

Buddhas in the Mist

From the journals of Margaret Hadden-Burke-Whyte
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Finding myself, at long last, in the remote hill country of central Texas, I established myself in the hamlet of Austin and immediately began my search for the legendary native Bodhisattva habitats. Finally, through native contacts and the use of the “web,” I located a local tribe, or kinship group, called a *sangha*, where I could begin my studies. I approached slowly and quietly so as not to startle these gentle, peaceful Bodhisattvas. Day after day I observed their primitive social structure, communication practices, tool use, and regular daily activities. At first, I could not tell them apart in their uniform dark coloration. But soon I began to identify the different individuals in the group and their distinctive personalities and markings.

There were several leaders, who seemed to exchange social roles frequently. It would be hard to determine if the lead male was a silverback, given that he lacks hair, as did many in the group I studied. There was definitely a patriarch and a matriarch, however, who share power in the tribe, symbolized by carrying a carved wooden stick with a curved end. This “wisdom stick” may have been used for punishment during the private meetings between an elder and tribe member, or *dokusan*, but in public it seems to serve no function except to be carried in ceremonies. These two, the “alpha male and alpha female,” along with several others who appeared to share some authority and power, would frequently appear swathed in many yards of black or brown fabric which so hampered their movements that they could barely sit, stand, or walk without assistance. Other members of the tribe sport smaller scraps of fabric sewn in geometric designs and tied around their necks. Although the obsessively precise stitching indicates that

great care was taken in their construction, I have been unable to determine any purpose for these ritual adornments. Many also seemed to share the distinctive close-cropped or shaved head.

The tribe was extremely passive, which, I am compelled to admit, made the long hours of research and observation rather tedious.

They seem to remain still for hours on end, neither moving nor communicating with each other. They adopt a variety of contorted, uncomfortable postures that involve either kneeling or twisting the crossed legs into a painful knot, then clasp their hands in their laps, and remain mute, while directly facing a wall. There they stay while a great deal of time passes, in a unique self-torture they call *zazen*. It is difficult, and I have not so far succeeded, to discover what sins or crimes have been committed that merit this punishment. This behavior is all the more inexplicable in that an abundant supply of comfortable chairs is ready-to-hand.

Then suddenly, all at once, at the sound of a bell, they line up to move into rows and begin the unique Bodhisattva calls and strange, measured prostrations of their daily ceremonies. Incense is repeatedly offered to the gods on the altar during the worship service. One of these gods seems to be quite fierce, with a sword and angry grimace, signifying judgment and punishment, while another looks like a graceful woman figure, signifying fertility and sexual union. Behind these two gods is the main deity, rough-hewn from stone, and shown seated in the same tortured cross-legged posture worshipped by the bodhisattvas, eyes half-closed in pain, in Christ-like self-abnegation.

During these ceremonies, sometimes their tuneless droning sounds much like our own language, but the words make no sense: “form is emptiness, emptiness is form”...something about a horse with one white hind leg, a tiger and a cow, a wooden man singing, a stone woman dancing, a silver bowl and some kind

of mirror jewel, putting one in mind at once of Neil Young. At other times it appears to be guttural grunting sounds with no meaning: “nah moo car a tahn no tow ra ya ya” and so forth, strangely reminiscent of 50’s do-wop music, but without the sense of rhythm or melody. The musical accompaniment is minimal and the primitive instruments are limited to a few bowl-shaped bells, a drum and a curious wooden instrument struck by a mallet, called a *mukugyo*. Since only one instrument is played at a time, the effect can hardly be called orchestral. At the end of the ceremony, more bowing. I pray the reader can imagine the piercing ache of your correspondent’s knees.

Persisting in my research despite the physical agony and oppressive boredom, I studied closely their movements, gestures, and eerie vocalizations. By adopting these movements and gestures I gradually won the confidence of these simple creatures and ultimately managed to be accepted by the natives in this “sangha,” and even treated as one of their own. I brought food offerings for them and spent many hours just “hanging out” with the Bodhisattvas. I avoided loud, unexpected noises or sudden movements, and even learned their strange rhythmic cries, hoping for their acceptance. As I slowly gained their trust, I was able to take on different “roles” within the sangha, or clan, sometimes beating on a piece of wood (the *han*) with a stick, presenting food in the eating ceremony (see Keith Kenneth-Hadley-Smythe’s definitive study of this elaborately pointless “ory oki” practice), hitting bells (as *do an*), or leading the ritual chants (as *ko kyo*). I learned to walk with tiny steps in their mysterious Bodhisattva parade, or *kin hin*, an excruciatingly slow trek to nowhere. Followed by yet more silent sitting in indescribable pain.

I was fascinated by the way the elders socialized the inexperienced young into the Bodhisattva way of being. The two leaders keep frequent contact with each member of the sangha, sometimes gesturing or murmuring, sometimes modeling

“proper” Bodhisattva behavior in postures. Corrections are gently given, with no recrimination. It was quite extraordinary to see how these gentle, peaceful creatures manage their daily lives with virtually no conflict and very little violence. During my entire field research there were only a few occasions when I observed one Bodhisattva strike another with a long slender punishment stick called a *kiesaku*. These curious, ritual beatings were typically preceded and followed by a mutual bow of submission. Perhaps their self-punishment via *zazen* is deemed adequate restitution for their sins.

Most of the time, though, the Bodhisattvas just spend seated on the floor on their small round black cushions called *zafus* placed on top of flat rectangular cushions called *zabutons*, facing the wall, avoiding all eye contact, movement, or discourse. Sometimes there is a sneeze or a cough. Birds awaken and begin their maddeningly repetitive morning cries. For excitement, there is the sound of an occasional vehicle going by. The annoying chirps of crickets and *cidadas*. Time passes exceedingly slowly. There is no trace of conversation or activity, and this no-trace continues endlessly. What was responsible for this strange behavior? I had many other questions, as well: Where was the system of commerce, the barter and exchange of goods? Where were the political struggles for power? Where were the tribe’s *children*? When would modern life with its lively frenetic pace, mass media, professional sports, commercial enterprise, celebrities, self-help manuals, talk shows, and competitive striving for success ever reach these primitive souls? I had to find out more. . . . [Here the account ends, and no more was heard from Margaret Hadden-Burke-Whyte. Perhaps we will never know how she met her end. Some speculate that she took to wearing black robes, shaved her head, and “went native” in the bush, others are convinced that the bodhisattvas turned on her, slaughtered, and ate her.]

Peg Syverson