

**WALKING THE PATH OF
THE BODHISATTVA CHAPLAIN**

Fay Octavia Elliott

Professor Stephanie Yuhas

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*As earth and the other elements, together with space,
Eternally provide sustenance in many ways for the countless sentient beings,
So may I become sustenance in every way for sentient beings
To the limits of space, until all have attained nirvāṇa.*

– Bodhisattva Vow

HOMAGE

May I never stray from my buddha nature and may love, compassion and bodhicitta always blossom in my body, speech and mind.

I dedicate this paper to my first husband Michael A. Gillis and my mother Delcine Elliott whose lives and deaths changed the course of my life and set me on the bodhisattva path and a career in chaplaincy.

I am grateful to my ancestors, teachers and the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha for all that I am and all that I hope to become.

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INTRODUCTION

*And now as long as space endures,
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world.¹*
—SHANTIDEVA

In his little book, *Profound View, Fearless Path: The Bodhisattva Vow*, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche says, “The Bodhisattva vow . . . does not involve a particularly dramatic ceremony. What has to be dramatic is your attitude. . . .”² The attitude is turned toward attaining supreme enlightenment not just for the benefit of ourselves but for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Ever since I first heard of enlightenment, I wanted to become enlightened so I would not have to spend any more lifetimes in this world of suffering and unhappiness. I hoped I could transition to a new world. In 1995, my husband Michael and I were in a major automobile accident which resulted in my brain injury and his death in 1997. The following year I found a lump in my breast which was finally diagnosed as breast cancer. In 2005, my mother died. I attended both Michael and my mother for many months leading up to each death. To make sense of all this, I decided to become a hospice volunteer because I had been both a person who faced death and a person who cared for dying family members. It was in hospice training I learned about chaplaincy and decided to attend Naropa’s Master of Divinity program to become a Buddhist hospice chaplain.

How could I have known that with that decision my path would draw me inexorably to not only wanting to become enlightened for my sake but also for the benefit of all beings; and that I

¹ Pema Chödrön, *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, Inc.), xvii.

² Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, *Profound View, Fearless Path: The Bodhisattva Vow* (Vancouver, Canada: Siddhi Publications, 2000), 3-4.

would take the *bodhisattva* vow to keep taking a human rebirth until all beings have attained enlightenment.

The Sakyong Mipham describes how “...we begin to see that suffering is based on fixating on the illusion of a solid self. We begin to see how consciousness and our perceptions try to hold it altogether. From our sense of selflessness springs forth an attitude that begins to see that the suffering of others is based on the same fixation. This naturally gives birth to *bodhicitta*, and the great motivation to help all sentient beings.”³

Bodhicitta is two-fold: both absolute and relative. Absolute bodhicitta is the true nature of mind that is beyond language, concept and thought. It is beyond duality. It transcends the thinking mind and can only be known by one who has transcended mind. The nature of reality is said to be empty of any inherent existence and is a collection of causes and conditions. “Relative bodhicitta is our aspiration and perseverance to become awakened so we can be of benefit to all suffering beings.”⁴

The bodhisattva vow does not end with our death in this lifetime. We take the vow to keep coming back lifetime after lifetime for the benefit of all sentient beings. Even for a bodhisattva the prospect of facing death seems daunting if one is not prepared. Sogyal Rinpoche in his book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* outlines an approach we can all take. He says the best preparation for death is to attain enlightenment in this lifetime before one is subject to death. Second best is to acquire a quality of practice that would enable one to attain enlightenment at the moment of death. If we cannot attain enlightenment, then next best would be to ensure a calm passage after death to the next rebirth.⁵ The bodhisattva delays his or her own final full

³ Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche, *Adhishthna: The View and Practice of Ngöndro*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: Lion's Roar, 2008), 9.

⁴ Pema Chödrön, 367.

⁵ Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 111-126.

enlightenment or attaining Buddhahood to keep returning to benefit others. However, we can aspire to attain absolute bodhicitta in this lifetime, joyfully face our deaths, and return to continue assisting others to attain enlightenment.

Throughout, this paper will reference *The Holy Teachings of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*. In the text, Vimalakīrti is a highly realized bodhisattva who appears to be ill. There is an assembly of bodhisattvas and *arhats* (disciples of the Buddha) at his bedside. He gives a teaching on absolute bodhicitta which he calls the inconceivable liberation. In one famous scene all the bodhisattvas present are trying to describe the non-dual nature of reality. When they finish, and it is Vimalakīrti's turn, he is silent.⁶ Absolute bodhicitta cannot be described in words or known with the mind. It can only be known by one who has attained this level of realization. This realization is full enlightenment.

The following sections of this paper focuses on how the bodhisattva aspires to be a bodhisattva; trains to be a bodhisattva; engages in the world; engages in caring for others facing life and death; faces illness and decline; and dies a good death.

⁶ Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture*, trans. Robert A. F. Thurman (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 77.

ASPIRING TO BE A BODHISATTVA

*We each have the seed of enlightenment within ourselves and because this potential can be actualized, it is said that we possess an enlightened essence.*⁷

— THRANGU RINPOCHE

When I first began practicing meditation, it was with the notion of becoming enlightened and never being reborn. I thought that somehow I could escape from my life and my problems by becoming enlightened. When I got cancer, on some level I believed that would be my way out. Then I remembered that I would just be reborn and face the same issues again since I was not enlightened yet. So I decided I needed to stay long enough to become enlightened.

At a very stressful time in my life, I prayed for a teacher, a mantra, and a retreat. I had read a book by a teacher named Eknath Easwaran. In it he suggested that our meditation practice focus on a passage of scripture or writing from an enlightened or spiritual teacher. The passage he suggested we begin with was the Prayer of Saint Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 Where there is injury, pardon;
 Where there is doubt, faith;
 Where there is despair, hope;
 Where there is darkness, light;
 Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 To be consoled as to console,
 To be understood as to understand,
 To be loved as to love;
 For it is in giving that we receive;
 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
 It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.⁸

⁷ Thrangu Rinpoche, *Buddha Nature: Ten Teachings on the Uttara Tantra*, (Kathmandu, Nepal: Rangjing Yeshe Publications, 1988), 10.

⁸ Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation: A simple eight-point program for translating spiritual ideals into daily life*, (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1991), 220.

I recited that prayer and others for half an hour a day and eventually an hour a day. Easwaran believed that the words were like depth charges that were released in your subconscious mind over time. I know I certainly never expected to want to become a bodhisattva. The very thought of coming back at all was an anathema to me. The notion of coming back over and over again until all beings have attained enlightenment had no appeal.

Then I attended an interfaith seminary program sponsored by a local church. The first day of class, we were in a room with a labyrinth surrounded by interfaith shrines from many different traditions. We walked around the room, stopped and prayed at each shrine and then walked the labyrinth. While I was walking the labyrinth, I heard what appeared to be the voice of Jesus say, “You are a bodhisattva.” At first it seemed strange that this idea would be introduced to me by Jesus. The religious scholar Karen Armstrong gave me a context for this in her book on compassion when she describes how “Saint Paul, the earliest extant Christian writer, quoting an early Christian hymn, presents Jesus as a bodhisattva figure who refused to cling to the high status befitting one made in God’s image and lived as the servant of suffering humanity.”⁹ By then I had been praying the Prayer of Saint Francis daily for over five years. Something in me seemed to resign to what seemed inevitable. It would be many years before I found the Shambhala Buddhist path and took the bodhisattva vow.

What is the path of the bodhisattva and why do I refer to them as chaplains? Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche defined the word bodhisattva as “...he who is brave enough to walk on the path of the bodhi.” He goes on to say, “‘Bodhi’ means ‘awake’ the awakened state. This is not to

⁹ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 2010), 55.

say that the bodhisattva must already be awake; but he is willing to walk the path of the awakened ones.”¹⁰

The bodhisattva vows to delay his complete and full enlightenment (Buddhahood) until all sentient beings attain enlightenment. She is agreeing to return over and over again to assist these beings. I was delighted to hear in a class one day with Andrew Holocek the notion that by attaining Buddhahood we could be of even more benefit to beings. So why delay? Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche reinforces this notion. Almost by giving up trying to attain something but by continuing on the path the bodhisattva arrives at Buddhahood. “He always lives life thoroughly and fully, and the result is that, before he realizes where he is, he has attained full enlightenment. But, his unwillingness to attain enlightenment continues, strangely enough, even after he has reached Buddhahood. Then compassion and wisdom really burst out, reinforcing his energy and conviction.”¹¹

When we follow the career path to become a chaplain, we are choosing to be of spiritual benefit to the people we serve whether we serve in a spiritual community, hospital, prison, school or some other setting. As bodhisattva chaplains we are called to a more extensive role in the world. The bodhisattva is in spiritual service to all sentient beings without exception and regardless of setting. Her chaplaincy includes not just service to a few “human” beings in a limited setting, but extends to non-human sentient beings as well. Lama Surya Das describes the bodhisattva thusly, “A real Bodhisattva has pure intentions toward everyone and everything. There is no selfishness, no neurosis, no rough edges, and no hidden agenda. This is the ideal we strive for to cultivate when we take the Bodhisattva’s altruistic vow.”¹²

¹⁰ Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1973), 170.

¹¹ Ibid, 176.

¹² Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within: Eight Steps to Enlightenment*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 143.

Sentient beings are numberless: I vow to liberate them.
 Delusions are inexhaustible: I vow to transcend them.
 Dharma teachings are boundless: I vow to master them.
 The Buddha's enlightened way is unsurpassable: I vow to embody it.¹³

When we consider the magnitude of the role, the question becomes, "How do I get there?" "What could prepare me for such an enormous undertaking?" Jamgön Kongtrül is clear that we must "strive for the state of completely perfected Buddhahood. There are no methods to effect this attainment other than those which rely on two forms of meditation: relative bodhicitta, which is training the mind in compassion, and ultimate bodhicitta, which is resting evenly in a nondiscursive state free from conceptual elaborations. ...Even when full buddhahood is attained, there is nothing to do except to work for the welfare of others with nonreferential compassion."¹⁴

He quotes Shantideva thusly:

He who desires shelter quickly
 For himself and for all others
 Should use this sacred mystery,
 The exchanging of oneself for others.¹⁵

Lama Surya Das defines bodhicitta as "...the purified and fully developed heart-mind. This is the heart, the very soul of enlightenment. Practicing bodhicitta means cultivating all one's innate enlightened qualities and following the path of awakening."¹⁶ "The ultimate absolutely transcendent aspect of bodhicitta is sunyata, luminous emptiness or pure untrammled, radiant openness. The relative more conventional aspect of bodhicitta is an unselfish aspiration for enlightenment, best embodied in the Bodhisattva's vow to alleviate the suffering of all beings."¹⁷

¹³ Lama Surya Das, 143.

¹⁴ Jamgön Kongtrül, *The Great Path of Awakening: The Classic Guide to Lojong, A Tibetan Buddhist Practice for Cultivating the Heart of Compassion*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005), 5,6.

¹⁵ Ibid, 6.

¹⁶ Lama Surya Das, 146.

¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

So what does it mean to be enlightened? What are we trying to attain? The Buddhist definition of enlightenment is not exactly what I was thinking in those early years. In all beings lies the capacity to attain the buddhahood Jamgön Kongtrül refers to above. We are all endowed with a Buddha-nature, a mind that is pure and essential. This nature rests in every being. Lama Surya Das says that, “The Buddha described it as still, clear, lucid, empty, profound, simple (uncomplicated), and at peace. It’s not really what we usually think of as our mind at all. It is the luminous, most fundamental clear light of our ground of being. This is Rigpa, the heart of enlightenment. This is our share of nirvana on earth”¹⁸ “...all we have to do to become enlightened is to recognize and rest in this natural state of mind. This is raw, naked awareness, not something we’ve learned or fabricated. This is the Buddha within—the perfect presence that we can all rely on. Waking up to this natural mind, this Buddha-nature, is what meditation is all about.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Lama Surya Das, 82.

¹⁹ Ibid, 82.

TRAINING TO BE A BODHISATTVA

“I should strive to attain perfect Buddhahood.” This aspiration to gain enlightenment in order to be of maximum benefit to the world is to be cultivated and sustained until it spontaneously pervades our every activity, from sleeping to meditating.²⁰

—DALAI LAMA

“The Tibetan tradition says that we must all live up to death. This means living up to the truth of death; it also means living until the very moment we die, without deadening ourselves by sleepwalking through our days.”²¹ Relative bodhicitta is love and compassion. It also has two aspects: aspiration and implementation²². When we take the bodhisattva vow, we are making the aspiration to be of benefit to all sentient beings without exception throughout all time and space. We are vowing to overcome our own habitual patterns that lead to suffering and to help others to do the same thing. To attain this aspiration, we also vow to implement the path that leads to its attainment. We undertake the arduous training of the six pāramitās (perfections): generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation and wisdom. We do not expect to have these qualities right away, but we commit to the path, to practicing them in our daily life. This is the important practice. In his book for preparing to take the bodhisattva vows, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche suggests that reciting the Heart Sūtra daily is a way to focus on emptiness and selflessness. He suggests we begin this practice after we have taken our bodhisattva vows. Then when we slip and break our vows, this practice will restore them.²³

According to Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, part of the bodhisattva vow ceremony includes reciting the “seven branch supplication” to accumulate merit. In Shantideva’s *Way of the*

²⁰ H. H. the Dalai Lama, *The Path to Enlightenment*, (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1982), 41.

²¹ Lama Surya Das, 108.

²² Chödrön, “No Time,” 11.

²³ Ponlop Rinpoche, “Profound,” 44-50.

Bodhisattva, he introduces the practice as the “sevenfold offering.” (See Appendix A). In her commentary, Pema Chödrön says this is a traditional method for gaining merit. We use this practice to wake up, to arouse our bodhicitta.²⁴ There are three parts to the practice: the special object which is the Three Jewels (the Buddha, dharma and *sangha*),²⁵ the special intention to acquire the attitude of bodhicitta, and the special offering. The offering helps us to overcome habitual selfishness and to connect with the expansiveness of bodhicitta, with love and compassion. We can do this practice throughout our lives and at our death to rouse two-fold bodhicitta.

The best way to prepare for one’s death or to assist the dying is to practice while we are living. The incentive to practice comes when we contemplate the Four Reminders: the fact of having a precious human birth; the truth of impermanence; the law of karma; and the futility of wandering around in .²⁶ The Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche says, “The point of the four reminders is to loosen our mind and to orient us toward how we should live our life. When other practices get too vague or high or far away, this one is the healthiest thing we can do. Turning our mind towards the dharma generates a sense of wanting to practice, feeling the need to practice.”²⁷

The first reminder is how fortunate we are to have a precious human birth. It is only in a human lifetime that we can work to attain enlightenment, and the probability of being born a human being is infinitely small. In my own life, I realize how fortunate I am to have been born in a country where I have enough of everything and no wars are being fought on our land. More

²⁴ Chödrön, “No Time,” 25-27.

²⁵ The Three Jewels: the Buddha, the *dharma* (body of teachings,) and the *sangha* (the Buddhist community).

²⁶ Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom and No Escape and the Path of Loving Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2001), 97.

²⁷ The Sakyong, Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche, *Adhishthana: The View & Practice of Ngöndro*, (Halifax: Lion’s Roar, 2008), 38-39.

fortunate, though, is that I found the Buddha's teachings and teachers in this lifetime. Hopefully I still have many years to practice before my death.

The second reminder is the truth of impermanence, that the world and everything in it are impermanent. So no matter how long we live, we will eventually die; and death comes without warning. When we contemplate impermanence, we begin to see that birth and death are arising at every moment. We begin to see into the nature of emptiness, that everything arises out of causes and conditions. One Sunday afternoon, my husband Michael and I went shopping. He was in a hurry to get home and without realizing it, went through the red light before it changed. When I told him the light was still red, he looked to his left and gasped. In that moment, I knew my whole life was about to change. What he saw was a tractor-trailer truck coming toward our car at fifty miles per hour. He was only forty five years old when he finally died as a result of that accident. Before that moment, I went through life pretty much oblivious to impermanence. Since then I have been conscious of its effect on my life constantly.

The third reminder is the law of karma. Everything we do has consequences. Some of the consequences occur in this lifetime, some came with us into this life from previous lifetimes, and some will go with us into the next lifetime. When death comes it is too late to do anything about our actions. So we must be conscious now while we still can make a difference. Some of the teachings say that our previous karma even determines the length of our life and the cause of our death in this lifetime. In *Life in Reflection to Death*, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche says, "Our lifespan will only be as long as our accumulation of positive karma supports it within its natural limits of human rebirth."²⁸ There is both individual and collective karma. The current economic situation is a good example of group karma. The whole country is in a downturn because of the rampant

²⁸ Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, *Life in Relation to Death* (Cottage Grove, Oregon: Pama Publishing, 1987), 13-14

materialism and greed that we have all supported for many years. The earth and all its inhabitants are endangered because of the activities of people all over the world and in particular in industrial countries. It appears to be our children or grandchildren's collective karma to reap the results in their lifetimes.

The fourth reminder is the futility of wandering around in . In this reminder we reflect on the cycle of suffering caused by our attachments and aversions. All sentient beings are also suffering, and we cannot know the extent of their suffering. I know my own suffering led me to this path. Seeing my friends and family members suffering breaks my heart, and I want to find a way out for all of us.

When we take the bodhisattva vow, we have vowed to live our lives for the benefit of all sentient beings without exception; to take on the sufferings of these beings; and to work for their enlightenment. It is a monumental undertaking. We have to develop compassion and give up our self-cherishing. To deepen our aspiration, we must develop unconditional friendliness toward ourselves and others. We need tools to learn how to do so. Two primary tools we can use are meditation and *lojong* practice. In his introduction to *Training the Mind*, Chögyam Trungpa says that *Hīnayāna* discipline focuses on taming the mind and the *Mahāyāna* discipline focuses on training the mind.²⁹

Taming the Mind

The bodhisattva establishes a firm foundation by learning to tame the mind with meditation practice. I first learned meditation over twenty years ago when I sought help for anxiety attacks. I knew my mind was out of control and wanted relief. The two aspects of meditation practice are *śamatha*, mindfulness practice, and *vipaśyanā*, awareness practice. Throughout life and at the end

²⁹ Chögyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Lovingkindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003), 1-2.

of life, *śamatha* enables the mind to focus and remain steady and *vipaśyanā* heightens our inquisitiveness and appreciation of our perceptions.

Judith L. Lief tells us, “On the basis of sitting meditation we can go further, to the practice of cultivating friendliness. This practice is based on the reversal of our habit of selfishness.”³⁰ One meditation practice that generates unconditional friendliness for our selves and others is loving-kindness meditation. Using this meditation practice we wish happiness for ourselves and others; wish to take away the suffering of others; wish equanimity for ourselves and for others; and rejoice in the wellbeing of ourselves and others. No one is left out in this practice; it even includes our so-called enemies. In his text, Vimalakīrti says the bodhisattva “generates the love that is truly a refuge for all living beings.”³¹ He enumerates other qualities of this love: free from grasping; free of passions; equanimous; without conflict and the violence of passions; non-dual; and imperturbable because it is totally ultimate.³²

Vimalakīrti tells us too that there are ten virtues that bodhisattvas can only accomplish in this universe (with a precious human birth). “[H]ere they are: to win the poor by generosity; to win the immoral by morality; to win the hateful by means of tolerance; to win the lazy by means of effort; to win the mentally troubled by means of concentration; to win the falsely wise by means of true wisdom; to show those suffering from the eight adversities how to rise above them; to teach the Mahāyāna to those of narrow-minded behavior; to win those who have not produced the roots of virtue by means of the roots of virtue; and to develop living beings without interruption...”³³

³⁰Judith L. Lief, “Compassion and the Healing Encounter,” *In Quest of the Spiritual Component of Care for the Terminally Ill: Proceedings of a Colloquium May 3-4, 1986 Yale University School of Nursing* ed. Florence S. Wald (Funded by the Arthur Young Davis Foundation, 1986), 126.

³¹ ³¹ Vimalakīrtinirdeśa,” 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 56-57.

³³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

Training the Mind

Six of these virtues called the *pāramitās* are used in training the mind. These six transcendental qualities or perfections include: generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation and wisdom.

Generosity

May I perfect the sublime virtue of generosity,
Which liberates and releases craving, grasping,
And attachment,
And brings joyous contentment.³⁴

—LAMA SURYA DAS

In a retreat, I heard Jack Kornfield describe generosity as love. We train in developing a quality of love that comes from our deep compassion. The Dalai Lama advises, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”³⁵ Karen Armstrong puts the benefits to us in a context that makes it very appealing, “...those who have persistently trained themselves in the art of compassion manifest new capacities in the human heart and mind; they discover that when they reach out consistently toward others, they are able to live with the suffering that inevitably comes their way with serenity, kindness, and creativity. They find that they have a new clarity and experience a richly intensified state of being.”³⁶

Generosity brings happiness
at every state of its expression.
We experience joy in forming
the intention to be generous.
We experience joy in the actual act
of giving something.
And we experience joy in remembering the
fact that we have given.³⁷

—THE BUDDHA

³⁴ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is As Buddha Does: The Ten Original Practices for Enlightenment*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 21.

³⁵ Ibid, 37.

³⁶ Armstrong, 21.

³⁷ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha...*, 31.

When I was on retreat with Jon Kabat-Zinn founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program, I told him this story about my parents. One Christmas vacation, I went to visit my mother, and then I went to visit my father. I spent the entire vacation with each of my parents visiting people, taking them food, running errands for them and in my father's case fixing cars and other broken things. Kabat-Zinn looked at me and said, "Your parents are bodhisattvas."

The sage accumulates nothing,
but the more he does for others
the greater his existence;
the more he gives to others,
the greater his abundance.³⁸

—LAO TZU, TAO TE CHING
(Translated by Red Pine)

I spent my entire childhood living with their generosity to anyone and everyone that came along. In my mother's obituary, we wrote that as children we never slept alone. There was always someone coming to visit us who needed a place to stay for a day or for much longer. Bunking down with one of us kids was usually what happened as we did not have a guest room. One cousin came for a visit and stayed ten years. We shared a room until I got married. Today she lives near me in Denver. We are as close as sisters and still generous in helping one another as needs arise.

³⁸ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is As Buddha Does: The Ten Original Practices for Enlightenment*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 24.

Discipline

May I develop and accomplish
 the pure virtue of ethical self-discipline,
 which dries up the boiling river of greed,
 hatred, and delusion
 and is a kindness to the whole world.³⁹

—LAMA SURYA DAS

In Chapter 5 of the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva describes the three disciplines:

not causing harm, gathering virtues, and benefitting others.⁴⁰

Not causing harm

Examine thus yourself from every side.
 Note harmful thoughts and every futile striving.
 Thus it is that heroes in the bodhisattva path
 Apply the remedies to keep a steady mind.⁴¹

—SHANTIDEVA

When we have the urge to anger, criticism, deceit, haughtiness, or using strong language, we can instead remain “like a log.” The practice is to refrain from doing anything we will regret or which could cause harm to another being.

Gathering virtue

With perfect and unyielding faith,
 With steadfast, respect, and courtesy,
 With modesty and conscientiousness,
 Work calmly for the happiness of others.⁴²

When doing virtuous acts, beyond reproach,
 To help ourselves, or for the sake of others,
 Let us always bear in mind the thought
 That we are self-less, like an apparition.⁴³

³⁹ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is...*, 54.

⁴⁰ Pema Chödrön, 129.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 136

Acting thus with faith and understanding,
 You will always undertake good works.
 And in whatever actions you perform,
 You will not be calculating with your eye on others.⁴⁴
 —SHANTIDEVA

The virtues Shantideva encourages us to cultivate are qualities that engender an enlightened mind. Some of the virtues include: compassion, nonaggression, love, faith, steadfastness, respect, courtesy, modesty, conscientiousness and calmness.⁴⁵ As he indicates in the quote above, we are developing these qualities so that we can be of benefit to others and get ourselves out of the way.

Benefitting others

The six perfections, giving and the rest,
 Progress in sequence, growing in importance.
 The great should never be supplanted by the less,
 And it is others' good that is the highest goal.

Therefore understand this well
 And always labor for the benefit of beings.
 The far-seeing masters of compassion
 Permit, to this end, that which is proscribed.⁴⁶

Directly then, or indirectly,
 All you do must be for other's sake.
 And solely for their welfare dedicate
 Your actions for the gaining of enlightenment.⁴⁷
 —SHANTIDEVA

In benefitting others, Shantideva gives instructions for how to manage ourselves and our behavior. He advises the bodhisattva to act within one's cultural norms and not to bring attention to oneself. When he says even to do that which is proscribed for the benefit of others, he is saying even though we would generally not harm others, we may be required to harm others for the

⁴⁴ Pema Chödrön, 129.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154.

greater good. He also advises us to extend our compassion and concern even to those we might call the enemy or might not normally want to feel compassion.

My mother was my role model for discipline. She was always even tempered, kind, never used harsh language, and worked very hard for the benefit of her family. She retired early so that she could take care of her mother, and she watched over her children even when we were adults. If I was ever sick or in the hospital, she came and stayed with me until I was well. The night Michael died she was by our side even though her mother had died only two weeks earlier.

One of my mother's neighbors had colon cancer. When the neighbor was too ill to care for herself, her husband left her and their young daughter. My mother invited them to stay in her home. The neighbor had a colostomy bag that had to be changed, and she needed nursing care which my mother provided until they could find family members to take them in. Through this whole time, my mother continued to work her fulltime job.

Patience

May I perfect the noble virtue of patience,
 which can face naked reality,
 forgive, accept adversity, and turn it into an ally.⁴⁸
 —LAMA SURYA DAS

Patience is a very necessary virtue as one walks on the spiritual path. The Dalai Lama describes three kinds of patience that should be practiced: patience towards harmful beings; patience in facing the suffering and hardships that arise throughout life; and patience in cultivating an awareness of emptiness.⁴⁹ Those that would do us harm can be our greatest teachers and give us the opportunity to work with our most difficult emotions. Practicing patience in the little things that cause us suffering can give us the capacity to be with much greater suffering and hardship. It also enhances our capacity for compassion for others faced

⁴⁸ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha...*, 82.

⁴⁹ H. H. the Dalai Lama, 155.

with similar difficulties. Practicing patience while cultivating emptiness is a practice living with life as it is, facing life's complexities.

There is fourth kind of patience and that is in working with our own anger and aggression. Shantideva considers anger a great evil and peril to our path because of its karmic consequences. Practicing patience is the antidote.

No evil is there similar to anger,
 No austerity to be compared with patience.
 Steep yourself, therefore, patience—
 In all ways, urgently, with zeal.⁵⁰
 —SHANTIDEVA

As a result of practicing patience, we attain four joys: patience is stainless; patience brings happiness; patience is praised by the holy ones; and patience is the perfect way to help others.⁵¹ Patience is stainless in the sense that there are no losers when you practice patience. Everyone gains by your restraint. By practicing patience, we contribute to the happiness of others and ultimately to our own happiness by increasing our peace of mind and joy in fulfilling our vows to be of benefit. Patience is looked upon favorably by the buddhas and bodhisattvas. It brings us closer to our own Buddha-nature and inherent goodness. When we restrain from anger and work with our difficult emotions and habit patterns, we benefit everyone around us. We reveal more of our Buddha-nature and by our example serve as an aid in demonstrating the dharma to others.

⁵⁰ Pema Chödrön, 161.

⁵¹ Ibid., 199.

Patience is the best ornament of real heroes,
A supreme self-mortification to overcome delusions,
The garuda bird to destroy the snake of anger,
Armor to protect one from arrows of criticism.
Knowing this, in every way familiarize yourself
With the armor of supreme patience.⁵²

—JEY RINPOCHE

I learned so much about patience when my husband was in the hospital for eighteen months. It tested every form of patience: my frustration with insurance companies, government agencies and hospital systems; the pain and suffering inherent in the situation; and the realities I had to face throughout the situation. I learned a lot about myself and certainly a great deal of compassion for the many families I met faced with similar circumstances. I learned to navigate the systems by working patiently and cooperatively with the people that worked in those systems. I faced my own suffering each day as a new day. The most difficult time I had with impatience was in the end when Michael's life support had been disconnected, and we were waiting for him to die. I wanted so much to do something about it, to end it quickly somehow. I read in a book something to the effect that no one knows the day or the hour of our death save God. Somehow that changed my whole perspective and allowed me to be content with the process however long it was going to take. Those three weeks were the simplest and most complex of my life. Patience saved my sanity.

⁵² H.H. the Dalai Lama, 154.

Exertion

May I perfect the noble virtue of enthusiastic effort
and fearless perseverance, which selflessly strives
for the ultimate benefit of all.⁵³

—LAMA SURYA DAS

The Third Dalai Lama in his *Essence of Refined Gold* refers to this pāramitā as “joyous perseverance.” He says,

Abandon all causes of apathy and devote yourself solely to noble works of body, speech and mind. In order to alleviate the suffering of even one living being, practice the three types of joyous perseverance [exertion]: armor-like perseverance, which does not abandon difficult practices for any reason whatsoever; based on that, perseverance which rests in wholesome Dharma and furthers one’s practice of the six perfections [pāramitās]; and by means of the above two, the perseverance which works for the good of others by striving for the goal of enlightenment of all sentient beings.⁵⁴

It would be impossible to attain the objective of the bodhisattva’s vow without this quality of joyous exertion or perseverance. The armor-like quality means we are undeterred. The key is to attain balance. If there is too much enthusiasm, one can quickly burn out and move in the opposite direction towards laziness, discouragement, weariness and complacency. This can also lead to burnout and self-denigration. The notion is that we want to work diligently towards our enlightenment at a sustainable level of effort that is undeterred by set-backs and difficulties.

Exertion which rests in wholesome effort is the quality of acting virtuously and accumulating merit. This is the antidote to procrastination. We work as if our hair was on fire or a snake was thrown into our lap. Without hesitation we would put out the fire or throw off the snake. So too, we work in the same way knowing that death will overtake us sooner or later. So there is no time to waste.

Lastly we persevere in fulfilling our bodhisattva vow and working diligently for enlightenment to be of benefit to others. Keeping this in mind, it keeps us from becoming

⁵³ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is...*, 105.

⁵⁴ H.H. Dalai Lama, 155.

distracted. Our efforts are one-pointed and not wasted. We are not just busy to keep our minds distracted, but busy with a purpose upper most in our minds. The Dalai Lama reminds us that, “We should remember that everything but the Dharma is useless at death, and instead of wasting our lives on meaningless activities, we should blend our mindstreams with the teachings and with practice. To do so benefits us as individuals and benefits the world by strengthening its spiritual basis.”⁵⁵

My own experience of this pāramitā was during my last full-time semester at Naropa. I was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of breast cancer in May, 2010, after surgery to remove a lump. I delayed the start of my chemotherapy treatments to go to Warrior’s Assembly and *Vajrayāna* Seminary. I was determined to stay in school and complete my treatments. My final semester I completed my coursework; radiation therapy; and by the end of the summer a full year of ngöndro practice. I will be 60 next year and am very much aware that death is not far into the future no matter how much longer I live. So, each of these had a sense of urgency for me. Yet there was and still is the danger of being out of balance and ending up too weak and too tired to do anything. This is where it is so important to work with all of the pāramitās, especially balancing exertion with patience and wisdom.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 134.

Meditation

May I perfect the subtle virtue of concentration
and alert mindfulness, which clarifies the heart
and mind, body, and soul, and allows awareness and discernment
to dawn within.⁵⁶

—LAMA SURYA DAS

To develop the deep level of compassion of the bodhisattva requires giving up our attachment to our own egos. Meditative concentration is the tool we use to accomplish this and that ultimately leads to wisdom. Developing mindfulness and awareness gives us the capacity to look deeply into our emotional reactions and to see things as they are as opposed to the way we desire them to be. In Note 64 to *The Great Path of Awakening*, the translator Ken McLeod comments, “The criteria of effectiveness in Buddhist training are not simply how well one can sit in meditation or how well one can focus the mind, but how thoroughly the understanding one develops through meditation permeates one’s life and one’s relationships with others, how present it is in everyday activity, and to what extent it is reflected in one’s behavior.”⁵⁷

Whenever we used to ask my first meditation teacher, “How do we know our meditation is working?” he would tell us to look at the rest of our lives. Are we kinder? Are our relationships more effective? How are we affecting the world around us? This was the measure of our success in meditation. So the more successful our meditation practice, the more capacity we have to be of benefit to other sentient beings.

Meditative concentration is the king to rule the mind.
When stabilized, it sits like a mountain,
When directed, it can enter all virtuous meditations,
It leads to every physical and mental joy.
Knowing this, great yogis always rely upon it,
The destroyer of the inner enemy mental wandering.⁵⁸

—JEY RINPOCHE

⁵⁶ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is...*, 122.

⁵⁷ Jamgön Kongtrül, 79.

⁵⁸ H.H. Dalai Lama, 157.

I measure the success of my own practice by its affect on those around me. I am currently in a hospital chaplain internship program. What seems to affect my patients most is my capacity to remain calm and openhearted. One patient commented to me that “a person could not help but be calm with me around.” In a recent very tragic situation where a family lost an infant, the greatgrandmother thanked me for being so openhearted and kind to her family. She seemed genuinely delighted when I told her I planned to be ordained as a Buddhist minister even though she was Catholic.

Wisdom

May I perfect the profound virtue of transcendental
knowledge-wisdom, which know how things
actually are, as well as how they arise and appear,
interrelate, and function.⁵⁹

—LAMA SURYA DAS

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche refers to wisdom or *prajñā* as the “sword that cuts the bondage of ego.”⁶⁰ We begin to attain wisdom when we understand the truth of “what is.” Through meditation, we find that there is no self-existing reality that is me. Once we attain that understanding, it becomes easier to dismantle our self-cherishing and to develop compassion, openheartedness, and kindness. We develop an appreciation for everyone else. We deepen our aspiration to be of benefit to everyone else.

Wisdom is the eye to see thatness,
The practice which pulls out samsara’s root,
The treasure of excellences praised in all scriptures,
The supreme lamp to dispel dark ignorance.
Knowing this, the wise seeking freedom,
Dedicate every effort to generating it.⁶¹

—JEY RINPOCHE

⁵⁹ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is...148*.

⁶⁰ Chögyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Lovingkindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003), 89.

⁶¹ H.H. Dalai Lama, 159.

The deeper I go into Shambhala Buddhism, the more I appreciate the teachings and what it means to live for the benefit of “all beings.” I have come to truly appreciate the dedication and sacrifice of our teacher Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He seems to be tireless in his efforts for our community and the world. Most recently, after coming out of a year-long retreat, he offered to our community two new vows. The first vow we took was to acknowledge our own nature as basically good, that we know this truth about ourselves. Secondly we vowed to know that society is basically good. Thus we acknowledged that the truth about all beings is that at our core, we are all basically good (all have Buddha-nature).

To develop virtue and train in the pāramitās, we use a practice called lojong, a Tibetan word for a Mahāyāna teaching called the seven points of mind training.⁶² Working with the seven trainings and fifty nine pithy slogans associated with the mind trainings, we become deeply steeped in generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, meditation and wisdom.

In the lojong teachings on the pāramitā of discipline, we find the slogans, “Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. These two should ride on the breath.”⁶³ and “Begin the sequence of sending and taking with yourself.”⁶⁴ We are willing to begin with ourselves taking in whatever suffering is there. This practice is called *tonglen*. It is useful for developing our compassion and overcoming our self-cherishing. In this practice we bring to mind someone who is suffering and imagine the person is with us. We visualize the suffering of the individual as a dark, hot, smoky energy. On our in-breath, we breathe this into our hearts imaging that our compassion and desire to relieve the person’s suffering transforms the energy. On the out-breath, we breathe out light towards the person and imagine sending them some relief from their suffering.

⁶² Ibid., xi.

⁶³ Chögyam Trungpa, “Training,” 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

We initially work with one person's suffering or our own suffering and then extend our practice to include other beings in the world that may be suffering in a similar way. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said about tonglen, "The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and emotions, and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes onto oneself."⁶⁵

When my husband was dying, I would have given anything, I believe even my life, to relieve his suffering. Had I known about tonglen practice then, it would have been very useful to both of us. Today I use this practice for the patients in the hospital where I intern; those I love; friends; and also beings that are difficult to love including non-human sentient beings such as insects and spiders. Recently I practiced tonglen working with the suffering caused by my fear and the suffering aroused by the uncertainty in a spider's life. I extended the practice to include all sentient beings suffering from fear and uncertainty.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche labels the chapter for Point Four, the pāramitā of exertion: "Showing the Utilization of Practice in One's Whole Life." He says, "The fourth point of mind training deals with completing your training in your life altogether, from the living situation you are now in until your death."⁶⁶ The first of the two instructions is for the living, "Practice the five strengths, the condensed heart instruction."⁶⁷ The second about dying will be addressed later (see page 52). The five strengths are strong determination, familiarization, seed of virtue, reproach, and aspiration. We do not have much time, so we need a strong determination to stop wasting time. We are vowing from this moment and every moment until we die to maintain our practice. We want to

⁶⁵ Pema Chödrön, *Tonglen: The Path of Transformation*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Vajradhatu Publications, 2001), 2.

⁶⁶ Pema Chödrön, *Tonglen*, 71.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-75.

familiarize ourselves with bodhicitta and the practices to develop bodhicitta. We study and train so we have a familiarization with our basic wakefulness. Seed of virtue means never resting from our wakefulness. We vigorously work on keeping our body, speech and mind engaged in virtuous activities. We reproach our ego whenever it shows itself. We recognize that the ego is the source of our suffering and do not let it off the hook. Lastly, we aspire (1) to single handedly save all sentient beings; (2) to never forget two-fold bodhicitta, even in our dreams; and (3) no matter what chaos arises in our lives, to apply bodhicitta. Jamgön Kongtrül in *The Path to Great Awakening* asks us to pray the following prayer at the end of any virtuous activity:

*May I on my own, guide all sentient beings to Buddhahood. In particular, from now until I attain enlightenment, may I never forget the two aspects of precious bodhicitta, even when dreaming. May the two aspects of bodhicitta grow stronger and stronger. Whatever adverse conditions I encounter, may I take them as aids to bodhicitta.*⁶⁸

Falling asleep is like a mini-rehearsal for our death and rebirth, and he suggests we recite this aspiration every night when we fall asleep, again when we wake in the morning, and before our meditation practice, as well.

We do not know how much time we have to practice since death may come at any moment. So it is urgent that we start now. The bodhisattva is vowing to start right away, right in the moment of taking the vow and never forgetting for even an instant the commitment to the vow.

In Jamgön Kongtrül's book on lojong, *The Great Path to Awakening*, he reminds us, "...to be brief, because the whole basis of mind training is contained in the two principles of throwing out concern for your own welfare and taking complete hold of the welfare of others, these teachings summarize this course of instruction."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Jamgön Kongtrül, 26-27.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 51.

ENGAGING IN THE WORLD

The bodhisattva, the Buddhist hero figure, is one who knows and takes seriously the dependent co-arising of all things. That is why he also knows that there is no private

, the world of suffering, again and again to minister to all beings until each, till every blade of grass, is enlightened. Here is revealed the compassion that blooms naturally when we open to our condition of profound mutuality. Since that condition pertains to us all, whether or not we acknowledge it yet, we are all in a sense- the Scriptures tell us—bodhisattvas.⁷⁰

—JOANNA MACY

Lama Surya Das reminds us that

...a Bodhisattva aspires to be a helpful spiritual altruist, an activist, and even a service-oriented leader as well as a seeker of wisdom, truth, unconditional love, deathless peace, and ultimate enlightenment. A Bodhisattva lives by a compassionate code that extends far beyond mere self-interest, with its severely limited potential for happiness and fulfillment, to engage more vitally with the welfare of all being and embody timeless values. A Bodhisattva is on the way to becoming a wise elder, so sorely need in our benighted world today and tomorrow.⁷¹

Along with working for enlightenment for all beings is being engaged in working for the good of the whole society. Engaged Buddhism is a modern term believed to be first adapted by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe what the monks were doing in the forest monasteries in Vietnam during the war between North and South Vietnam. Hanh said, “[T]he object of our mind is the world. When we see clearly and know what is going on, we will do something to help the situation.”⁷² The distinguishing characteristics of engagement is that it is often a grass roots, decentralized organization of individuals engaged not just in meditating, but also in acting to relieve the suffering being experienced by those around them. The goal is no longer focused on

⁷⁰ Joanna Macy, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World*, (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publisher, 1998),52.

⁷¹ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is As ...*, xiv.

⁷² Judith Simmer-Brown, “Speaking Truth to Power: The Buddhist Peace Fellowship” in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 73.

individual enlightenment, but on the notion that we are all in this together. In Kenneth Kraft's article on engaged Buddhism, he writes, "Qualities that were inhibited in pre-modern Asian settings can now be actualized through Buddhism's exposure to the West, where ethical sensitivity, social activism, and egalitarianism are emphasized. We can believe that Buddhism may have unique resources to offer the West and the world, and apply ancient Buddhist insights to actual contemporary problems."⁷³

Another distinguishing characteristic of engaged Buddhism is that it is a movement of the laity, not the monastic community. Lay Buddhists are engaged in activities that used to belong to the monastic community. George D. Bond, in an essay on the *Sarvodaya Shramandana* movement in Sri Lanka, talks about the founder Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne's notion of universalism. This is the idea that the laity has the spiritual potential, the opportunity and the responsibility for their own liberation. They can try to achieve *nirvāṇa* for themselves. Ariyaratne believes in a dual liberation: the path to individual liberation is through social liberation.⁷⁴ For the Sarvodaya movement, "The path became a path of selfless service in the world, and the goal became the development of a new social structure that embodied the Buddhist ideals and facilitated a dual liberation process."⁷⁵ I believe this characterizes the role of the "engaged bodhisattva" Buddhist in the modern world.

Today's engaged Buddhists are accomplishing change by the sangha (Buddhist community) engaging directly with the people. They do not have to wait for governments to act and in fact are less constrained by not doing so. The sangha changed dramatically too as

⁷³ Kenneth Kraft, "Engaged Buddhism" in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996), 65

⁷⁴ George D. Bond "A. T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. Queen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 121.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 124

Buddhism moved to the West. The sangha is no longer primarily the monastic community supported by the lay followers, but a community of lay followers who are engaged in pursuing their personal relief from suffering. At the same time, they are being encouraged to be concerned about more than just their own backyard; to be concerned about the poverty and suffering being experienced in their own countries and throughout the world including the suffering of Mother Earth. “Inspired by Buddha, guided by Dharma, and supported by Sangha, we travel a path toward living in balance with ourselves, with all other forms of life, and with our true mother, the Earth.”⁷⁶ A good example of this is Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche’s call to the Shambhala Buddhist community to provide our teachings and beneficial activities not just to our own sangha but also out into the larger community.

Buddhism came to the West in myriad forms. *Theravāda*, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions are all represented here and oftentimes get mixed together. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen Buddhist from Vietnam who defined the engaged Buddhist movement and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King. Even better known is the Nobel Prize winner the Dalai Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist steeped in the mysteries of Vajrayāna Buddhism. The ideal of the bodhisattva relieving the suffering of the world has taken on a new meaning. In her article on The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), Judith Simmer-Brown talks about the BPF’s recognition that engaged Buddhism has to address not just personal suffering but the suffering caused by “structural and social forms of suffering, oppression, and violence.”⁷⁷ It is daunting to think of jumping right into it. Pema Chödrön in *No Time to Lose* talks about a step by step approach to taking on the role of bodhisattva: the monarch (king or queen), the ferryman, and the shepherd.

⁷⁶ Allan Hunt Badiner “Dharma Gaia” in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996), 139

⁷⁷ Simmer-Brown, 80

As a monarch, we work with ourselves first. Until we can develop compassion and loving kindness towards ourselves, we don't have the capacity to extend it to others. As ferrymen, we recognize that we are in the boat with others that are suffering just like us or desire to be happy just like us. We start to extend our compassion and loving kindness to others when we observe their suffering and to extend joy when we observe their joy. As the shepherd puts the care of his flock above his own concern, we aspire to put the concerns of others above our own.⁷⁸ The Dalai Lama has stated that his "religion is kindness." This personifies the bodhisattva way of being in the world. In a speech, Bernie Glassman the founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order talks about becoming the bodhisattva of compassion (*Kanzeon* in Japan) in the work of engaged Buddhism.

Kanzeon "the listener of the sufferings" means fully embodying listening, not with the ears, but listening with the pores of the body, with the hairs on the head, with the feet, listening and fully becoming the pains of the world So *Avalokiteshvara*—*Kanzeon*—takes a vow to bring an end to all the sufferings, but he/she/it was put into the position of listening to all this stuff and having no answers.

Do you know what happened? She burst into millions of pieces! Then all those pieces came back together—now we have a thousand-armed *Kanzeon*—and each hand held a different implement. One had a pen, one had a sword, one had a hoe, and one had a flower.

Now *Kanzeon* is doing the work. He's listening, still having no answers, but is doing everything in every sphere where she/he appears, doing the things that need to be done.⁷⁹

The dharma of engaged Buddhism focuses on the dual objective of individual liberation and active engagement to relieve the suffering in society and the world. This socially-focused dharma may no longer look like the traditional dharma. For example, A. T. Ariyaratne, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar the leader of an Indian Untouchables movement to Buddhism in the 50s,⁸⁰ and Makiguchi Tsunesaburo, and Toda Josei founders of the Soka Gakkai movement in

⁷⁸ Pema Chödrön, *No Time*, 68-69

⁷⁹ Christopher S. Queen "Glassman Roshi and the Peacemaker Order: Three Encounters" in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 100

⁸⁰ Christopher S. Queen "Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation" in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. Queen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 55

Japan⁸¹ all created their own versions of the Buddha's dharma. Ariyaratne focuses on selfless service as a path to liberation and on the social nature of the Buddha's teachings. He uses the *suttas* (Pali) such as *the Kutadanta, Sigalovada, and Parabhara* suttas to support his notion that his interpretation goes back to the early teachings of the Buddha. He claims that the Buddha's teachings have to be taken in balance and that while the Buddha taught on liberation, he also gave many teachings about social responsibility and social philosophy.⁸²

Ambedkar focused on the aspects of Buddhism that met the needs of the Untouchables he was trying to convert. In his own treatise on Buddhism, *The Buddha and His Dharma*, he leaves out many of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism because

Ambedkar knew that the traditional presentation of the Four Truths—which blame the victims for their own sufferings were caused by others' cruelty and a heartless social system. He recognized that the metaphysics of karma and rebirth intensified self blame by alleging the sufferers' misconduct in former lives. Furthermore, he knew that the voluntary poverty and contemplative pursuits of the traditional bikkhu could not offer a viable ideal for people locked in poverty.⁸³

The Soka Gakkai movement also has a very narrowly focused brand of Buddhism based on the original teachings of the *Nichiren Shoshu* school of Buddhism which was primarily based on chanting the *Heart Sūtra*.⁸⁴

In the West, engaged Buddhists come from many different Buddhist traditions including the Theravadin Buddhism of East Asia, Chinese and Japanese Zen, Tibetan Buddhism and many variations. There is a Soka Gakkai lay movement in the West called Soka Gakkai International in the United States of America (SGI-USA). This group is no longer affiliated with the Japanese

⁸¹ Daniel A. Metraux "The Soka Gakkai: Buddhism and the Creation of a Harmonious and Peaceful Society" in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. Queen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 366

⁸² Bond, 124-126

⁸³ Queen, "Dr. Ambedkar," 59

⁸⁴ Metraux, 366

sect called Nichiren Shoshu of America. David W. Chappell the author of an essay on racial diversity in the Soka Gakkai argues that this is an engaged Buddhist movement if engagement is defined as Buddhism for social as well as personal liberation. SGI-USA's emphasis is on caring about people, practice and purpose. They claim to have the largest and most racially diverse Buddhist group in the United States, and they work in the local community. Chappell concludes, "Since racial inclusiveness is an essential element of Soka Gakkai's philosophy and practice, and since social integration is a crucial test of its claims, we must conclude that Soka Gakkai is inherently 'socially engaged.'"⁸⁵

"In Bernie Glassman's [founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order] Buddhism, a vision of human reclamation and social change only imagined by New Deal liberal and sixties radical—and surely unimagined in traditional Asian versions of human liberation—is realized in job training programs, full-time employment, permanent housing, nursery and toddler care, and drug treatment and hospice centers for the destitute and dying."⁸⁶ Glassman's dharma consists of five ingredients: spirituality, study and learning, livelihood, social action and relationship and community. The Peacemaker Order he founded consists of "a community of social workers, activists, and religious leaders from many countries and religious traditions who embrace three tenets: not knowing, i.e. the renunciation of fixed ideas and prejudices; bearing witness to the pains and joys of the world; and healing oneself and all beings in the universe."⁸⁷

In the East, the core of the sangha is monastic community supported by lay followers. While here in the West, there are some monasteries, the primary model is a center led by lay

⁸⁵ David W. Chappell "Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai" in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 202

⁸⁶ Christopher S. Queen "Glassman Roshi and the Peacemaker Order: Three Encounters" in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 95

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 98

Buddhists like the Shambhala Buddhist community. The sanghas of engaged Buddhism include the engagement of both monastics and the laity in Buddhist practices such as meditation, chanting, studying the dharma and also in active social engagement in the world. Thich Nhat Hanh's monastic order in Vietnam led the movement for peace and to end the suffering of the people. It enlisted the lay people to follow in their footsteps and work for the benefit of all the people. His notion of sangha includes everyone. In an essay on engaged Buddhism, Sulak Sivaraksa tells of asking Hanh about the importance of peace versus preserving Buddhism. "He [Hanh] argued that Buddhism does not mean that we should sacrifice people's lives in order to preserve the Buddhist hierarchy . . . and the tradition. When human lives are preserved and when human dignity and freedom are cultivated toward peace and lovingkindness, Buddhism can again be reborn in the hearts and minds of men and women."⁸⁸

Bernie Glassman's sangha includes social workers, activists, and the people they support, the street people and disenfranchised people everywhere. Sivaraksa argues that we don't need Buddhist institutions, but institutions whose policies and methods are informed by Buddhist ideals such as compassion and the true spirit of nonviolence.⁸⁹ Engaged Buddhist activist all around the country work towards these ideals.

The sangha of the Soka Gakkai in the U. S. is a racially diverse mixture of lay people. In 1997, they claimed to have 330,000 members in over sixty community centers around the country. While the actual numbers may be in dispute, they appear to have the largest sangha in the U.S..⁹⁰ Engaged Buddhist sanghas include other types of diversity as well. There are gay men only sanghas designed to give gay men a sense of community and acknowledgement, where they

⁸⁸ Sulak Sivaraksa "Buddhism in a World of Change" in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996), 76

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 76

⁹⁰ Chappell, "Racial," 189

don't feel marginalized like they might in the larger community sanghas. There are prison sanghas and sanghas that include only a particular ethnic group. There are Asian sanghas led by a Buddhist priest or the monastic community much along the lines of the old model. These sanghas may be engaged in social action in their local communities.

The key seems to be taking Buddhism to the streets, to the places where people live and work. Throughout the Western world Buddhism has found a foothold. It's notions of personal individual practice and liberation combined with social action and deep compassion for the suffering of the world has given Buddhism a new vigor and freshness. It has also brought a new way of being to the many activists movements such as peace, disarmament, and ecology. Unlike the old notion of a benevolent monarch ruling the world and implementing change top down, this new Buddhism is bubbling up from the bottom and engaging the people in becoming "the change they want to see in the world." In taking a vow to be of benefit to all beings, the bodhisattva is called to practice not just on the cushion but to a practice of engagement in relieving all the forms of suffering in the world, a universal form of chaplaincy.

ENGAGING IN CARE FOR THE SICK AND DYING

*In other words, present a very sane and solid situation to the person who is going to die. . . . just open to each other simultaneously and develop the meeting of the two minds.*⁹¹

—CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

My vocational aspiration is to become a hospice chaplain. As an aspiring bodhisattva, I have vowed to be of benefit to all sentient beings without exception. Because of my commitment and my practice, I can be of great benefit to beings who are ill or nearing the end of their life. I can be especially beneficial to beings who are not bodhisattvas yet. Without our understanding of the emptiness of death, they may be particularly fearful and agitated over their approaching death. This can be a time of great suffering for these beings. In her experience working with the sick and the dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross found that, “All of our patients reacted to the bad news in almost identical ways, which is typical not only of the news of fatal illness but seems to be a human reaction to great and unexpected stress: namely, with shock and disbelief.”⁹²

I heard somewhere that “if you cannot be helpful, at least do no harm.” This is excellent advice for those of us attending the sick and dying. Vimalakīrti has instructions for the bodhisattva attending the sick (and dying) bodhisattva. His instructions are profound and steeped in an understanding of emptiness and absolute bodhicitta. We are essentially to remind the invalid of what she knows from her own understanding of the emptiness of the body, the two-fold bodhicitta and the virtues one has practiced. We can do this without making them feel bad or putting them down in any way. “He [the attending bodhisattva] should encourage him [the invalid] not to be

⁹¹ Guru Rinpoche according to Karma Lingpa, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo*, trans. Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc. 2000), 29.

⁹² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., *On Death and Dying: What the dying have to teach doctors, nurses, clergy, and their own families*, (New York: Scribner, 1969), 264.

distressed, but to manifest the roots of virtue, to maintain the primal purity and the lack of craving, and thus to always strive to become the king of healers who can cure all sicknesses. Thus should a bodhisattva console a sick bodhisattva, in such a way as to make him happy.”⁹³ Vimalakīrti teaches.

Lama Surya Das reminds us that, “Lord Buddha said ‘If one teaching is grasped and known, all of my teachings will be in the palm of your hand. What is this one teaching? It is altruism.’”⁹⁴ He goes on. “The Dalai Lama says, ‘The highest perfection of altruism, ultimate altruism, is bodhicitta complemented by wisdom. Bodhicitta—the aspiration to bring about the welfare of all sentient beings and to attain Buddhahood for their sake—is really the distilled essence, the squeezed juice of all the Buddha’s teachings.’”⁹⁵

Judith L. Lief, who studied with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and taught at Naropa on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says, “Compassion is the central context in which healing can occur.”⁹⁶ She defines the components of compassion as awareness, friendliness, and openness. These are all qualities that come from our own practice of meditation, loving-kindness practice, and tonglen. She continues, “We see that compassion provides a link between healer and patient, a point of connection more powerful than superficial differences of background and religion. . . it is an action complete in itself, which leaves no trace of ego.”⁹⁷

Whether you are in the role of chaplain, family member, or caregiver, compassion comes first. If we are with a Buddhist practitioner, we can assist them to practice meditation, loving-

⁹³ ⁹³ Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, 44.

⁹⁴ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha is*, xiv.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁶ Lief, “Compassion,” 125.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

kindness practice, and tonglen for themselves and others. If they choose to continue practicing, it is valuable for us to help them to attain the stability needed to perform their own end of life practices.

Even if they are not a practicing Buddhist, we can use these practices ourselves when we are with the dying person or on our own to restore our stability and capacity to touch our own suffering or pain. If we are out of touch with our feelings, we will not be present for the suffering of the other.

I volunteered at the Denver Hospice Care Center. One time when I went there, I paused outside the building. I felt reluctant to go inside and face the suffering that was sure to be there. I acknowledged the feelings, breathed into them for a few minutes and finally went inside. During my chaplain internship, I have this experience walking down the halls of the hospital. It feels like there is so much suffering in the patient and waiting rooms.

Lief has devised her own six slogans for working with the dying. They provide guidance until we develop our own inner guidance. In her book, *Making Friends with Death*, she outlines these slogans as (1) Start with knowledge; (2) Give and receive; (3) Pay attention to details; (4) Slow down; (5) Don't give up; and (6) Be present. She devotes an entire chapter to each slogan.⁹⁸ The slogans interrelate and balance one another, so that we do not become too tight or too loose in our approach.

In "Starting with knowledge," we gather information so that we are prepared for the situation. When I start my hospital chaplain shift, I review a data sheet with information about each patient. Then I check with the nursing staff and social worker if they are available to see if anyone needs special attention. Lief says we cannot just keep gathering information. Eventually we have to act in a way appropriate to the situation. This is what the next slogan is about.

⁹⁸ Lief, 114.

The slogan “Give and receive” is about generosity, about sharing and receiving what is given back. It is an action step. In the morning, even before I go to my office, I stop in the chapel to meditate and do tonglen practice for every sentient being in the hospital. I know that I will face a lot of suffering and it prepares me to remain open-hearted in the face of the pain I encounter there.

After I begin my shift and review my client list, I visit patients. I start with a knock on the door; clean my hands (with the alcohol pump by the door); and then step inside the room. Sometimes the patient is conscious and greets me. Sometimes the family members greet me. Sometimes the patient is alone and unconscious. I meet them all where they are in the moment. Then an exchange takes place even when they are unconscious. I find a way to be with each person. It may just be chatting for awhile and saying a prayer. Sometimes I provide a calming presence just by sitting still with an agitated family.

Last week a three-month old baby died in the hospital’s emergency department. The huge extended family was at the hospital and very anxious to get a priest to come because the baby had not been baptized. When we could not find a priest on a Sunday morning, and the family considered time to be of essence (because they believed that the baby’s soul was leaving), I rounded up a Bible and other materials to assist the greatgrandmother to perform the baptism. I negotiated with the police and victim’s advocate on the family’s behalf since they would not let them touch the baby (The death of a child results in a criminal investigation. The police initially would not let anyone touch the baby until the coroner arrived.). The police finally agreed to the procedure and the greatgrandmother baptized the baby in a timely manner. The family was greatly relieved and very appreciative.

“Paying attention to details” focuses us on what is right before us, the physical details of the room or the patient’s situation. Small gestures are often just what are most appropriate. This

slogan also reminds us to keep bringing our attention back as it wanders. At the hospital, each patient's circumstances are different. I have to pay attention to the details to figure out what to do. At the hospice one time I stepped into a room where both patients were unconscious. One man was lying on his back with a flower stuck in his hands like you see in a funeral home. I thought it was strange that someone would do that to the poor man. On my way out of the room, I noticed that his tray table was outside in the hall. I went to my supervisor to tell her about the flower and found out that the man had died very recently. The funeral director was coming to pick him up shortly. The family must have put the flower between his hands, since it was not a part of the hospice's routine. I was not paying attention to the clues that he had died.

Slowing down is about patience. If we focus too much on the details, we may find ourselves getting obsessed or speeding up. The slogan "Slow down" reminds us to let our minds relax. It is a way to connect with the ill or dying person and not just the activities we are doing for the person. Whenever I was sick and in the hospital, my mother would spend the day just sitting quietly by my bedside. She rarely spoke, and her patience seemed unending. It was particularly comforting to me to have her sitting still when the nursing staff were bustling around me.

The slogan "Don't give up" is about effort. If we slow down too much, we may start to get lazy. We need some exertion to keep going. We need exertion when we have a tendency to give up on the ill or dying person. If we are at-home caregivers, it may seem just too difficult to keep up the daily chores and activities required of us. One young woman at the hospital was crying inconsolably at her dying father's bedside. She admitted that she had not always paid attention to his needs because she was just too tired. His nurse told me later that his body appeared to be neglected.

On the other hand, if we push too much, we may exhaust ourselves and lose the capacity to be of benefit to the person. When my grandmother was gravely ill, my mother was taking care of her at home. I went to see them, and the visiting nurse told me that if my mother did not get some help, she would die before my grandmother did. My mother had exerted herself so much she put her own life in jeopardy. By placing my grandmother in a nursing home, my mother could really be with my grandmother at the end of her life.

This leads us to the last slogan. “Be present” is a reminder to relax the effort. Like a yield sign, it invites us to notice the dying person and what is needed. When my husband was disconnected from his feeding tube, we knew it would just be a matter of days before his death. Yet since he was not in hospice care, the nurses continued performing all the same routines. They turned him over like clockwork; gave him medications for his arthritis; and did other things which seemed to disturb him. I asked the doctor if we could just keep him comfortable and free from pain since he was going to die shortly. She seemed surprised at the request, but agreed to stop the things that were no longer making a difference to him in the days before he died. I spent those last days just “sitting silently” with him. Lief says, “Our sense of presence, or essential being, is the most powerful gift we can offer, and in turn, we can draw out the quality in others.”⁹⁹ Kübler-Ross wrote in her journal

Those who have the strength and the love to sit with a dying patient in the silence that goes beyond words will know that this moment is neither frightening nor painful, but a peaceful cessation of the functioning of the body. Watching a peaceful death of a human being reminds me of a falling star—one of the million lights in a vast sky that flares up for a brief moment only to disappear into the endless night. To be with a dying patient makes us conscious of the uniqueness of the individual in this vast sea of humanity, aware of our infiniteness, our limited lifespan.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Gill, *Quest: The Life of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), 288.

While my husband was in a coma, whenever he heard my voice, a nurse observed that his heart rate and blood pressure monitors would change. At the end of his life, he lapsed back into the coma. Until the moment he died, he had ways of letting me know he knew I was there, even when he was no longer attached to a monitor. On the last evening, I was out of the room for a little while. When I went back into the room, the moment I touched him, he sighed his last breath. All the years we were married, I had promised he would never die alone. It seemed as if he waited for me to be present before he took his last breath even though my mother and brother were already sitting quietly in the room with him.

Lief has advice on the pitfalls of idiot compassion and other reminders about our conduct when we walk into the room with the dying person. At the end of the book, she reminds us that after all our preparation and knowledge, in the end we have to trust ourselves. We have to trust that we will know what is needed to do “good” and to do no harm.

MOVING INTO DECLINE

*I vow to do my best not to let my illness affect my practice. I also vow to let my practice continue to teach me how to be sick—and to enable me to help others who are chronically ill.*¹⁰¹

—TONI BERNHARD

In his text, Vimalakīrti summarizes his advice to sick bodhisattvas, “[T]hus should the sick bodhisattva consider things. His wisdom is the consideration of body, mind, and sickness as impermanent, miserable, empty, and selfless. His liberative technique consists of not exhausting himself by trying to avoid all physical sickness, and of applying himself to accomplish the benefit of living beings, without interrupting the cycle of incarnations.”¹⁰²

Lama Surya Das tells the story of Ram Dass after he became half-paralyzed and in a wheelchair following a stroke.

Dass no longer has the physical stamina to work so actively and must usually remain at home in Maui, accepting constant help from others merely to sustain his existence. And yet he remains a champion of spiritual growth by taking every opportunity he can to speak out on its behalf. He is actively engaged in teaching on the Web through streaming video. In a recent interview with Virginia Lee, former editor of *Yoga Journal*, Dass talked about his unanticipated new mode of continuing to serve his lifelong cause:

Before my stroke, I was very much into helping others. Just read my book, *How Can I Help?* It’s about the power of being a helper. And now I am experiencing the opposite, the powerlessness of being a dependent person. I am the one being helped. At first, I was freaked out by that and then I got used to it. I’ve found that in the role of a dependent person, I can contact

¹⁰¹ Toni Bernhard, *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), xvii.

¹⁰² Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, “The Holy,” 47.

the heart space and the soul of another human being. I get to make people feel really good.¹⁰³

Lama Surya Das reminds us, “When hearts are broken open by terror or despair, spirits cry out for healing. From profound suffering can come greater understanding and more bountiful compassion. These powerful energies can then be put to the joyful task of making broken things not just whole again but stronger and healthier than they originally were. A broken heart can lead to more sensitivity to the suffering of others and to greater open heartedness, thus transforming wounds into wisdom.”¹⁰⁴

I had been sick for over two years when I was finally diagnosed with a debilitating autoimmune illness that attacks the lungs, called sarcoidosis. The next year when I had a reoccurrence of breast cancer, people told me it would make me a better chaplain. I was skeptical. After all, I had experienced breast cancer already and did not feel I had anything to gain from another round of that nightmare. This time the therapy was even more difficult, and I maintained a fulltime school schedule through the whole ordeal. I also started a healing meditation group for people with cancer and chronic illness. Looking back over this experience, I do believe I am changed after all in ways that may take years for me to understand.

Accepting that I am a disabled person even without having the cancer has been difficult. In that acceptance, I believe I have deeper compassion for the disabled people in my care. I know the people in the meditation groups that I lead appreciate that I am in it with them. I have to deal with the same concerns they have. I am in pain, take medicine, feel exhausted, and so forth. I do not get to go home and forget about them and their struggles until the next week. Because of my

¹⁰³ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is*, 116.

¹⁰⁴ ¹⁰⁴ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is...*, xxi.

own situation, I am in empathy with them all the time, and they are encouraged by the way I manage my situation.

Last week, I taught my cancer group tonglen practice. At the end of the session, one woman related this story. There is a fire station at the end of her block. Recently when she heard the fire siren, she stopped for a minute and thought about the people that were likely being affected by the incident. She said it was the first time she ever thought about them.

Jamgön Kongtrül’s book on lojong encourages the bodhisattva to see sickness and adverse conditions as spiritual friends. “By using adverse conditions, you can gather accumulations, clear away obscurations, be reminded of dharma, and derive benefit from your understanding....When everything you don’t want or don’t wish for descends on you, in being an aid to destroying ego-clinging it is in fact, your first wish, your first concern. Let your mind rest happily, at ease...”¹⁰⁵

In *The Grace in Dying*, Kathleen Dowling Singh beautifully talks about the transformation or transcendence that happens in the process of nearing death which she calls the “near-death” experience. She says,

There appears to be a universal, sequential progression into deeper, subtler, and more enveloping dimensions of awareness, identity, and being as we begin to die—a movement from the periphery into the Center. Further, I realized that the transformation I was observing in people who were nearing death was the same psychoalchemy—in a greatly accelerated mode—that I had noticed in myself through two and a half decades of practicing contemplative disciplines and in the people with whom I had worked as a psychospiritual counselor.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Jamgön Kongtrül, 48-50.

¹⁰⁶ Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Dying* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 14.

Singh goes on to make the point that human consciousness unfolds in three stages: from pre-rational where we are still undifferentiated from the Ground of Our Being (God, Source), our true Home; to a differentiated ego; and lastly to a transpersonal being reintegrated with the Ground of Our Being—back Home again.¹⁰⁷ We must all go through these stages, and if we do not complete the third stage before we arrive at our near-death experience, we will be accelerated through it at that time.

In the first stage, we gradually separate from the Ground after birth through our early years. We experience three dualisms Singh describes that leads us from being undifferentiated to being identified completely with our mental egoic selves. In the First Dualism we distinguish between subject and object, self and not-self. She refers to Ken Wilbur's writing,

Of all the boundaries man constructs, the one between self and not-self is the most fundamental. It is the boundary we are the most reluctant to surrender. It was, after all, the first boundary we ever drew. It is our most cherished boundary. We have invested years to fortify it and defend it, make it secure and safe. It is the very boundary that established our sense of being a separate self. And as we grow old, full of years and memories, and begin to slip into . . . death, this is the last boundary we relinquish. The boundary between self and not-self is the first one we draw and the last one we erase. Of all the boundaries we construct, this is the primary boundary.¹⁰⁸

Singh says the Second Dualism is time consciousness, an awareness of being and non-being and this sets the stage for the fear of death. The Third Dualism is the separation between the self and the body. We begin to move away from what Sri Aurobindo refers to as “our troublesome, involuntary, and ultimately finite body.”¹⁰⁹ By the time we are eight years old we have experienced ourselves as something separate and apart, cut off from our Source.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 24-25.

¹⁰⁸ Ken Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1993), 294.

¹⁰⁹ Singh, 35.

We perceive of ourselves as a mind inside of the body. This mind develops by a constant stream of internal dialogue. Singh says, “Quite simply, the mental ego talks to itself in an effort to establish a sense of being. The inner dialogue of the mental ego is a way of assuring itself of its existence as the subject of consciousness.”¹¹⁰ This differentiation into a separate egoic self is an essential part of our human development and serves us in the first half of life. Over time we forget that we have created our separation, and we become increasingly alienated inside our construct. It does not allow for our complete growth or the natural development of human consciousness into transpersonal consciousness. Often in our culture, we get stuck here.

Thomas Keating says we become invested in our emotional programs for happiness and over-identified with our group whether it is our family, society, culture, or any other group we belong to. The emotional programs for happiness developed during the first stage of development and started out as needs and eventually solidified into “shoulds.” These were our instinctual needs for survival and security, affection and esteem, and power and control. These emotional programs were developed with a child’s consciousness but remain with us as we move through our adult lives. He says, “The nature of the emotional programs is to want to get more and more out of life, bigger and better pleasures, and more and more power over as many people as we can dominate, including God if we can get away with it.”¹¹¹

Our stuckness may eventually lead us to a mid-life crisis. If not, then aging starts to take away the things we identify with such as our jobs, our family members, and our friends.¹¹² Often what moves us on to the next level of consciousness is a diagnosis of a terminal illness. Thomas Merton reminds us that “Death reveals in us that eventually tomorrow is today and that we have

¹¹⁰ Singh, 39.

¹¹¹ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1999), 9.

¹¹² Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), 88-93.

run out of time.”¹¹³ Instead of waiting for time to run out, we can move our own consciousness forward. In his essay, “Standing on Holy Ground,” David Steindl-Rast writes, “In the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is a passage that says we should always be on guard, living in a state of continual suspense with death always before our eyes. Awareness of death is a key point...the remembrance of death is what can make us more and more alive.”¹¹⁴ Instead of waiting for death to catch up with us, we bring it to our conscious awareness. In life we may discover that an alternative to the transformation of the dying process is the transformation of contemplative practice.

In the third stage we are drawn through successive levels of consciousness to re-union with our source. Singh calls this movement into the transpersonal realms the Path of Return, the movement into transcendent dimensions that is our birthright.¹¹⁵ I have the sense that people that are called to spiritual practice especially contemplative practice in some way did not completely forget where they came from and experience a longing to return there. Ken Wilber suggests, “The movement of descent and discovery begins at the moment you consciously become dissatisfied with life....A person who is beginning to sense the suffering of life is, at the same time, beginning to ‘awaken’ to deeper realities, true realities.”¹¹⁶ Singh writes

The near-death experience can be delineated as follows: “At some point during the dying process (its relation in time to EEG cessation or any other metabolic measurement of death is presently unknown), *the sense of subjective consciousness leave the body, but it remains identified with the animating spirit that was housed in the body as a continuation of the same self.*” Parameters of a “core experience” have emerged, although there are countless

¹¹³ James Finley, *Merton's Place of Nowhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978), 36.

¹¹⁴ David Steindl-Rast, “Standing on Holy Ground,” *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists in Dialogue*, ed. Susan Szpakowski (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2005), 24.

¹¹⁵ Singh, 66.

¹¹⁶ Ken Wilber, *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 85.

individual variations. Although the depth and clarity of the near-death experience (which incidentally relate to its transformative power and effect in the life following recovery) vary... These descriptions are clear indications of transpersonal states. It is obvious that primal repression however temporarily, has been usurped by the power of the Ground of Being. The self often in the fragile structure of the mental ego, has been catapulted into energy far beyond the level with which it is familiar. ... Adding weight to the argument that these are transpersonal and therefore transformative, experiences (and consequently not “reducible” to physiological “effects”) are the profound metamorphoses in consciousness manifested in many upon return to daily life.... The qualities of grace, qualities flowing naturally from subtle, more inclusive levels of consciousness, that these survivors begin to manifest include *feelings of selflessness and generativity, a sense of peace, love of both ones' self and others, and a deep shift toward altruism.* [Italics added.]¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Singh, 251-254.

DYING

*You are going to die; and when you do, you will take nothing with you but your state of mind.*¹¹⁸

—HIS HOLINESS THE
SIXTEENTHKARMAPA

A student once asked a teacher, “What is the most remarkable thing?” The teacher answered that the most remarkable thing is that even though people are dying all around them, people still believe they are not going to die. Throughout writing this paper and particularly in the last two weeks, I keep coming back to the question, “Why have I chosen death as a teacher?”

If one has prepared properly during life, then one is prepared for death. As practitioners, we accept death as part of life and are not afraid of coming to the end of this cycle. If we have attained full enlightenment (liberation) during our lifetime, then when we come to the end of the lifespan of our physical body, we move joyously from one body to the next. We recognize that the body is empty and therefore there is nothing to die. We move our focus from our own situation to our commitment to be of benefit to all sentient beings. Some of the teachings suggest using tonglen practice to accomplish this. We can recognize that we are not the only one who is dying, or who will die.

When my mother was in the hospital sharing a room with a woman dying of cancer, she was very kind to this woman and her family. Even though my mother was very sick at the time, she maintained a calm and kind nature which they found beneficial. The family said she was an angel. In general, my mother maintained a pleasant and peaceful demeanor until her death. However, she was in a lot of pain and sometimes cried out for her mother. She did not have the benefit of a life of practice to sustain her. Had my mother been a Buddhist practitioner, she might have suffered even

¹¹⁸Chödrön, “The Wisdom,” 43

less during her long illness and pending death. She could have practiced tonglen for herself, her roommate, and all the beings in the world that were likewise suffering at that time. This practice takes the focus off us and our situation and brings it back to the aspiration to be of benefit for all sentient beings.

In the lojong teachings associated with the pāramitā of exertion, the second slogan is for the dying. It says, “The Mahāyāna instruction for ejection of consciousness at death is the five strengths: how you conduct yourself is important.”¹¹⁹ (see page 27). In *Training the Mind*, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche says that death is a continuation of our practice.¹²⁰ Since we were born, we naturally will die. We can use this opportunity to relate to our practice.

When we practice, we must have the determination to focus on two-fold bodhicitta. We use our mindfulness and awareness to stay with the two-fold bodhicitta that we have practiced for so long. The seed of virtue is to be willing to give away our attachment to all of our possessions, including the body. We do not want to cling to anything of this life as we pass into death. In dying as in living, we reproach the ego and remember that it is the cause of all of our problems. We let it know that we know that nothing dies since the body is empty. Lastly our aspiration is to attain full enlightenment if we have not done so already. The focus here is on maintaining steadiness of mind up until and through the moment of death. If at all possible, we should practice the Seven-Branch Prayer (See Appendix A).

If it is not possible to perform the “Seven Branch Prayer” or shorter prayers that are prescribed, then focus on the breath and rest your mind in nature of ultimate bodhicitta until you die. According to Chögyam Trungpa, this is the ultimate instruction on death.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Trungpa, “Training,” 75.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

My first meditation teacher was Eknath Easwaran. When my husband Michael was dying, Easwaran's teachings were my life raft. Easwaran always said that his body was like his brown Nehru jacket. He took good care of it and when the time came, he would take it off as easily as he took off his jacket. His own death was an inspiration to his students. He maintained consciousness until the moment of death. I am certain that he died repeating his *mantra*¹²² just as Gandhi did when he was shot. As Hindus, they both believed that if they died repeating their mantras, they would attain enlightenment. They had maintained this mantra practice for most of their lives. At the moment of death, they did not have to think about it at all. The mantra naturally came to mind. This is why it is so important to maintain our practice throughout our lives. When we are dying and cannot stay focused on the breath, if we are familiar with mantra practice, we can use it to keep our mind stable and calm.

In the Zen teachings, Philip Kapleau's instructions are to read and reflect on the Heart Sūtra daily. He says if you can, repeat the last four lines which are the mantra "Gate, gate/paragate/parasamegate/bodhi, sva'ha!" "over and over as you cross the threshold of 'death'" Thus you will take the sūtra with you into the intermediate state of consciousness.¹²³ If you have been reading the Heart Sūtra everyday, it will be natural for you to do this practice.

What I have learned from my question about death as a teacher is that *the most important thing we can do for ourselves is to adhere a daily practice so it will be there for us when we are dying*. Ultimately at the moment of death, having faithfully practiced meditation, lojong, tonglen and other practices on a regular basis will ensure the steadiness of mind to be present with our own deaths and the moving to our next life.

¹²² A mantra is a short phrase or prayer usually repeated over and over again. In the Hindu tradition, they most often contain one of the names of God. Buddhist practitioners also recite mantras. The most famous Buddhist mantra which is associated with the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is Om Mani Padme Hum.

¹²³ *The Wheel of Death: A Collection of Writings from Zen Buddhist and Other Sources on Death – Rebirth – Dying*, ed. By Philip Kapleau (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1971)

When I spoke at my father's funeral, I said, "I read somewhere that when it comes time to die, no one ever said they wished they had worked more or bought more toys. They regretted most not loving more. My father loved and was loved. I believe he died with no regrets." My prayer is that when it comes my time to die, because I am walking the bodhisattva chaplain path focused on love in the form of two-fold bodhicitta, my practice, and engagement with the suffering of the world, I will die with no regrets.

Dedicating Our Death

From the Tibetan Book of the Dead

*O son/daughter of an enlightened family, what is called "death" has now arrived, so adopt this attitude: "I have arrived at the time of death, so now, by means of this death, I will adopt only the attitude of the enlightened state of mind, loving kindness and compassion, and attain perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings who are limitless as space . . ."*¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Sogyal Rinpoche, "Tibetan," 219.

Dedication of Merit

May whatever merit I have attained from writing this paper,
be for the benefit of all beings throughout all time and space.

By this merit, may all attain omniscience.
May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing,
From the stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death
From the ocean of , may I free all beings.

By the confidence of the golden sun of the great east,
May the lotus garden of the Rigden's wisdom bloom.
May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled.
May all beings enjoy profound, brilliant glory.

APPENDIX A

The Seven Branch Prayer¹

With complete faith I prostrate
 To Buddha Sakyamuni
 To all the victorious ones and their children
 Who abide in the ten directions and the three times.

I offer flower, incense, light,
 Perfume, food, music, and many other things,
 Both in substance and with my imagination.
 I ask the noble assemblage to accept them.

I confess all evil actions that I have done
 Influenced by the defilements
 From time without beginning until now:
 The five² that ripen immediately,
 The ten non-virtuous acts,³

I rejoice in the merit of whatever virtue
 Shravakas⁴ pratyekabuddhas⁵
 Bodhisattvas and ordinary people
 Gather throughout the three times.

I pray for the wheel of the dharma to be turned,
 The teachings of the Mahayana and Hinayana,
 In ways suitable for the different aptitudes
 And motivations present in beings.

I ask the buddhas not to pass into nirvana,
 But, with great compassion and
 Until is completely empty,
 To look after all beings
 Who drown in this ocean of sorrow.

May whatever merit I have accumulated
 Become a seed for the awakening of all beings.
 Without delay, may I become
 A splendid leader for all beings.

¹ Bokar Rinpoche, *Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism* (San Francisco: ClearPoint Press, 1993), Appendix 1.

² They are: killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhat, making a Buddha bleed with a harmful intention, and creating a schism in the sangha.

³ Killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, dividing talk, harsh words, gossip, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong views.

⁴ Hearers or listeners. They are the practitioners of the first turning of the wheel of the dharma.

⁵ Solitary awakened beings.

APPENDIX B

THE TEN TRANSCENDENTAL VIRTUES OF THE BODHISATTVA

Milarepa

*Perfectly give up belief in any true existence,
 There is no other generosity than this.
 Perfectly give up guile and deceit,
 There is no other discipline.
 Perfectly transcend all fear of the true meaning of emptiness,
 There is no other patience.
 Perfectly remain inseparable from practice,
 There is no other diligence.
 Perfectly stay in the natural flow,
 There is no other concentration.
 Perfectly realize the natural state,
 There is no other wisdom.
 Perfectly praise Dharma in everything you do,
 There is no other skillful means.
 Perfectly conquer the four demons (death, illness, defiling obscurations, prideful arrogance and sensuality),
 There is no other strength.
 Perfectly accomplish the twofold goal (liberation of both self and other),
 There is no further aspiration.
 Recognize the very source of negative emotions,
 There is no other primal wisdom.⁶*

⁶ Lama Surya Das, *Buddha Is As ...*, 261.

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