vikkali, "What's up? Why are you always looking at me?" Vikkali said, "Venerable Sir, when I look upon your face, I am filled with happiness." The Buddha then gave him a teaching. He said, "Vikkali, listen to me. My physical appearance is not important. One who sees the dharma sees the Buddha. To understand the dharma is to see the real Buddha." What the Buddha was saying was that the dharma is to be found within our own bodies and minds. Vikkali understood this and began to meditate.