

Bodhisattva Chronicles

Book I: The Awakening

Chapter 1

Richard Richardson woke early the morning of December 22, 1967, knowing that something was going to happen. Exactly what he did not know, but the feeling was strong and the feeling was never wrong. His morning meditation revealed more to him. His *samādhi* was unusually deep and effortless. Fifteen minutes in he felt a melting away of mind and body into a vast expanse of primordial space outside of time. His heart rate and breathing dropped close to *nil*. To an ordinary outside observer he would appear as if dead or in a coma; such is the limited knowledge of worldings.

From out of this basic space of pure awareness, Richardson witnessed the emergence of a flood of images; at first he saw only indistinct colors, forms and heard strange sounds blending and fusing together. Then the visual forms began to take on recognizable shapes turning into the images of innumerable worlds from countless star systems. He saw thousands of billions of intelligent life forms on these planets being born, suffering, dying only to be reborn again and again for inconceivable eons. In each world, he saw the Awakened Ones appear and heard them teach the Truth, gather bodhisattva followers and at the end of their lifespan pass away into final Nirvana. At first he could see this indescribably vast array of spacetime as a single unity; all of its parts distinct, yet joined together in an interconnected web. But as more and more information flooded into his neural network at near light-speed his one hundred billion nerve cells, despite their trillions of connections, threatened to overload. Milliseconds before the vision literally blew Richardson's mind, it suddenly disappeared to be replaced by the Clear Light.

From out of the Light a humanlike form immersed. Richardson knew immediately who he/she/it was. This Being was called many things by many beings, but Dick Richardson identified this spiritual force with a name: Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Universal Compassion. Not for many years had the Bodhisattva appeared to him. Not since Korea and the landmine. Bathed in the pure light of Avalokita's compassion, Richardson's body was suffused with indescribable bliss, and though he was not aware of them, tears of joy streamed from his eyes. All his pain, both physical and mental, melted away in the Savior's light; like a moth to the flame his finite selfhood willingly cast itself into the infinity of this sublime spiritual Presence; completely overwhelmed by the charismatic power of the universal force of Great Compassion, Richardson felt himself merge with the essence of the Light of this Compassion, becoming its instrument and ready servant. When the Great Being spoke (sounding to Richardson like something between the chiming of golden bells and the soft cooing of doves) he heard the words from everywhere at once.

“A bodhisattva will be born today. You must protect him,” were the words that echoed in his mind as if whispered within the vast stillness of a subterranean cavern. Then the vision was gone.

When Richardson opened his eyes, he saw his living room miraculously transformed. The ceramic Buddha statue of red clay on the altar in front of him now appear as solid diamond, and the cedar altar was now sandalwood inlayed with mother-of-pearl, rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Instead of his ordinary glass vase containing wilted daisies, he saw a crystal vase containing jewelled lotus flowers. His worn-out shaggy white carpet had become lapis lazuli; his television appeared as a chest of gold and silver coins, pearls, cat's eye and coral; his coffee table was pure white marble inlayed with platinum and encrusted with rubies; the curtains to his front window were made of the finest red silk. This vision lasted about three seconds and then was gone. The room was once again what it had been.

Richard felt an ache in his knees and lower back. He was sitting in full lotus posture in front of his ordinary altar in his ordinary living room once more. Although he sat perfectly still, his heart pounded and his body was covered in sweat, like a race horse worked hard. He looked over at the clock on the wall: 7:30am. He had been sitting for two hours. He got up slowly, put some coffee on and hobbled stiffly into the shower.

Richardson focused on the drops of water as they fell from the back of his neck and splashed down at his feet exploding into millions of tiny droplets. He felt slightly dizzy and sick to his stomach. He called this sensation “vision vertigo.” Less than a half dozen times in his life had he experienced a vision even a fraction as intense as the one he just had. Now he was having flash-backs to the panorama of countless worlds and beings recently witnessed. The sight of the bottom of the shower kept disappearing underneath him, giving way to an endless sea of spacetime. The water drops as he watched were falling into an infinite void. He took deep, slow breathes. Advanced bodhisattvas could fully integrate the experience of linear spacetime with the infinite beyond, some even simultaneously; he could not. Slowly things began to feel more solid, more “real.” The shower, the soap, the hot water, the steam, the shower curtain began to lose some of their liquidity and dreamlike plasticity. By the time, Richardson stepped out to towel himself off, the mundane world had asserted itself sufficiently to make him feel less sea-sick.

As Richardson donned his work uniform—a blue suit with a fat red tie—he had time to ponder his vision. “A bodhisattva will be born today...” *and I must protect him. But born by whom? When? How will I know who it is? How am I to protect him?* He went into the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and put some bread in the toaster. He drank his coffee black, standing up. Staring blankly at his kitchen counter, he suddenly noticed the package he had placed there the night before when he had come in from a late night at work. It was from The Society for the Publication of Sacred Books of the World, Tokyo, Japan. He

knew what it must be—a Sanskrit edition of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. Over a year ago the word *Gaṇḍavyūha* had come to him in a dream. He had no idea what it meant. After many late nights in town and university libraries searching through dictionaries, encyclopaedias and bibliographies, he finally discovered that it was the name of a Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture and that a Sanskrit version had been edited by two Japanese scholars in 1934, and then revised in 1949. Sitting on his kitchen counter was the revised edition he had ordered from Tokyo over a month ago.

Richardson smelt something burning. *Shit! My toast!* He popped his slightly blackened toast, scraped off the black layer and spread some butter onto the two slices. His stomach was still unsettled from his vision, but he ate mechanically knowing he needed something in his gut before work. After his first piece, he took a kitchen knife out of the top drawer and used it to cut through the tape on his package. Very delicately wrapped in paper tied with string inside the box was the book. He wiped the excess butter off his fingers with a kitchen towel, untied the string and removed the weighty hardcover book. The front and back covers were dark green and lined as if made of fine thread. The edges of paper on three sides were webbed with delicate and random patterns of ink, making the edges look like marble. There was no printing on the front or back covers. On the spine in gold letters was written,

THE
GAṆḌAVYŪHA
SŪTRA
REVISED
EDITION
D. T. SUZUKI
AND
H. IDZUMI

Richardson opened the book to the preface of the first edition and read,

That this edition of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* with all its imperfections is now placed before scholars and readers who are engaged in the study of Mahayana Buddhism, enabling them to probe into the secrets of the religious consciousness of the Oriental peoples, is due to the protecting power of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who are constantly watching over our work and guiding it towards the universal welfare and enlightenment of all beings, and for which we are all most devoutly grateful.

DAISETZ TEITARO SUZUKI

Kyoto, October 1934

Richardson then flipped opened to a page and read out loud the Devanāgarī script, “Atha khalu sudhanaḥ śreṣṭhidārako >parājīṭadhvajabodhisattvavimokṣajñānāvabhāsitāḥ acintyabuddhaviṣayavikurvitapratyakṣavihārī.” *Then indeed Sudhana, the merchant’s son, was illuminated by the gnosis of the liberation of the bodhisattvas which is the unsurpassed banner. He was one who dwelt in the direct perception of the miracle which is the inconceivable domain of the Buddhas.* Richardson smiled. *I know how he feels.* Then he smiled again thinking about how surprised his work buddies would be, if they knew he could read Sanskrit.

Work! Shit! I’m gonna be late.

Richardson grabbed his coat, hat and briefcase and headed out the door of his duplex and into the winter chill of Tarrytown, New York, which greeted him with its usual bite. *Feels like snow today*, he thought as he pulled up his coat around his neck and quickened his pace. He had a twenty-five minute walk to work, or a five minute drive. Most days he chose to walk. He didn’t like cars, never did. His friends at work liked to make fun of him, calling him a “hippy health-nut” for walking. But he took their ribbings gracefully with a smile. Richardson walked across his street, Carroll Close, went up a short dirt drive, onto the driveway of the Hackley School, turned right and then right again onto Benedict Avenue. As he walked briskly through the cold morning air, he

pondered his vision again. *Larry's wife is expecting a child any day now; maybe she'll give birth to the bodhisattva today?* Larry was a young gun at the company; a self-taught electrical engineer, who had a sharp mind for systems protocols. Richardson liked him—he was the closest thing he had these days to a friend. But he had a hard time imagining a bodhisattva being Larry's son. The guy was about as hard-headed a Realist as they come. Not a spiritual bone in that guy's body... But the ways of bodhisattvas are mysterious and Richardson knew better than to think that he could foretell such things.

As he was crossing Maple Street something caught the corner of his eye on the other side of Benedict Ave. There was a small wooded park there, a place where junkies use to hang out before the neighbourhood got gentrified. When he turned his head for a good look, he saw three crows on a park bench staring at him intently. Struck by the intensity of their avian stare, he paused for a moment. Then as he watched them, they blurred and their shapes morphed. Now he saw three piteous creatures, humanlike except for their hugely distended bellies and freakishly thin necks. Their eyes were deep pits of want, their skin like leather tortured by the wind and cold, their teeth black like coal, and their hair was matted and greasy. They were naked, shivering and huddled together watching Richardson with wild pleading eyes streaming tears that left black streaks down their tortured faces.

What the Hell... Oh my God, they're pretas! Richardson stared in disbelief. Pretas, "The Deceased." The Chinese called them *èguǐ*, "hungry ghosts." Richardson had read about them in the scriptures. In the sūtras, they are described as beings that used to be human, but due to their excessive greed, are reborn as pitiful ghost-like beings forced to wander the earth with huge bellies and tiny throats, perpetually hungry and thirsty. The three pretas were begging him for something to eat by moving their out-

stretched hands to their tiny mouths as if eating. Richardson still in disbelief looked around him and noticed that the landscape had also transformed: instead of Benedict Avenue with its busy morning traffic, there was a river of grey-green pus flowing sluggishly between him and those creatures. Also the winter oaks, maples and beach trees were now giant, twisted trees of tortured wood covered with thorns. Nesting in them were thousands of vultures looking hungrily at the pretas as if ready to swoop down in mass and devour them. The street lamps had become greasy poles illuminated by giant flaming torches. The bench was no longer of wood, but was now wrought iron, with iron shackles attached to the left foot of each ghost. The sky, no longer grey with the possibility of an early winter snow, was covered in pitch black seething clouds that created a perpetual night for the denizens of this fearful land.

Richardson felt sick to his stomach for the second time this morning. *I have the second sight*, he thought. To the *prthagjānas*, the worldlings, driving in their cars, sitting in their cafes, or walking down the sidewalk, this was an ordinary winter's morning. For anyone who might have stopped and looked around, they would see three crows sitting on a park bench. The only unusually thing on the corner of Benedict and Maple was a middle-aged greying man in a suit and trench coat staring somewhat drunkenly at the crows across the street. *I need to get it together*, Richardson thought as he held back the urge to puke.

Richardson closed his eyes and concentrated on imagining the Tarrytown he knew: Benedict Avenue, the morning traffic, the winter trees, grey morning sky, street lights. Slowly he opened his eyes and at first he saw the nightmare vision of the preta-world, but then it blurred. For a moment he was seeing double, and then the familiar Tarrytown reappeared. He again looked at the three crows on the bench, and now they

were just crows. Letting his concentration relax slightly, he saw once again the form of the preta-world. But this time, Richardson was not afraid. He saw the loathsome creatures with their out-stretched hands, and now he felt pity and a warm ache in his chest. *What was this feeling?* Compassion. He knew now that he had to do something to help these pitiful wretches. As he looked upon them this time with eyes of compassion, he not only saw them as pretas, he also saw who they had been and who they would be. He saw them as spacetime worms—not only could he see their existence at this one moment in spacetime, but also their past and future lives simultaneously spread across the fabric of the spacetime continuum like earthworms in the dirt, the present moment representing only one segment of each worm: the here-now segment.

Richardson witnessed all three as junkies in their last lives and saw each die of an overdose on this very bench. He knew their previous names, occupations, families, friends, childhood experiences. He witnessed how each became addicted to heroin, lost everything that had meant anything to them, and ultimately died in despair only to have their greed for the drug propel them into the next agonized life. One had been Harold Larson, a wealthy lawyer from a well-to-do Sleepy Hollow family. Just like Dad, Harold had gone to college at Cornell and law school at Columbia. He was a junior partner in a contract law firm in Tarrytown when his father died of a heart attack. The following year his mother died of cancer and his wife left him. He started drinking heavily and became addicted to prescription drugs. He lost his job and house soon afterwards. In three short years he went from having everything to being a junkie on the streets. The preta next to him had been Elizabeth ('Lizzy') Martin. She had grown up in a middle class working family in Kingston. Her childhood ended when she was molested by her father at five. This continued until she ran away from home at fifteen. She wandered from place to

place up and down the east side of upstate New York, using, begging, and prostituting herself to get by. This park bench had been a pit-stop for a quick fix before she was back on the greyhound bus. But one time the Junk had been too pure and she OD-ed. Preta three had been Danny Jones from NYC. Danny had been an average Joe, who worked in a bar, liked his beer, and taking his motorcycle for joy-rides on the weekends. One sunny Sunday in March of '63 while cruising North I-87, an eighteen-wheeler ran a red light and slammed into his bike doing 75 mph. After a month in a coma and eighteen months of rehab, Danny could walk again with a cane, but was in constant, agonizing pain and couldn't kick the morphine. Soon the morphine wasn't enough, and the rest was, well, history.

Richardson also saw who the pretas would become; how Harold would be reborn next as a German Shepherd, Lizzy as a squirrel in this very park, and Danny as a human again and owner of Harold-dog, who would chase Lizzy-squirrel when taken to the park for a walk. Not only did Richardson see these things of the beings' past and future, he also felt their joys and sadness, suffered their pains, and experienced their triumphs and defeats. He felt his own heart break when Harold's wife left him; trembled with fear when Lizzy heard her father open her bedroom door late at night; left the splinter of bones as the truck impacted with Danny's body.

Richardson knew that he needed to help these piteous creatures if he could. *But how? They were hungry, no doubt. Could he feed them?* Then he knew what he must do. With some concentration Tarrytown reappeared as "normal" before him. He crossed Maple Street and went down a block. One the corner there had been a greasy cafe that went bust a couple of years ago. Recently it had reopened as a bakery. Richardson rarely stopped in, but he enjoyed the smell of fresh bread each morning on his way to work.

This morning he walked straight in and picked three fresh sesame bagels off the rack and put them in a brown paper bag. He gave the pretty blond girl behind the counter a twenty and smiled at her as he waited for his change. Then it was out the door and back to the intersection.

Returning to the previous spot, Richardson crossed the road and approached the bench. The crows watched him intently but did not move. Richardson focussed his mind on his vision of the preta-world and was struck instantly with the nauseating smell of decrepit flesh. It immediately reminded him of the apartment in New York he had rented in his early twenties. A rat had died in his kitchen wall and it took two months for the smell to go. Richardson choked back the vomit and looked at the crows as they morphed into pretas. *Damn, you smell*, Richardson thought as he removed the bagels from the bag and carefully handed one to each. They grabbed the doughy circles and began devouring them noisily. *Lovely*. Looking back over his shoulder as he went on his way, Richardson saw three crows pecking at some bread left on a park bench.

If these visions keep up, I'll be a raving lunatic before lunch time, Richardson thought, as he quickened his pace toward work.