

# Essays on Buddhist Prayer

Volume One

By Jason Espada

## Introduction

The following is an introduction to the essays I have written on Buddhist Prayer (Volume One), to articles on the subject by various teachers (*Volume Two*), and to the 15 volumes in this collection titled *An Ocean of Prayers*.

November 17th, 2023

At this moment in time, I will begin again.

I am sitting in the library that is across the street from my home, listening to quiet music as the struggling, suffering world goes on outside. From a safe distance, I can think clearly, and try to express what I've had in me for some time now to say.

I usually feel like I am in the middle somewhere with any project I leave off and pick up again, but here the sense of it is especially acute. I know that I have only gathered together over the years the wisdom and inspiration of those who know much more than I do, and a few comments I've written down. *Where does this begin?* and *Where does this lead to?* - are more philosophical questions than I'm interested in now, as I hope will become clear.

I am more interested in how prayer works, and what can be accomplished with it

Of course, this implies a belief system to even begin, or to sustain prayer, and this is where it gets really interesting and practical for me. If a world view is there, then much happens naturally in terms of prayer, and meditation, and caring for ourselves and others and our world.

As I have tried to describe elsewhere, so much turns on the world view that we have. One small collection of essays I was able to complete recently has the title, *Opening the Door to Pure Perception*, since this makes a great

difference, as far as what we feel we have to work with - the resources we can reach and make use of in our lives, and in the lives we care for.

The common, mundane view of our lives here has far fewer means. I have attempted then to describe the ways a person can open up to a fuller understanding of spiritual truths here.

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Much has been written about prayer, but most of it, of course, is from a theistic point of view. I would have little to add to that, but the field of non theistic prayer is wide open. Not much has been said about it, which surprises me, but when I look at the life of prayer in general, and Buddhist prayer in particular, I catch a glimpse of what I can at least try to offer.

This didn't begin here of course, and it will not end with however much we may be able to study, and reflect, and pray in our lives. It will continue, in mysterious ways, vivifying, revealing, always onward leading....

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There is much to be said, and one person can only do so much, I know. I was heartened to continue though this when I heard earlier today -

*It is not your obligation to complete the task,  
but neither are you permitted to desist from it...*

In response to the needs of our world then,  
and with great hope and faith,  
I send this forth,  
as prayer

## An Ocean of Prayers - Contents

### Essays on Buddhist Prayer - I. By Jason Espada; II. By Various Teachers

1. Selected Dedication Prayers
2. Dedication Prayers from Various Teachers {Audio}
3. Extensive Dedication Prayers from A Healing Buddha Practice
4. Prayers for the time of transition
5. A Set of Reflections and Prayers
6. A Collection of Prayers by Thang Tong Gyalpo
7. A Collection of Dedication Prayers by Lama Zopa Rinpoche
8. Paritta Recitation - A Selection of Texts {Audio}
9. Mahayana Prayers and Poetry {2012} {Audio}
10. In Praise of Avalokiteshvara
11. A Collection of Prayers to Tara
12. An Exhortation to Resolve Upon Bodhi {Audio}
13. An Anthology of Buddhist Prayer {2008}
14. A Collection of Buddhist Methods for Healing {2020}
15. Metta and Readings on the Mahayana

Essays on Buddhist Prayer, **Volume One**, by J. Espada (49)

I. Introduction, and 15 essays

1. Tenets of pure perception

2. Why do we pray?

3. Every Letter of Every Word of Prayer

4. Knowing the Equality of Self and Others

5. An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism

6. From The Bodhisattva Vow

7. On The Potential Power of Vows

8. Mahayana Thought Training - An Ideal Practice for Our Times

9. Three Buddhist Paradigms

10. The Esoteric Aspect of Connecting With a Tradition

11. A few notes on Catholicism in its broadest sense

12. The Power of the Name

13. A Thousand Years of Miracles

14. The Blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

15. Self Power and Other Power

## II. From A Belief in the Miraculous and A Practice That Thrives in Difficulty (20)

16. Grace and Buddhism

17. From The Imperfect and the Beyond Perfect

18. Buddhism, Religion, and the Supernatural

19. Sacred outlook – Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture and American Buddhism

20. Westerners and Prayer

21. An Introduction to Buddhist Prayer

22. The Prayers of Contemplatives

23. Praise and Thanksgiving

24. From 'Lineage'

25. Blessings, Faith, and Devotion

26. Saints East and West

27. The Nature of An Awakened Person

28. Prayer as Buddha-Activity

29. Moving up the planes

30. The Power of the Word

31. The Resonance of the Saints
32. Ocean of Saints
33. An Introduction to the Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara
34. On Mysticism
35. Healing the World Soul

### III.

#### Creative writing (5)

36. Imagine an underwater system of channels
37. Lineage;
38. Prayer
39. The Ocean
40. This is the way light moves

#### Essays, continued (9)

41. The Blessings of Paritta
42. Tantric Refuge
43. Fierce Compassion

44. Introduction to the Commentaries on the Metta Sutta and the Prayer of Saint Francis

45. See How Far Devotion Will Take You

46. Untying the Knot of the Ego

47. On Wisdom and Compassion Together

48. From The Inseparability of the Two Truths

49. On Dedication Prayer



Why do we pray?

For those with an affinity with prayer,

We pray because we have to.

We pray out of necessity, seeing the suffering and confusion in the world;

We pray because of the love and compassion that is in us

We pray because we have faith that prayer works, in ways beyond our understanding

We pray because prayer is the activity of the spirit in us

This is a privilege - the past, the present, and the future call us to this

We pray because we are connected to each other, and to this world, even if we don't always know it, or feel it, this is true

We pray because the inner life and the outer world are inseparably connected - and we believe that what we think and feel and say and do matters in each others lives.

We pray because we believe that prayer matters, because we feel it is essential, 'the one needful thing' in our lives.

We pray because it helps us to remember what is important in this life, and what is not, and, it is the expression of this heart-knowledge

We pray to give thanks to our family and friends, to our parents and teachers,

and to bring light, to heal, to share all the good we have found;

We pray to correct what's gotten out of balance, to help others, our family, and others as far as we can

Who prays?

Sometimes, it is the ego, and sometimes it is our true nature.

Often these are mixed together, and there is a dawning that can happen, a revelation within, where prayer changes for us.

Prayer then comes from a place that is altogether beyond the ego, as the expression of who we are, in truth.

## Every Letter of Every Word of Prayer

I had an experience a little more than two ago that set me on a journey to understand the nature of prayer more deeply. I was in the process of gathering as many teachings as I could on the subject, when I came across one modern American Zen teacher who said simply that, while Buddhists here pray, they don't give much attention to how it works, and that on the whole, 'such matters have remained peripheral' .

I could see right away that this is true, but what moved me was the feeling that something vital is missing when we don't understand this practice, and how it relates to our living. The thought came to me vividly, that we need a world view that supports prayer, if it is to be as effective as it can be.

Around the same time as I was reading this, I was also studying the teachings of a Jewish mystic named the Baal Shem Tov, who said that,

*Every letter of every word of prayer is filled with worlds, and souls, and divinity...*

- and it has been within the polarity of these views on prayer that I have been conducting my study, contemplation, and writing. I asked myself, and all the teachers I could find, *How can we realize prayer as something essential?*

I have been feeling for some time that the Western world view in general is materialistic, and lacking any sense of the sacred. As a result, we don't pray, or meditate, or care for ourselves and each other and this precious earth.

But there was more implied in the casual comment from that we really don't think too much about prayer. It indicates a devaluing of language in general, and prayer in particular. So when I found this quote from the Baal Shem Tov, it set the contrast between views in bold relief.

Studying his teachings on prayer, he speaks then of how we can know what is contained especially within the sacred language of prayer. He said,

*Every letter of every word contains worlds, and souls, and divinity,*

and,

*For all the words of prayer to have the maximum effect as sanctuary and means of transformation, we need to enter into them...*

*While your inner eye is gazing at these letters, your mind and heart should be directed towards their meaning...*

I note here that if it had only said that 'every letter contained worlds, and souls' we could easily accept this, theoretically without it being much of a challenge, but when he adds, 'and divinity', it calls for our full attention. For what does divinity imply? It means that there are blessings in this world, guidance, strength and peace of another order than is usually known.

We can define it in any way that appeals to us, but the truth of it remains - that we are in a different world when divinity is known. It becomes a priority. Everything changes for a person.

And this is what I have been responding to across the years - the mundane view that is tragically common here, and that needs to be addressed and overcome to create the world that we all long to see. We undervalue ourselves and each other, and from this comes all the greed, all the violence, all the discrimination and despair.

Buddhism and other world religions at their best aim in the direction of of remedying mundane views, I do believe, and when they do not accomplish this, they have fallen short. They have failed to communicate to people what is essential, and inspire people.

Western Buddhism in the United States is very much a product of so called 'enlightenment' thinking, materialism, and the very limited views of

psychology. This could be changing, but it is the starting point of a lot of what we find in the Zen and Theravada centers here. It is a mundane view that is being perpetuated, with few exceptions.

We say that Buddhists are often in recovery from Western religions, and so we reject a spiritual world view, and language that reminds us of those teachings, but it's our loss when deeper universal truths are excluded.

I have used this one line then to remind myself to go slowly when praying or reading the Dharma, to appreciate the hidden power of language, and traditions, great beings, and prayer. When I bring to mind that *every letter of every word of prayer...* I want to give this sacred activity all the time and attention it deserves. I want to be able to learn from those who know more than me what this life is for, and especially those Noble Ones who are our guides.

For example, there is a preliminary prayer in the Karma Kagyud Tradition for taking refuge in the Three Jewels and the Three Roots, that says:

*I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;*

*I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;*

*I take refuge in all the Buddhas, and Arhats,  
those who have completely conquered and gone beyond;*

*I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;*

*I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;*

*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,*

*who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*<sup>1</sup>

- and when I go slowly and pause for a time after just the first line, it can open up for me.

With faith and devotion, I think of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Thich Nhat Hanh, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, Atisha, Je Tsong Khapa, the Sixteenth Karmapa, Longchenpa, and teachers from the Thai Forest Tradition. I bring to mind all their incredible, *glorious, holy* qualities, having themselves realized the teachings, and I think about and can feel what it means to take refuge. There is the feeling of safety and protection, and of guidance and inspiration.

It's possible to meditate for a good amount of time on this, and receive the benefit of this prayer, far more than if I skimmed over it on the way to something else. There is the precious opportunity to find depth and meaning when we pray.

*Every letter of every word of prayer contains worlds, and souls, and divinity...*

It is my hope that we all receive the full measure of the sacred energy found within teachings, prayers, ritual, and spiritual arts, just as our teachers intended. Our world speaks in thousands of ways to the need for this every day.

Buddhism at its best is non-dogmatic, and it has said from the very earliest times, *ehi passiko* - that we should *come and see* for ourselves. It is an *invitation*, and I believe that anyone who searches with all humility and persistence will find the deeper truth of our being here together. This has been the testimony of sages across traditions:

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<sup>1</sup> See the essays *The Profound Practice of Taking Refuge*, and *Tantric Refuge* for an explanation of these terms.

That our world is a sacred place, and that we are upheld. We are each of noble ancestry, and we each have a place here. With all the gifts we have received, grace and blessings then, may we always care for each other and this earth in the best of ways.

*May the Great Healing Light of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,  
of all Holy Beings,  
and of all that is sacred and pure in the universe,  
pacify, completely pacify,  
and fully remove the sufferings of living beings,  
and bring them all true and lasting health and happiness*

## Knowing the Equality of Self and Others

There are two different kinds of equanimity taught in Buddhism. They differ in their causes, and in their results, as I will outline here.

The first kind of equanimity, as taught in the Theravada, is in the Four Immeasurables - of universal love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and a balance of mind that is unshaken by whatever it meets.

A verse that is often referred to at this point is

*All are owners of their karma,  
heirs to their karma;  
they abide supported by their karma,  
and whether they experience happiness or suffering  
depends on their their own actions...*

Out of love and compassion, we can certainly aim to uplift, care for, and share our knowledge of the Way with others, but no one can do the work for another, as hard as this may be to accept at times.

If someone could do the work completely for others, after all, it would only have taken one wise and compassionate person in history, like the Buddha or Jesus, and all our problems would have been solved, but this is not the case. The way that enlightened beings help us is to give us teachings, and all the encouragement and inspiration we need. Ultimately then, it's up to the individual. *Practicing correctly is your own responsibility*, as they say.

To clarify, Ajahn Pasanno said

*True equanimity does not hinder compassion or action, but rather enhances it by developing the discernment that knows how and when to engage.*



A certain equanimity comes from knowing this. It is a wise and balanced state of mind, a real accomplishment of understanding how practice works.

It's taught that, following mindfulness, investigation, energy, enthusiastic joy, peace, and concentration,

*Equanimity is the culminating point of the Factors of Enlightenment.*

One is non-reactive, or unshaken by whatever arises, and there is acceptance and clarity, going forward.

The way that equanimity is taught in Tibetan Buddhism is a bit more of a challenge to explain, but this is necessary if we are going to understand and practice the teachings as they have come down to us from this Tradition.

Although there is peace, and a steadiness of mind that we generally call 'equanimity', here it has different causes, and very different applications, going forward.

*Equanimity in the Tibetan Tradition means seeing the equality of self and others.* It comes from reflecting deeply on the ways we are essentially the same. This can be quite challenging, because, what do we see being emphasized all around us, especially these days? It is our differences, and discrimination based on race and class, gender, and sexual orientation; it is our differences in nationality, religious or political beliefs, being rich or poor, or having more or less of an education. When this is almost all that we see and hear about, we feel separate from each other, without any sense of our common interests, or responsibility for one another.

So what *do* we have in common? All of us without exception want to be free from suffering, and to find lasting happiness. We all have the right to this, and according to Buddhism, we all have this potential.

In addition, what so many people do with the aim of finding happiness, such as using drugs or living a hedonistic lifestyle, in fact leads to only more suffering and confusion.

As Shantideva said:

*Although wishing to be rid of misery,  
They run towards misery itself.  
Although wishing to have happiness,  
Like an enemy they ignorantly destroy it*

Isn't this so? Just look around...

When we see the equality of self and all others, the way we view our own life changes, and the scope of our practice broadens *immeasurably*. We know how we would want to be treated, and how we would want our beloved family to be treated. In the teachings they call this 'the exchange of self for others', something we're universally familiar with. It's there in every religion and code of ethics.

Seeing the equality of self and others, we feel a kinship with them. There is the feeling that -

*These are my very own family crossing rivers,  
crossing oceans on poor, overcrowded boats,  
they are crossing deserts, leaving everything they have ever known behind  
to escape hardship;*

*these are my family under bridges, with almost nothing  
and sleeping in parks, and on sidewalks...*

*They are infinitely precious to me...  
infinitely precious... infinitely precious...*

- and how far this is from the disconnect and callous indifference that is so common these days!

We waste millions on the military, and on superficial entertainments, while there are such needs here on our streets, and in other places.

Why is there so much inequality? Why is there hunger? Why is there so much poverty and lack, when these things really could be changed?

Where is our heart?

High and low, young and old, rich and poor, educated, uneducated, male and female, people of all races and nationalities everywhere- we are all companions here. This naturally leads to wanting others to be free from all dangers and difficulties, and to enjoy every happiness. It naturally leads to wanting to care for and support all others - known and unknown to us - in any way we can. We are all fundamentally equal.

It's said that a person who understands this deeply will react the same way to a person on one side showering them with praise, and someone on the other side hurling abuse. We can call this loving equanimity *an even tempered impartiality* towards people or situations. It is being without bias, or indifference.

As Buddhists, or people of any faith tradition, or simply as people who think and feel deeply, and have some insight into problems and their resolution, of course we then feel we have something precious to give others. Naturally, we want to share whatever has been most helpful to us in our own lives.

From the mind and heart that sees the equality of self and others arises the sense of responsibility to do what we can for them. How can we ever turn away from those who, just like ourselves, seek only happiness?

And when a person at last sees, or even just hears about a way out of the round of samsara, {this uncontrolled cycle through various realms with so much sorrow}, naturally we see ourselves and our practice in relation to others. What is then called *the Special Intention* in the Tibetan Tradition is an awakening of a clear and strong feeling of responsibility for others. Our motivation matures, as it would for someone with a family, aiming to provide for them, and we practice inclusively for self and others, without any separation.

As part of the Four Immeasurables, of universal love, compassion, and sympathetic joy, equanimity or impartiality here sees that,

*All are equal in deserving our respect, our love and our care*

and there is so much need.

The peace and stability here, that unshakable quality of mind, is also born of our dedication to caring for others in the best of ways.

*For as long as it takes,  
no matter what it costs,  
no matter how difficult it may be...*

Having universal love and compassion, giving equal love and care to every person and living being brings composure and inner strength. We are all in. We can call this a kind of equanimity, with these causes, and these results.

\* \* \*

Knowing the equality of self and others is a fundamental practice, and is the basis for much that follows in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition. Without it, the all inclusive Mahayana - Great Vehicle motivations and practices are not complete. This needs to be meditated upon deeply.

They say that before we can awaken the heart mind of bodhicitta - the mind intent on enlightenment for the sake of all, we need to have this realization. Without it, practice would be biased towards friends and helpful people, and neglectful towards those who either don't do anything for us personally, or who oppose us in some way.

I'm thinking now that, of course, this vital point of the equality of self and others should always be clear.

This is not talked about often enough these days, so I thought to write out these few thoughts on the subject.

*May I think of all beings with great love and compassion,  
and generate the supreme awakening mind  
May I think of them all as my family, and care for them all as my own*

*May all beings have happiness  
and the causes of happiness flourishing...*

*May all beings be completely free from suffering  
and the causes of suffering...*

*I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in this world,  
in all kindness, virtue, and positive action,  
and in all success, happiness, and good fortune...*

*and abide in impartial love and compassion...*

*May all beings everywhere,  
all precious ones,  
receive everything they need to become liberated  
from all problems and difficulties,  
and may each and every one of them enjoy lasting happiness,  
freedom and peace*

## An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism

*Mahayana* means 'the great way', that aims to benefit all people, and all forms of life. This word comes from one of the ways a person can practice Buddhism. The motivation for their meditation, prayers, ritual and mantra can be not just for their own sake, but for the sake of all their precious family, and *for the sake of all beings*.

### The heart of the Mahayana motivation

To make it plain, if we first look just at this quality of a path being *mahayana* alone - of it having this beautiful, loving, and all embracing, universal nature - we can see a Mahayana Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, or Indigenous spirituality. Every tradition then has methods we can use to accomplish our aims. A person who is living for others can even be without any tradition at all and, to my mind, still be a mahayanist. This is not the usual way of speaking, I know, but it can help us know the nature of a supremely life affirming path.

...

Sometimes we can get lost in the struggles of our own personal life, or our culture and times. We can become a prisoner of the moment. *The Great Way* - the mahayana motivation - then can help us to make our way through life's difficulties. It holds whatever is happening in a larger context. Little things don't bother us as much because we have a large view, one that is not just for ourselves alone, and we are also thinking for the long term.

The oh-so common 'eight worldly motivations' that people have- around material gain and loss, pain and pleasure, fame and obscurity, praise and criticism - don't move us any longer, and this comes as *a great relief*. Our lives become so much easier. As I hope we will all find out for ourselves,

the mahayana view also brings us maturity, and to genuine fulfillment as human beings.

### The history and resources of Mahayana Buddhism

Once we see this much of the universal motivation people can have, it helps to approach the history of Mahayana Buddhism. About 500 years after the Buddha's physical passing from this world, collections of teachings such as the Perfection of Wisdom, the Avatamsaka and Lotus Sutras were written down that described the practices and praised the great qualities of this path of universal benefit. Over the centuries, noble teachers such as Nagarjuna, Atisha, Asanga, Shantideva and others then taught methods to develop the loving, compassionate and liberating mahayana mind. Those of us who have a connection can draw from this extensive body of inspired teachings.

When we study Buddhism, we receive teachings on developing our inherent good qualities, and we also receive the blessings of our teachers and spiritual ancestors. Although it is not often talked about, there is an esoteric aspect to traditions as well. On the subtle planes, a tradition is a reservoir of blessing power, insight and inspiration built up over many generations. This sacred energy is a resource we can draw from. This is true of all the different Buddhist traditions and lineages. They each have unique and precious qualities we can know and benefit from. Every true religious tradition has produced also saints, and the influence of their realization surely outlasts their physical body. They are a blessing to this whole world, and especially to their lineage.

### The development of the awakened heart

The nature of the awakened heart, everywhere it is found, is to help others as much as possible. In it, two aspects are always present, those of loving compassion, and understanding. Compassion is vitally important here. *Without it, there will be no urgency to put an end to suffering.* If we have the

capacity to hold in our heart the awareness of what is difficult or tragic, even for a short while, then it can be a powerful force for good in our lives, in the lives of all those we love, and in our world.

The core of the Mahayana Buddhist motivation is called *bodhicitta*, the awakening mind. The view in this Tradition is that the best thing we can do for others is to help them to become free from all their suffering and its causes. To do this we need to awaken and liberate ourselves, then we can help others to reach that same state. Bodhicitta is called *the sole thought on everybody's side*.

A bodhisattva, literally an 'awakening being' is someone who is dedicated to the temporal and ultimate benefit of all beings, providing them with all they need and wish for. The bodhisattva vow is traditionally phrased as *May I become a Buddha in order to lead all others to that very same state*. This is the heart of the Mahayana. With this, they say, we 'enter the family of the Buddhas'. Its motivation is expressed in this way

*May I cause the pacification  
Of all sentient beings afflictions*

And in the poetic language of Shantideva

*As long as diseases afflict living beings,  
may I be the doctor, the medicine,  
and also the nurse who restores them to health*

*May I fall as rain to increase the harvests that must feed living beings  
and in times of dire famine,  
may I myself be food and drink*

*For as long as space exists,  
and for as long as living beings remain,  
may I too abide,*



*to dispel the misery of the world*

As one teacher said, *Strive to give the taste of bliss to others!*

The Chinese Mahayana Buddhist teachings speak of something they call 'vow power'. This is the deep motivation that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have to help others, guided by wisdom and compassion. This is also something that can become a very real force in our own life. It has the potential to open us up, and to help us awaken our inner resources, of great strength, patience, courage, clarity, peace and joy.

We should realize at this point, as Lama Yeshe said, that we don't have to have completed the path before we can begin to act. He taught us that we should just help others as much as we can, always working to deepen our wisdom, and the effectiveness of our work.

*Em Ah Ho! How wondrous!*

*May all beings benefit.*

*May we all learn about and awaken the motivation to be of universal benefit,  
find a path that suits us best,  
and then practice diligently to actualize all of our noble aims*

*May all beings everywhere be free from suffering and the causes of suffering*

*May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness flourishing*

## From The Bodhisattva Vow

There is a way of orienting ourselves to the world that many people over time have found to be greatly life-affirming. Based on universal love and compassion, and understanding the source of problems and their resolution, it is the intention to help others as much as possible by awakening and freeing ourselves from suffering, and then bringing all others to that same state. In traditional Buddhist language, this dedication to helping all others with both wisdom and compassion is called 'the Bodhisattva Vow'. Bodhisattva means, literally 'an awakening being'.

There are ceremonies for taking the Bodhisattva vow, but the true vow comes from our own heart. When we have this motivation, it is a breakthrough, no matter how many times it happens. It's the dawning of a new awareness. Finding the Bodhisattva vow in ourselves, re-affirming and strengthening that can give a person much courage and energy for their whole life. It clarifies everything, and helps us to have a feeling for our place in this world.

When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged -  
Mahayana Buddhism

The term 'Maha-yana' in Mahayana Buddhism means 'Great Vehicle', and this refers to the aim to work for the benefit of all. Being Buddhist in origin, the Bodhisattva vow includes *the thought of enlightenment*. In this and other religious traditions, the cause of our many problems is seen as ignorance, and the remedy is wisdom, or insight, which taken to its furthest point, is enlightenment. The vow is then taken to cultivate the highest wisdom, and to lead each and every one to that same state. *Quite the expression of love, compassion and understanding of what we all need!*

## Two Traditional Verses

In the Chan and Zen Traditions, the Mahayana motivation takes the form of the Four Great Vows:

*Beings are numberless, I vow to save them;  
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them;  
Dharma gates are limitless, I vow to enter them  
The Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it*

And in the Tibetan Tradition, a verse for taking refuge and generating the highest motivation, bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, is recited before many of their diverse practices:

*I take refuge, until I attain enlightenment,  
in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly  
By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,  
may I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.*

Here, the phrase, Generosity and other Virtues, refers to what are called the Six Perfections. These are the path of the Bodhisattva, as described in Tradition. They are Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, or Diligence, Meditation, and Wisdom.

This Vow is the vibrant central principle of the Mahayana Path.

Yes, but how much can one person really do for another?

It has been asked many times – how much can one person actually do for another? What is this about someone vowing to do something so significant for another, such as ‘carrying a person to the other shore’, and freeing them from suffering? While it is true that ultimately every person has to understand and to actualize the causes of health and happiness for himself or herself, there is so much that can be done for another. I only have

to think of what others have given me for this thought to become real to me.

We all need support and encouragement; freedom from fear and hunger; we all need to have medicine available, and enough warm clothes. Most of all, we need respect, love and clear teachings, in the form of good human examples, and in some language we can relate to. These are very great things, and the Bodhisattva vow is the intention to give all these things, all needful things, to all beings, our family.

### Skillful Means

Once we arrive at the Great Way – the Mahayana , with its strong central motivation to serve all beings, and to liberate all living beings, we will utilize every resource, we will do anything to communicate the Dharma, take any form to meet people's needs, to benefit them, to speak in a way they can understand, and lead them step by step to freedom. Because of the great sufferings and needs that are here, we *must* search until we find the methods that work for us, and that are effective in helping others.

In Buddhism, over generations, a diversity of forms have developed from this very motivation to benefit self and others. These are called *Upaya*, or Skillful Means. Out of compassion, teachers and translators are not attached to any one way of doing things, or saying things. Although the forms may change, as long as we keep to essential principles of wisdom and compassion, then it is Buddhist Dharma. Skillful means are just what are necessary to help and to reach people.

When I think of loneliness, death, suffering, and all that is unpredictable and tragic in this world; the inevitable separation from friends and loved ones, the cruelty and madness, all the absurdity and waste – all of it – this one factor is the only thing I can think of that makes life livable. This one great vow reveals the capacity we have to help each other. It reminds me that there have been in the past, and that there are now, people who are

working to help others, and that we can also take up this aim and this work. That, for me, is the glory of being alive. We can actually do something of real value with our lives.

This intention makes it possible to live with an awareness of all the amazing good and all the terrible things, and to live with resolve, commitment and joy. This is the only thing, really, that gives me the courage to face whatever life may bring. If fear is the feeling of not being capable, then right here is where resourcefulness, blazing true confidence, and solidity are found. This one aim, this one intention, tips the balance, in favor of life.

## On The Potential Power of Vows

A vow is a kind of commitment. It can become the strongest commitment you can make. *It can be something you feel with every fiber of your being.*

When they speak of *vow power* in Chinese Buddhism, this is what is meant. It is a sacred commitment that is immutable, fierce, indomitable. It overcomes everything, and nothing overcomes it.

When you make a vow, it's something you think about all day and all night. If you wake up in the middle of the night, it's there, and when you get up in the morning, if not the words of the vow, then the feeling of it is present.

*It's that powerful an intention.*

It projects forward from where we are now to where we want to go.

There are vows we can make for a set period of time, for example, for twenty four hours, a week, a month, or a year; and those that can last for our whole life, or for lifetimes, until we accomplish our aim.

*Even if the heavens fall,  
or the earth opens up,  
through conflagrations,  
and floods sweeping everything else away,  
vows endure, unchanged,  
pristine, illuminating the way forward*

If there is no intensity to your vows yet- then keep working.

How do we make our vows stronger, more enduring, unconquerable? It is through deep reflection, and coming to decisive conclusions about what matters most in our lives.

We distill the essence of medicine in the same way, slowly, in jars or in beakers, under a slow fire, carefully, diligently, with time, maybe weeks or months or years, until what we have remaining is concentrated, potent, life changing.

In vows, there is nothing superfluous. Nothing is in excess, and nothing is missing. They are as straightforward as we can make them, and for that reason they speak to us on a deep level.

They say that vows are the spark of compassion. *They come from knowing what is urgently needed in our life, and in the lives of the world.*

In Buddhist mythology, it's said that Avalokiteshvara, the archetype of compassion, is overcome by the immensity of suffering, and his head splits into pieces from the intensity of his emotion. Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, comes to comfort him, telling him he'll help him accomplish his compassionate aims, and puts him back together in his thousand-armed form. White and Green Tara spring from his tears, and vow to help him liberate beings ceaselessly.

All this comes from the strength of his emotion - from all of his sorrow, from all of his rage, from all of his grief, and principally from all of his insight, great love and determination.

What is the power that overcomes the world, with its individual and collective delusion, and the weight of its history behind it? What could possibly change our hearts and the course of our lives?

Shantideva wrote:

*Just as a flash of lightning on a dark, cloudy night  
For an instant brightly illuminates all,  
Likewise in this world, through the might of an awakened one,  
A wholesome thought rarely and briefly appears.*

*Hence virtue is perpetually weak-  
and delusion strong,  
And except for a Fully Awakening Mind  
By what other virtue will it be overcome?*

This is vow. It is most serious thing we can do in our life. It is also the most joyful, and brings the most energy.

When you love someone, it's natural to want to protect them, and if there is some danger, we do everything we can to overcome it. When there is love, this goes deep, and changes everything.

*May I clearly see that what I and all others need,  
{all of these infinitely precious ones}  
is ultimate liberation of mind, perfect peace and freedom,  
and that in taking care of myself, I am taking care of all of us  
With an understanding of the Noble Truths,  
may my love and compassion become the dedication to helping others through my  
realization of this path*

*For the sake of all who struggle and suffer,  
all those who have not yet reached the highest state of freedom, and peace,  
to relieve their suffering and to bring them happiness*

*I vow to accomplish each of the stages of liberation  
and enlightened understanding and activity,  
and help bring all others, without a single exception,  
to these very same states.*

A vow is then at once both a result, and a cause.

*Vows are really potent psychologically.*

- Venerable Robina



In this process of making powerful vows, as time goes on, and with experience, we become crystal clear that our aim is truly worthwhile. It is the most important thing in our life, and it is something we yearn for, and are determined with all our heart and soul and with all our strength to achieve.

The word 'vow' then is much stronger than to simply hope, or to have a wish, or an aim, or an aspiration, and here is the key:

*In order to make a vow powerful, we must invest it great energy.*

We have to have the utmost clarity, and then make our vows with true firmness and resolve. They can become like a diamond, like a vajra thunderbolt.

The Riverside Chan Meditation Group has said that: We must give our vows the full energy of our mind and heart. Never underestimate the importance and the force of a vow...

You must set your mind clearly on your path so that you will continually remember your intention, and provide it with force...

{This is like Don Genero, in the Teachings of Don Juan, crossing a precipice on the strength of one intention}

We must give our vows power so that they carry into the future...

And the Buddhist teacher Jung Hong Lu has said, Vows guide the life of a Buddhist practitioner; and,

Your life's direction is formed by your vows.

We can see how this is true.

## Mahayana Thought Training - An Ideal Practice for Our Times

### Turning Adverse Circumstances into the Path of Awakening

*I recently heard the Buddhist story of Devala the Dark, who was being cursed by seven Bramhans, 'but the more they cursed him, the more beautiful, good-looking, and inspiring he became...'*

This reminded me of the Tibetan Buddhist Thought Training practice, called *changing adverse circumstances into the path to enlightenment*. One analogy they use is that of *the Peacock in the Poison Grove*. They say this mythological bird eats poison, and his plumage becomes brighter, and even more beautiful. The more difficult things are, and the greater the need, the stronger these practices become. In some ways, this is the ideal practice for our times.

If we're not going to be overwhelmed by the news of worsening conditions, of the pandemic, of racial injustice, or environmental destruction, we're going to need a way of holding these difficult truths. Most of the time we can go just so far with reports of oppression, or corruption, or our destruction of the natural world before we shut down in one way or another, but there is another way to be with what is tragic, or suffering or oppressive that is found in these precious Tibetan Buddhist Thought Training teachings.

*The essential principle of Thought Training is to meet all the most difficult conditions, such as those we are living with now, and to use them as powerful motivation to respond skillfully. Through this alchemy, the awareness of suffering itself becomes the remedy to suffering.*

The Thought Training Teachings and practices are known as the expression of compassion, especially in difficult times. If we understand fully what is meant by compassion in Buddhism, then we can understand and effectively practice Thought Training.

From its inception, Buddhist teaching has always been about liberation from suffering. The central motivating principle then in Mahayana Buddhism is compassion, and the dedication to bringing every single being to freedom and ease. It's said that *When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged...*

Compassion as we usually think of it here in the West in these times often has this soft quality to it. It can also feel like sadness. True compassion though is powerful, illuminating, and inspiring. It is the most powerful force we can harness to endure, to bear witness, and to solve problems on deeper levels than ever before. Compassion leads us to seeking resolution, through insight, beyond the emotional reactions, and rising and falling of events. *In Buddhism, the understanding of how suffering can be brought to an end is essential.* Without such wisdom, problems are potentially endless. Compassion is then essential food for the journey. It brings light and health, peace and strength.

The Assalayana Sutta doesn't say what practice Devala was doing that caused him to become even more lovely and inspiring when attacked and insulted, but this is exactly the way that Thought Training works. The worse the conditions become, we can see, the more powerful this practice is. That is the secret of Thought Training. It becomes even more powerful in especially dangerous times such as the ones we are living through now, in 2021.

At the end of one commentary on The Seven Point Mind Training, called 'The Great Path of Awakening', there are a few additional verses that compare compassion in the most difficult times as being like a strong wind that makes a fire grow more and more. These very conditions can be a kind of fuel.

## A Tonlen - Taking and Sending Poem

*Again and again take to heart what others are going through  
and let it become who you are, and what you aim to do  
Uncover your hidden sources of strength, and ease,  
and then give yourself away, today,  
the clean breath, the warmth of love...*

With the way things are in our world right now, I imagine that if we could be strengthened by compassion it would be a very great thing. If we could change what would otherwise be oppressive conditions into a source of strength and courage and greater love and freedom, that would be wonderful, the best we could hope for, really. The more we take up these practices, the more everyone benefits.

## Whatever Practice We are Doing - Compassion Empowers All Virtuous Activity

There are so many practices in Buddhism, and in other Spiritual Traditions, and non-traditions. They all aim to improve our lives, and the lives of those around us. Whatever practices we are doing, of taking refuge, of prayer, or mantra, calm abiding, or insight, purification, and social engagement- all of these can be strengthened by having greater compassion. Compassion connects us with others and with our deeper resources. It awakens a wealth of qualities in our lives - such as courage, patience, and foresight, humility, endurance, and wisdom.

The Thought Training Teachings highlight this activity. They say that when challenged, it's *exactly* times like these that we can unfold our strength and hidden virtues.

With the extensive sufferings these days, of illness, poverty and economic insecurity, and given all the materialism, the immaturity, the endless distractions of consumer culture, all that is meaningless, there's a great

need now more than ever for conscious, dedicated, truly healthy and wise people. When conditions rise up as menacing enemies, we can become stronger, more clear and compassionate as a response, and we can take quiet joy each day in engaging and uplifting each other, and our world. This is the message of the Thought Training Teachings.

\* \* \*

For more on Thought Training, called 'lo-jong' in Tibetan, the following texts and their commentaries are recommended.

The Seven Point Mind Training - commentaries by Jamgon Kongtrul, Geshe Rabten, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, and others;

The Eight Verses of Thought Transformation, commentaries by the Dalai Lama, ([available online](#)), and Geshe Sonam Richen; and,

The Thirty Seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisattva, commentaries by the Dalai Lama, Dilgo Khyenste Rinpoche, and Geshe Gyalsten.

See also [The Empowerment of Compassion](#),

and,

[A Practice That Thrives in Difficulty](#) by this author, from Great Circle Publications, 2017.

## Three Buddhist Paradigms

### From Ordinary Perception to Right View

*To begin:*

*A view is the way we see ourselves, and each other, and this world we live in.*

*These are the maps we use; the way we orient ourselves;*

*Another word for this is our paradigm;*

*In every moment we have a view of some kind, even if we don't have language for it.  
It's the basis of all that we think and say and do;*

*A view can be less or more true;*

And,

*A view is something we start with, and it can be something we can have as an aim,  
as when we are developing and maintaining Right View.*

The way most people experience their lives and this world is one we that can call ordinary view, or mundane perception.

It has a few characteristics that are easily identifiable.

From a Buddhist point of view, it's said that,

We take as impermanent to be permanent;

We take what is suffering and the cause of suffering to be happiness;

and we see what is not a self at all, to be a self.

We can add that we take to be ordinary what is in truth extraordinary. We undervalue ourselves, and others, and this world.

Lama Zopa calls such relative truth of the common view,

*truth for the all obscuring mind -*

and the idea here is that our mundane view continually projects ideas onto reality that do not match what is here. Until we learn to see correctly, with a profound change in our consciousness, we will find ourselves perpetually in conflict, and unfulfilled.

Lama Zopa also taught on what he called

pervasive, compounding suffering -

a phrase I found to be very interesting. It means - in all places, at all times, and, increasing, like compounded interest increases, not only on the original amount owed, but then on the interest itself also. Ignorance, confusion and suffering are like this - they are always increasing, and are so difficult to get out of for that reason.

I would like to introduce here four views, or paradigms - the view of the ordinary person, also called mundane view, or impure perception, and then *three Buddhist paradigms*, those of Liberation, the Mahayana motivation, and Sacred Outlook, or Pure Perception. These correspond generally to what is taught in the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. There is overlap between these, ideally, or we can say, they are each inclusive of the others. This is just my own opinion, of course.

## I.

For someone without any training, or education, or insight, these are the general characteristics of what we can call

*the paradigm of samsaric view, or the samsaric mind:*

it is one that is ceaselessly wandering through the six realms {the hell, hungry ghost, animal dispositions, human, angelic and Divine realms} - sometimes up, sometimes down, without choice or control, and without knowledge of what is needed.

{It should be noted, they say in the Tibetan Tradition that most of our experiences throughout countless lifetimes are those of the three lower realms.}

The experience of an ordinary person can be compared to being in a room without doors or windows - to such a mind, there seems to be no way out. Moving through the experiences of the six realms of samsaric suffering and change is all that is known by ordinary view, or mundane perception.

There are however other views we should know about.

These Buddhist paradigms are presented one at a time, so that they are accessible.

## II.

The first one says that there is a way out of suffering.

This is what the Buddha taught from his very first talk, Turning the Wheel of the Dharma, and throughout the rest of his life.

*This is the paradigm of the knowledge of liberation,*



and such a view makes a great difference to someone who until that time has known only confusion, suffering and dissatisfaction, and seen only that in the lives of others, those he or she has cared for, strangers, and adversaries if there are any. Hearing this, and believing in this possibility leads naturally to the aspiration to be forever free.

### III.

Then, when joined to love and compassion for those we see around us, that view leads to the thought that *what we all need* is this freedom and ease, the health and safety, that the Buddha taught and that was then realized by his followers, and generations of followers and teachers, right up to the present day.

This thought brings with it great courage and power, and the willingness to do whatever we can to realize the teachings ourselves and to share the benefits of that with all.

We call this then

*the paradigm of the Mahayana view and motivation,*

and it opens the way to connecting with holy beings, guardians and protectors, to kindred spirits here on this earth, and to enlightened understanding and activity.

and,

### IV.

From there, and completely based upon the Mahayana view and motivation, and meditations

*the paradigm of sacred outlook, or pure perception*

becomes accessible.

This is the Vajrayana View, that is taught and the skillful means practiced in the Buddhist Tantras.

This is the way of seeing and being in the world is where we know and express our own divine nature, with the knowledge that we are living in a sacred world.

## Tenets of Pure Perception

Adapted from Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call 'impure perception', or 'ordinary perception', the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer. The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

*That all life is sacred;*

*That the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all*

*That our fundamental nature is pure*

*and therefore,*

*That we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness;  
we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others*

*That this world is sacred, alive and responsive, and that we are inseparably  
connected to it;*

*That we are always connected to each other, to our whole family*

*That there are other realms of existence*

*That there are past and future lives*

*That karma works, negative actions create suffering and positive actions create happiness, and bring light into the world*

*That the way we experience ourselves and each other and the world depends on our mind*

*That true mind sees things the way they are, and naturally has right values, and is healing*

*That the purpose of our lives here is to care for each other,*

*and,*

*Those who show us the best ways to do this are our venerable teachers*

*That there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen*

*That we are not alone in this world*

*That there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings that will respond and help*

*That we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible*

*That there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone*

*That vows are powerful*

*That prayer is effective*

*That ritual works*

*and,*

*That mantra works*

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living that is full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, are to know the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

*May we all be aware of our true heritage,  
and live lives of generosity,  
great joy, and fulfillment,  
of great peace, well being,  
and benefit to all!*

## The Esoteric Aspect of Connecting With a Tradition

From the outside, when we see a person connecting with a Tradition, it looks fairly straightforward, and self evident. We may see them going to church, or to a temple; on a retreat, or pilgrimage; we may find them joining a candle light procession, reading scriptures or sutras or inspired poetry in time set apart, or having a daily meditation practice. This much can be seen.

Within the experience itself however, there is a richness that is subtle, and tangible. This is less often talked about, and so I'd like to say something about it here.

If we are connected to a Tradition, there are blessings that can be known directly, and that are not visible to the outside world. We can feel an immediacy, of protection, of guidance, and encouragement; healing energy, and the presence of our spiritual ancestors and allies. We can feel a strength that is related to our Tradition, with its clarity and vision.

When we connect with a tradition, its unique power can be felt, as subtle nourishment, and as light. This is what attracts a person in the first place, and the memory of it is what brings them back, even if they have wandered far. Even if we do not understand it well, or fully, its power works in our lives.

A tradition can also be felt to be a great source of power that has gathered over time. It has been created by the devotion and love of generations, our spiritual family, and its sacred energy is ever available to us. Connecting with this is like opening a tap for pure water to flow.

There is a karmic element to such a connection, surely - there is an external aspect, the Venerable Tradition, and then there is our inner makeup, and when these two meet, if we have a personal affinity, experience easily opens

up. Owing to our different natures, this is not the same for everyone, but just thinking about this has got to bring respect for every individual's choice of a path, and celebration.

*May we all connect deeply with one or more traditions and their teachers in this lifetime, and receive their blessings into our lives in full.*

If we relate personally to only one teaching, or one teacher, or tradition, we may identify its wondrous benefit simply as the quality of warmth, and aliveness, and peace, and purity that we know. If we have had the experience however of moving between religions, and traditions, and lineages, and also connecting with them deeply, the unique qualities of each tradition becomes more readily apparent. This is a delight to know, and to think about, and to even try to speak of.

*It is actually this living quality that we find in our tradition that can be felt throughout our lives.* It is the energy of the realization that is within each word of its teaching, in its every insight, and gentle, compassionate encouragement. It is a blessing to us, and this is what we draw from to give, through the generations.

When we know the esoteric aspect of a tradition, we smile. We feel the immediacy of our great good fortune here, and naturally find ways to share this with all we meet, and with all the world.

A few notes on Catholicism in its broadest sense

Before the moment of inception for this study is too far removed, I thought it worthwhile to sketch a few thoughts that have converged, leading me to where I am now.

A couple of months ago, I was making my way through a rather dense Buddhist treatise, one I had been working up to and looking forward to, when I came to a point where I had to at least take a break from it all for a while. A deep wisdom teaching can be peculiar in a way. There's a place for what it says, but if it doesn't match where we are at some particular time in our life, there's not much effect, and I continue to suffer.

I know I have been looking for a complete vision, and the richness of a devotional element is essential.

I mentioned to my sister how Buddhism here in the West is more like psychology than religion, at least so far, and that I am in some ways more like the Catholics in their devotions, and their veneration of Saints, and their world view or cosmology that includes angels, and the help and support we can receive from subtle realms. I have written about a few of these things, from a Buddhist point of view as well as I could.

For a door to open, for anyone, whatever is in the way needs to be navigated successfully, and each tradition, from what I can tell, has their own unanswered questions. If we can accept these, the rest of the system opens up for us. It can be viable, at least for a time, to take the tradition on its own terms.

Buddhism, for example asks us to accept on faith such things as the workings of karma, past and future lives, and the nature of liberation and enlightenment. We accept these provisionally, and take up the practices to know truth directly.



For me, to approach a theistic tradition, and learn from it, I have to set aside the whole question of why a compassionate, all powerful God would allow suffering. I've never been satisfied, as others seem to be, with the answers tendered, and this has mostly stopped me from pursuing studies in the Christian Tradition, at least past a certain point.

Others can accept, and move forward, continuing to learn. I've seen how there can be different amounts of what is accepted on faith, to begin with. Some start with a world view, and base their spiritual practice on that. The danger there is that a view can be confining, and self reinforcing. If engaged skillfully, sincerely, and with good guidance though, a person can mature to the point where they can explain the descriptions based on their own insight.

Other people begin with what they can see and feel and work with, and allow their view to develop from experience. Perhaps at some point these two approaches can meet, one would hope.

I've found that I'm more a mystic, I think, than someone who identifies with any one tradition, even Buddhist ones. That this is almost impossible to explain has left me with relatively poor options, as far as communicating what is true for me, and essential, but it is the ground, still, that I can base my faith on, and continue to learn.

The teachers I've connected to most, I believe, are mystics too, in that they have taken their experience to a profound and universal level. Anything less and it feels restrictive, and self referential, instead of opening outwards, to greater life.

I am so thankful for these teachers, Thich Nhat Hanh, Lama Yeshe, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Ajahn Pasanno, and others. I don't know what to make of these connections with excellent teachers, other than to recognize that they provide something that no other relationships offer. Philosophies are fine, as far as they go, but these

realized teachers communicate much more by who they are than what they say or write. They are lights in the world, and breath and food and music to me.

\*I had an interesting experience recently, that opened a door again to Christian mysteries, and, following my intuition, this has led to some surprising and wonderful progress.

\*\*There is something Christian teachings call *an anointing* that is recognizable. There is a spiritual power that is palpable and known in comparison to our ordinary way of experiencing things.

The best we can do to talk at all about the presence of spiritual energy is to say what it *is like* - saying things such as it is *like* an electric current, or a fragrance, or like something awakening. By comparison, even a moment before, we were living an ordinary experience, and just then a new world appeared.

I have had this experience before with one other modern Christian evangelist who is on television, by the name of Joyce Meyers. A few years back, for some reason, at times I would come across her programs and she would usually be speaking to exactly what I was going through, with real depth and clarity and conviction and helpful insight. At first, we write these experiences off too easily, but then it become undeniable that there is some connection.

*An energy flows through certain teachers, and this is one of the gifts of the holy spirit, they say. It is tangible, a blessing power, a quickening at the right time for those with a connection.*

I had this same feeling again about a month ago meeting the Catholic teachings of a traditional nun named Mother Angelica.

I can see in her how anointing does not mean infallibility, and this has been broadly instructive. How often it happens that a person or group will get some revelation or strong energy of the spirit, understand it only so far, and build a whole school or philosophy up around it!

But I recognize there is something about her that is profound, and mysterious, and illuminating, opening the way for seekers. Of course, I realize there's a subjective side to it as well, but now here I am. I am astonished, and delighted.

I mentioned to my sister how she knows my connection to the Divine Feminine in Tara, and how devotion to Mary feels very similar. This is a way to access this broader Catholic tradition. It gets so personal at this point that it's not easy to say much more, only that this is fruitful, and joyful, and healing on many levels.

Which brings me to a review of what makes the most sense to me, and also what I need to somehow accept or to recognize directly and set aside so I can keep learning. (see my criticisms of the Church) I know that I look at Western Theistic traditions with a strong prejudice against them to begin with.

On the other side of the balance, undeniably for me, I am as surprised as anyone to say, given all I've said so far, there is the Divine Person of Jesus, and the blessings of Mary, and the transcendent, holy lives of the saints, which I do believe in, have faith in, and draw sustenance from, especially now.

There is something in the view of theistic traditions that I feel is much needed in our world, and that is *a personal, and vivifying sense of the sacred*. This is missing in almost all Buddhist teachings in the West, until we get to the Vajrayana, but even there it is remote for most. We are closer, at times, to speaking about these things through the language of western traditions, even if we are not members of any church or group.

It's this need, to be complete, that has led me here. Whew. We'll see what comes of it.

The traditions of prayer, and social engagement, having love for all others, and wanting to serve them in whatever way is needed then- these are common ground between traditions, and for that I am most grateful. In this way, these studies feel like a continuation, rather than beginning something entirely new and unfamiliar.

May we all receive everything we need to heal, to be whole, and to have joyful, creative lives. May we all live in harmony with each other, caring for one another in the best ways.

## The Power of the Name

Why is it that a name has deep meaning for one person, and not another? Why is it that hearing a word, or remembering an image can re-awaken strength and inspiration for some, but not for others? What is in the heart of these two different kinds of individuals is of a different nature, surely, and this is a fruitful subject to go into, for reasons I hope will soon become clear.

If you look up 'the power of the name' especially here in the West, the first references are mostly to the name of Jesus, which I will say something about in a bit, but first I want to explore this phenomena - that of *a word* or *a name* having power, as a universally recognized and applied truth.

We find this recognition in indigenous spirituality, where learning something's name requires deep respect and attention, and makes it possible to use call on that being as an ally;

The power of the name is also traditionally honored in Judaism and Islam, and is re-awakened through remembrance in Hinduism and Buddhism as well.

From the Hindu Tradition, we've received deities' mantra and dharani, that are *sacred words with the power to protect and redeem...*

And in the Theravada countries, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Burma, Protective Discourses, or *Paritta* are traditionally recited, including one called *The Banner Sutta*, that encourages the devotional recollection of the Buddha, saying,

*If you think of me,  
any fear, terror,  
or standing of hair on end that may arise in you will pass away...*

Consider how it is when a devout student brings his teacher to mind - tears may come to his or her eyes. *They are moved with gratitude* when they sense again all they have been given, and how much they have been helped, upheld, supported and encouraged.

Another person by comparison, especially the overly-intellectual, or the jaded materialist, tragically, would not know the gifts that are offered by our saints and the Holy Ones. Those who would decry this as 'magical thinking' are missing the point, and the benefit. For a time, their minds are closed.

The qualities that are there in a person when we see the power of the name at work are, universally: *reverence, humility, deep gratitude, and inner quiet, faith and devotion*. Without these, the name loses its deep significance, and it can stop working for a people. This is in spite of the fact that sacred words do have a certain power 'from their own side'. This only goes so far.

The Third Commandment in the Bible is usually translated into English as *Do not use the Lord's Name in vain*, and although I've heard this for decades, it never really occurred to me what this meant. Of course, we may relate it to cussing, but that's just our common, superficial reading. Take this precept apart however and its' great significance begins to reveal itself.

*To do something in vain* is to act, but not get any result from it. Take for example, *I went to the store looking for soda crackers, but my efforts were in vain*, or, like it says in the blues song, *All my love in vain...*

In each of these there was something hoped for, but not received in the end. What then could using the Lord's Name in vain mean, or *have promised*? Or, to put it another way, What was *not* received? I would say that *the meaning, or the power* of the name was not received.

With a callous mind, such as one that would use the Name of Jesus or the Divine or the Lord merely as a cuss word, what is absent is - the glory, or

*the life enhancing power* of that is manifested as that Name. Such a debased mind came first, and was expressed, and the great loss continued on. Such is the meaning of this precept 'Do not use the Lord's Name in vain' as I understand it now.

When we connect with a divine being, such as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, or Tara, and we do so with reverence, a power comes to us, and this is what we are uplifted and healed by. It is of another order altogether than what the mundane mind, or ordinary perception usually thinks possible, or even existing, but there it is.

The same happens I see now when people cherish the sacred Name of Jesus, or Mary, or a Saint. I know that truly these have the power to heal, and to uplift and illuminate a person's whole life.

Those qualities that enable the sacred to be known deserve to be spoken about, and unfolded in each of us, so that the fullness of life can be received and given:

*Reverence* contains humility and awe, and through it we are uplifted. We may feel this for our precious teachers, or for Divine Beings, such as Jesus and Kuan Yin, or the Buddha; we may feel this for our sacred earth, for one another, and and for our Noble Ancestors.

In each instance, feeling reverence for even a moment is enough to empower us and to guide our steps. We are not alone, despite what our ordinary mind tells us. We have not been left on our own, to struggle and to suffer here. The Ones we feel are our Companions in the spiritual life are *always* with us, as angels and ancestors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Saviors, and Great World Teachers.

*Humility* is often singled out, emphasized and encouraged in spiritual teachings across traditions for good reason, because arrogance or pride, even in very subtle forms, closes us off from divine support and deeper

nourishment - how much more so the blatant, closed minded egotism that is so common among materialists?

The great thing about humility though is how easily we may again open to deep truths, if we are not attached to our views, even for a short time. Many things can open a person, a loss, or personal suffering, a crisis in the family or in our world.

We may find again in a flash, and with thankfulness, that we are part of something far greater than ourselves in our striving. That divine help is always available, when we recall a name or recite a mantra, if we only knew it. We can awaken greater compassion, healing energy, wisdom and strength through mantra and through remembering the Sacred power of the Name.

Thinley Norbu said:

*Because sublime beings are miraculous, their histories do not fit within non-spiritual reality and ordinary, intellectual reasoning.*

Our usual way of thinking is so narrow, and it excludes so much that we need new language to speak of our experience when we open to the greater truths about our being here. We speak then of *mundane view* and *sacred outlook*, or *ordinary perception* and *pure perception*.

This is in the realm now of Right View, and where it leads, naturally.

At the end of many Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhist) practice texts, the last instruction we're given to meditate on and to carry out with us into the world are that 'this very world is the Pure Land' we've been visualizing, 'all forms truly are divine, and all sounds are sacred sound - mantra'. That we don't see ourselves and others and this world this way is precisely the reason for our regular sadhana practice. It opens our vision to the truth and the enduring qualities of our being here.



The third of these concluding instructions highlights the sacred nature of of the word, or speech, and of the Name.

This is something that's been for the most part lost in our times, and so the effect of our prayers and mantra, the Holy Names are used in vain, ie to little or no effect, but this can change. We can again re-awaken the sense of the sacred, through our reverence, humility, inner quiet, gratitude, faith and devotion.

A word should be said here also about the place of of *silence* in the spiritual life.

See how common it is for monasteries and ashrams to be places of solitude, free of common distractions and noise, and also free of so much unnecessary talk. This naturally leads inwards, and refines the mind in ways that are too seldom known or held up as something we can and should all have as part of our lives. Without quiet, we stay on the surface of things, and then even our words, and the Names we use lose much of their potency.

One needs only take some time off from talking and from this immersion in language that is our common lot it seems, to see directly what I'm talking about here.

I used to take one day a week off from talking, and everyone I knew was aware of this. More time off from speaking will show the effect of so having many words and concepts. For the most part, we live in an ocean of language, with all the effects that has. Silence then purifies and sensitizes us to the deep effects that language can have at its best, such as we find in poetry, prayer, and sacred texts, and such as we find in the teachings of Noble Ones. Inner quiet enables us to benefit from mantra and from the Sacred Names we connect with and use, and receive sustenance and inspiration and guidance from.

*Faith* can lead us then where the intellect alone cannot go. What we know in our heart, by faith, is far greater than conceptual understanding, useful as that is in its own domain. With faith, we trust in our Sources of guidance, and healing. We can rest in that, and there is Peace found there, for our whole lives.

The way we experience this is ultimately most personal, and yet we can communicate. Now, how extraordinary is that? Here, we know our unity. We are of one family.

The power of a Sacred Name, when we are awake to its significance and what it represents, can transform our sorrow and pain, our loneliness and despair. Faith and devotion follow and increase naturally, and by the spiritual potency of the Name, the Way is opened again to peace and fulfillment.

Now we may reasonably ask, are all Names equal? A dogmatic person of course would say no, and insist we use only the names they alone claim to have received and understood, but we can see all the disastrous effects over time that such ignorance has had. My guide here is: *By their fruit you will know them.*

When we see the results of virtue and harmony, healing and respect for elders and traditions, both our own and beyond our own, that is a True Name, one that leads to the realization of Universal Truth.

*May our faith in the Divine deepen  
and may that holy strength nourish and guide us all our days*

*May all beings everywhere awaken to the beauty of this world,  
our ancestry, and our precious children*

*May there be joy and the fullness of health everywhere and always*

## A Thousand Years of Miracles

For more than 2,000 years, people have been healed by calling on the name of Jesus;

crutches and wheelchairs left along the road, and at sites of worship;

For 2,000 years, the laying on of hands, casting out harmful spirits, restoring life;

and there have been countless interventions, visitations, apparitions, visions, in dreams and in contemplation,

of Jesus, Mary, the Saints, and Angels;

*Two thousand years of miracles, two thousand years, and still we don't believe!*

{see '[\*Frank Martin's miraculous journey to a new life\*](#)', that's on youtube, for just one modern example}

Some infinitesimal part of *all this* Divine Activity is spoken about, and written about, and remembered- but most of it goes on out of sight; it is not revealed to the world, it is not recounted, it is too personal, too precious to people, and not to be shared though if it were something common;

*This is the universal activity of the holy spirit;* and it goes beyond anything we could ever say about it, though we try to capture it in creative ways, exultant, uplifting, inspired by that working in us, and in those around us;

it *overflows* these forms, these simple expressions, and the grand testimonies of faith and devotion;

this same life, everywhere, revealing, healing, restoring us to sanity and wholeness;

real, profound miracles, no less astonishing than seeing someone walk on water, or vanish;

the almost always unspoken, changing lives *completely*

this divine life is what is called on in times of the most pressing need, in times of doubt, and in times of celebration, in times of transition;

we can be sure that we remember and recount is only the smallest part of what is taking place, now, today;

we remember and tell about only the smallest part of what has helped in the past, in innumerable ways and places;

Negating this then, denying these agencies, dismissing all intuition of this as superstition, or as fable, or analogy only is an incalculable loss; it is a flat, affectless, materialistic, impoverished view, a black hole;

all at once, it is denying the universal divine activity that takes place every day, everywhere, though all world religions, and independent of these;

it is all at once denying the efficacy of prayer, of sacred words, mantra, ritual, holy places and people and objects;

it is such a diminished view, an arrogant, hostile, narrowing view; impotent, despairing, futile, with very little of real meaning and purpose, direction and resources;

oh, but then to go on to *dissuade others* with such a view is an immense tragedy- it is much worse than burning countless temples and churches and libraries to the ground, because it attacks the very root of all of these- which is people's faith and devotion;

these instead should be encouraged, fostered, and increased as much as possible, especially now;

and this is where real knowledge enters into it -

What blocks our knowing?,

and what helps it unfold?

We can sense the Activity of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints as Universal Activity, going well beyond what is done in any one Tradition, and with one Holy Name;

This at once affirms all truths people have found and made use of in their lives and families and communities;

it affirms the divine activity in other Traditions and beyond them;

layperson and religious, hermit, monk and nun, saint and every devoted person all draw from this same source;

this same One Divine Life manifests in countless ways;

We get to see only the smallest part, but the whole of it is intuited by us; it is celebrated, affirmed, and passed down to each generation to draw from as needed;

It has ever been so, and will always be so.

## The Blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Saviors

From 'An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism'

When we study Buddhism, we receive teachings on developing our inherent good qualities, and we also receive the blessing of our teachers and spiritual ancestors. Although it is not often talked about, there is an esoteric aspect to our traditions as well. On the subtle planes, a tradition is a reservoir of blessing power, insight and inspiration built up over many generations. This sacred energy is a resource we can draw from. This is true of all the different Buddhist traditions and lineages, and all genuine spiritual traditions. They each have unique and precious qualities we can know and benefit from. Every true religious tradition has produced saints as well, and the influence of their realization surely outlasts their physical body. They are a blessing to the whole world, and especially to their lineage.

\* \* \*

Reading texts and practicing meditation up to a certain point can sound very much like we have to do all our work ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. *We are not alone in our work.* We are upheld by the spiritual nature of our Noble teachers and traditions, by the wise and holy ones who are all of our benefactors. When we connect with their divine nature, we have uplifting, healing, bright and clear energy to meditate with, and to offer to all others. For those with certain spiritual faculties, this becomes more and more apparent as we practice.

Enlightened ones are endlessly dedicated to the benefit of struggling, suffering sentient beings. These include the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteshvara, Quan Yin, Tara, Manjushri, Maitreya, Vajrasattva, and the Healing Buddha;

these include the great saints of Buddhist and other world religious traditions: the Dalai Lama, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Bokar Rinpoche, Deshung Rinpoche, Thich Nhat Hanh, Je Tsong Khapa, Longchenpa, the Thai Forest Masters Ajahn Mun, and Ajahn Lee; Xu Yun, Hsuan Hua, and countless others;

these include the Buddha, and devas, and Jesus, Mary and the orders of angels.

All this spiritual life supports and sustains us, beyond any one way of naming it, well beyond any amount of description or praise.

We know these things according to our affinity with traditions, and teachers, and according to our karma and temperament.

We may be helped without knowing it. We all have guardian angels watching over us, helping us and guiding us, healing us and encouraging us. These gifts are placed right in our hands, to give.

It's said in the Bible, *We love, because we were loved first.*

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, angels and holy ones, Saints and Saviors are here for us, as ever present resources we can draw from for our life and work. The divine is available, with each of us, oh, if only we knew it! This is so important for us to know, especially when, because of love and compassion, we have turned in the direction of dedicating ourselves to helping others.

In the Book of John, Jesus says,

*I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit.*

Christian writer Cynthia Heald adds that

*A branch must stay connect to the vine if it is to bear fruit. And that is all the branch has to do! As we stay joined to our Lord, that life will begin to flow through us. In that living union, our inner being gives rise to our doing...*

In Tibetan Buddhism, we stay connected to the Great Love and Wisdom, and healing energy of our Noble teachers, through our faith and devotion.

*Padampa Sangye said, Keep the Lama in your heart all the time, and all good qualities will come naturally;*

And in this lineage, we stay connected to the divine in the form of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we have a deep personal affinity with with prayers and by reciting their sacred mantras. A *Yi-dam*, means, *the one that is held tightly in mind*.

We keep them in our heart, and keep them continually in mind. This is how we receive the blessings of our teachers, the Holy Ones, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Saviors.

*May all beings receive all they need in their life and work*

*May all beings enjoy peace, comfort,  
good health and inspiration,*

*May we all be enriched and forever blessed  
by our connection to Holy Beings,  
to great teachers, Noble Ones,  
to our Saints, and Great Benefactors*



## On Self Power and Other Power

If you ask the mystics in any tradition what their relationship to the truth is, they will tell you that at first, if it is known at all, the two are completely separate;

but as we engage these lived realities, this changes more and more to a brief and then more enduring relationship;

they say we can do some things that bring us into a closer communion, and others that seemingly place more distance between ourselves and the One we have devotion for, the ground of our faith;

What is the relationship between our Deeper Nature or our True Nature, and the way we usually experience ourselves?

If we are theistic, we could say, what is the relationship between the Divine and ourselves?

There is ceaseless change in all this, and there are patterns we can discern. We give them our name, or the name of a tradition of practice.

At times, we can sense this mysterious power working in our lives, and then we cannot really say that we are here, and the beloved is there; there is an intimacy, and relationship that is known, but that cannot be defined by any words or ideas. We let go of that at those times.

In Buddhism, over the centuries there has developed the idea and way of practicing with what we call *self power and other power*, and the same principles apply, I do believe.

At times we may feel we can do nothing but hold on to the one who knows the Way; {a teacher, or a Buddha, a Guide, or Benefactor}. Even when

everything is falling apart, we can find some comfort and safety, and rest there;

We can then have times of leisure, and companionship; a strength of confidence gathers, that we are upheld;

More is required of us though, if we are to mature. We need to awaken and to understand ourselves more fully, and that needs study, prayer, reflection, and meditation.

We are not alone in our work, and so what we can call or feel to be self power and other power are not at all separate in this. They work together.

Thich Thien-An said,

*If the self-power and other-power work together to assist each other, then we can go anywhere, reach anywhere we wish. By fusing these two powers in our daily practice, we can enter the gates of enlightenment and abide in the city of Nirvana.*

Speaking of the Divine and the human, Gary Thomas expresses it this way

*The truth is these realities are complementary, not contradictory....*

I remembered again today the teaching they have in contemplative Christianity, on what they call 'the withdrawal of consolations', and this is usually described as part of the dark night of the soul. Its purpose, from a theistic point of view is to take away the previous methods or supports a person had, so there can be a further maturation of the soul.

They talk about 'dryness' in prayer, or study and reflection, a kind of dullness, not being moved or inspired as before. What worked before may not be as effective today. A real desperation can be felt, like crossing a desert, or an abyss, and this can go on for a long time. Surely something like this has been known and commented on across traditions.

We can depend on devotion and prayer, ritual, liturgy and studying the works of saintly teachers, perhaps for years, or decades, or even lifetimes, but these will only take us so far. We need to awaken to the same truths our teachers have known, and so, even if it doesn't feel like it at all when we're going through it, these times can also be something of a gift in the long run, if we don't give up.

In all cases, we can use these times to further our understanding.

Then when we return with new eyes to our study and prayer, and the names and forms that are so significant to us, we do so with a greater appreciation for their animating power, and with greater and more enduring respect for all ways to the truth.

From A Belief in the Miraculous

Grace and Buddhism

From The Imperfect and the Beyond Perfect

Buddhism, Religion, and the Supernatural

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture,  
and American Buddhism

Westerners and Prayer

An Introduction to Buddhist Prayer

The Prayers of Contemplatives

Praise and Thanksgiving

On Lineage

Blessings, Faith, and Devotion

Saints East and West

The Nature of An Awakened Person

Prayer as Buddha Activity

The Power of the Word

The Resonance of the Saints

Ocean of Saints

An Introduction to the Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara

On Mysticism

From Healing the World Soul

## Grace and Buddhism

*Grace is the power by which we are ultimately saved, and grace is the power we have to change.* - Joyce Meyers

I've always admired the concept of grace in Christianity. I've marveled at the beauty of it, and how it describes a real, profoundly transformative event in people's lives. Such a wonderful thing, they are describing!

Sometimes I've felt like it is present in Buddhism also, for example, when I think of the blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Saints and our teachers, and the Dharma, and the love we have received from our parents. Nothing we could have done could 'earn' this kindness. It is a tremendous thing. And, just as a blessing is described in Christianity and in other religions, it has the power to 'tip the scales', so to speak.

I remember the title of one book of Beat poetry called 'Grace beats karma'. When I saw that I had to laugh, because in Buddhism we don't usually speak in these terms. In Eastern Traditions, it is talked about, with such terms as 'darshan' (the blessing of being in the presence of a Teacher), and 'shaktipat' (a transmission of spiritual energy), but I've not heard grace mentioned in the same way by Buddhist teachers, or in books on Buddhism. In Buddhism, as it has reached these shores up to now, it's usually all very mathematical, with the teachings about karma saying that this action produces these precise results. This may have some truth to it, but when it comes to our lives, and the possibilities that exist, especially when we connect with a spiritual tradition or teacher, more needs to be said.

When we are blessed by something or someone, we really have to throw out our calculators. There is no way to measure the great positive influence of a Sage or a Savior in our lives. This is spoken of in many great traditions.

Grace is described in Christianity as ‘God’s free and unmerited favor’. Interpreted in non-theistic language, this has its equivalent for us also in a very practical and accessible way, in our own Buddha Nature, that which is with us all the time. This profound truth of our nature is described in the literature as unproduced by our efforts, unblemished, beyond delusion, and, as it is, the source of all good qualities.

*This is our ‘original, unborn, and undying wisdom, which radiates all the time’, says Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche. He says,*

*‘This is the most powerful light. At this moment, the undying flame of wisdom is hidden behind or within our phenomenal conceptions. This inner light resides within us, never dimming, never losing its qualities, never dying out.*

*‘Whatever brightness, clarity, analytic energy, or understanding we have actually arise from that original, unborn wisdom. All are none other than the innate nature of our own mind.’<sup>2</sup>*

This fundamental nature, that is beyond the reach of all deluded activity and mistaken concepts, is in us all. It is all of our birthright– and surely this fits any definition as a grace and blessing to each and every one of us! This potential we have is to really something to celebrate! This is what we aim to realize, both in the sense of understanding it, and in the sense of bringing its intrinsic good qualities to fruition in our lives.

### Three parallels

There’s always a risk when we compare great traditions that we’ll oversimplify their message, or bend what they teach to fit what we’d like them to say. It is useful though, to compare teachings when they shine a

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<sup>2</sup> From: Tara’s Enlightened Activity, Shambhala Publications

light on each other, and complement the understanding and practice of each approach.

That said, here are three parallels I've found for grace in the Christian and Buddhist traditions. It seems to me that they are using different language to talk about the same thing – in very different frameworks, yes, but there you go. The 'active ingredient', I'm thinking here, is the same in both cases.

First, these two – the divine, or God's grace within, and our fundamental nature of mind, or Buddha Nature are with us all the time. The reality that *The Kingdom of God is within you* was not just being invented as it was spoken by Jesus – it was the truth that has always been that was being pointed out by Him. This is a teaching on universal truth, and not just for those He was addressing. This is saying something about what is always and everywhere true. Quite radically different than how we usually perceive things to be!, and so it needs to be said, and experienced.

The same message, in Buddhist terms is that our fundamental nature is always with us, unchanging, and pure from the beginning. In the Treatise on Buddha Nature, by Maitreya, the basic teaching is this:

*The essence of buddhahood abides within all beings,  
obstructed by the stains of transient delusions.*

The second idea is that receiving, and awakening to Grace, or the realization of this fundamental nature within us can be seen as the starting point for us in our spiritual practice.

In Christianity, it is in receiving Christ that our new life begins:

*'You have taken off your old self, with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge of its creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.'* (Colossians 3:9-11)



In Zen, having an insight into our deeper nature is called satori. In the Nyingma and Kagyud schools of Tibetan Buddhism, this is called having the realization of the nature of mind. From that point, there is a re-orientation of practice. It's as if the clouds had parted, temporarily, and we're able to adjust our sense of where we are, and where we're heading.

Tho it's not often referenced, in the Nyingma, or Early School, they say that until we have a glimpse of the View, we don't really know what we're doing or where we're going in meditation. The same idea, in Christian language is that meeting Christ, from that point on, gives a new perspective on everything in life.

The third idea that I find in both Christianity and Buddhism regarding grace is the idea that this is what we draw from for our whole lives. As one of my favorite modern Christian teachers, Joyce Meyer says,

*'Grace is more than just the power to save us, it is the power we need for every single thing that we do.'*

and,

*'Here's what grace is: grace is not just the undeserved favor of God – grace is the power of the Holy Spirit, coming to us, freely, to help u to do whatever we need to do, with ease.'*

The Scriptures say,

*'Divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness' (2 Peter, 1:3)*

In the Christian tradition they make the distinction between what they call 'works of the flesh' and 'works of the spirit'. They sound the cautionary note:

*'Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain that build it'*

And yet, if we look closely, there is also something blissful about this:

In Romans, it says

*'Grace is a work that is done entirely with God's mercy, and without human effort.'*

When this kind of power is present in our life, we can understand what the poet Rumi meant when he said:

*'Stop swimming so hard,  
and climb into the boat  
with Noah...'*<sup>3</sup>

How excellent!

In one of his letters, it's true, Paul says he struggles, but that he does so using the grace he's been given.

*'To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.'* (Colossians, 1:29)

In his book, *The Glorious Pursuit*, author Gary Thomas highlights that, *'Paul is laboring. But he is struggling with God's energy, not his own, 'which so powerfully works' within him.'*<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Paul affirms that, *'I can do all things, through Christ, who strengthens me...'*

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Coleman Barks

<sup>4</sup> From *The Glorious Pursuit*, published by Nav Press

In Mahayana Buddhism, practice is framed in terms of what are called The Six Perfections: of Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, Meditation and Wisdom, and it's taught that the true, natural, and, in a way, effortless expression of these all depend on Wisdom – which is insight into Reality, or our Fundamental Nature.

The Zen Ancestor Dogen referred to this at the end of one of his fascicles where he says, *'The treasure house opens, and we use it as we will...'*

In Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism also, where they use visualization, this same idea is referenced when they say that the view is the necessary basis for all the prayers and practices that they do. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, and the blessings that are given and received through devotion form an integral part of practice within this living tradition.

Often when two traditions are compared, something is lost in the translation, or in the attempt to make things 'fit'. Hopefully that's not the case here. If, in drawing these parallels, what's at work in these traditions is any more clear, then I'll be glad. May that be to the benefit of all practitioners everywhere, and to all beings.

*'Grace and peace be multiplied to you...'*

I have this wish, for all of us, whoever we are, wherever we are.

In the words of Timothy, and then Paul:

Dear friends,

*'Stir up the Gift that is in thee...'*

and,

*'Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.'*

Aah, how wonderful!

## From The Imperfect and the Beyond Perfect

Being in touch with beautiful things, life giving things is essential. Then, for everything else that life is, for all the 10,000 sorrows of the world, the benefit, the virtue of these gifts can continue. Real benefit can continue in places where it is needed most.

In Buddhist terms, when you see only the suffering of the world, with no apparent way out, that is called 'samsara'; when we see and experience only what is right, fine, pure, rich, unchanging, unmixed, undeluded, without affliction, peaceful, that is called 'nirvana'; and when you are able to see and experience both at the same time, that is called 'the realm of Buddha activity', and it's this last one, clearly, that this world needs more of.

One analogy for this is when we are able to hear two things at the same time, like music and a voice speaking, without the two obstructing each other in any way. They can co-exist in our perception, and they can influence each other as well. So, for example, the quality of music (Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, slow movement heard in the background) can influence how a mother asks her teenaged son to clean up his room; or two people in dialogue can each influence each other's tone and what is said. They interpenetrate and affect each other.

Buddha activity arises, we can say, from a base of something perfect (or, more accurately, beyond perfect). When in touch with suffering, compassion arises. We respond to the world out of a heart of love, for as long as is needed. This fundamental divine nature is touched by, and touches suffering, and is able to bring relief and transformation over time.

That which is vast, and made of light both retains its' character, and at the same time is able to move, to touch, to influence, like light, like words, like rain.

Now isn't that something?

## Buddhism, Religion, and the Supernatural

*Looked at in the light of eternity, some things are easier to approach. Whereas before, our view was too narrow, too taken up with the dynamics of our everyday lives, settling back even for a day, or half a day, opens a more expansive vista on this, our world.*

In my twenties, I made a study of Western Esoteric Philosophy, mainly because the world view described there so matched my own experience. Different levels of existence, orders of conscious beings, and divine help that is always available – these were, and continue to be the day to day fabric of my life.

Now, a person discovers very early on when they are out of step with those around them. It's like when a child sees spirits, and assumes everyone else can too, until finding out one day, much to his surprise and dismay, that it is not so. From then on, of course, they lead a dual life – one they can share, and the other that is the world of their inner reality, they way they experience the world.

A person searches philosophies and religions not only to make their way out of confusion and suffering, but also to find some affirmation for their view of the world. If others do have the same view of life as we do, the thinking goes, maybe they also have some thoughts on what our aims should be, and how to make our way here.

The reference point when searching out a religion or a teacher is inside. It is unyielding, some would say stubborn – restless with a kind of divine dissatisfaction towards philosophies or view that don't cut it, impatient even to the point of not bothering to criticize.

This sense of what we really need is something I'm sure we all have, and it is a true compass. On some level we know, this is the most important guiding sense we have. Anything that threatens that, we move against with the force of our whole being.

To turn and face my fellow Buddhists, we do share this wonder, and a reverence for the Founder of our traditions, but each of us do also carry with us, and see the world through a very different world view. Perhaps some good can come from talking about these differences. This is not to assert the superiority of one over the other, or to proselytize, but to suggest other possibilities as far as looking at our lives here, and particularly at our spiritual life and practice.

In Buddhism, you have to look to the Tibetan Tradition to find a cosmology or world view similar to the Western Esoteric Tradition's understanding. This is not so much the aspect that is emphasized in that school's teachings, but it is the ground, the basis of their ideas and practices. Their overall view pervades everything we find there.

There are oracles, visions, the appeal to saints, and the receiving of blessings from one's teachers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. That aid and support to a person's spiritual life in this world are the daily bread and the nurturing ground in the Tibetan view.

That this is curtly dismissed in the minds of many Westerners, as primitive, 'magical thinking' is a great loss, as far as I'm concerned.

From what I said earlier, it should be obvious why I feel this way, but here I'll say a bit more about it anyway.

I imagine that if a person in any time and place, endowed with the faculties of faith, intelligence, vigor and persistence, were to search for the truth, that he or she would very likely find it – or at least some level of truth that



has been found by other seekers throughout time. There would be nothing surprising about that.

Now, whether we like it or not, and whether we are aware of it or not, those of us living today are all to some extent the products, intellectually, of the so called 'Enlightenment', that rejected a lot of superstition that needed to be cut away, but that at the same time negated the truths and methods of religion as well.

What we were left then with is a mechanical world view, that clings to a part of the truth of things as being its entirety. More is left out of the rational, materialistic view than is included.

There were always, and continue to be now, artists, independent thinkers, mystics and religious, that could never subscribe to such a barren view as this, and yet we find ourselves situated with all the effects of the Enlightenment in our education, economics, media, psychology, and even in our religion.

I understand that, for someone not sensitive to the invisible world, what some people do in their prayer and ritual, with appeals to saints, angels and ancestors, would be at least non-sensical, or worse, an object of scorn. They look down on such people as immature, or fools, misguided, superstitious, or just plain ignorant, and, charitably, to be pitied.

From the other side of it though, those 'non-believers', or those without inner vision are blind, and they mislead others.

Who's to tell what's going on here? I have my own experiences and ideas and practices to guide me, but for others who may be wondering how to navigate these same straits – I'd suggest two things:

the first is to aim, as much as possible, to have an open mind. This means having a mind that is capable of learning.

My second suggestion is to study, as much as you can, how other people have made sense of life in this world. This will, at least, help develop a tolerance for others views. At best, it will open you to a greater experience of this one life we share.

Which brings me to Western Buddhism today, and the way it is being transmitted and understood in America, circa 2013.

There is not yet a Buddhism here that includes the realities of other dimensions of existence, of Saints and Enlightened Beings. We can't quite borrow the Tibetan view, as much of their philosophy derives from the place they came from. Neither can we look entirely to Western religions because of elements that many, myself included, can't entirely accept.

And yet realities, and people's experiences being what they are – that is, messy, but having their own logic to them – transcend systems of thoughts. So we do need to somehow accommodate these experiences, or we are the lesser for it.

I'm in the middle of reading a book called 'The Good Heart', which is His Holiness the Dalai Lama's explanation of Christian scripture. As I'm reading, two themes keep emerging for me. One is the saying that, 'truth is one, but people call it by different names'. The other thought I've been having is one the Dalai Lama has made reference to many times over the years, and, that is, that the Western Sources are closer at hand, and more accessible for most people here.

So where does that leave a Western Buddhist in the twenty-first century?

Like many other people here, I have a great respect and admiration for the teachings of Jesus. And more than that even, I feel a natural closeness and devotion to Him, as a Bearer of Light, as one who sustains us through hard times; as a Healer, and True Guide. From what I can tell, He is not the only

form of truth and help, as most Christian assert, but He is no less true, powerful, and holy because of that.

He is on my altar, right along side the Buddha, surrounded all around by the images of Saints, Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

I know some purists would say, well, that's not Buddhism as the Founder taught it, and I don't want to argue, but, if enlightenment is the aim, then any way to get there is fair game, no?

And if our purpose, as brought out in the Mahayana, is the benefit of all beings, then the vision of a world in which there are many enlightened beings is something to be celebrated as helping us to accomplish our aims.

I'm a big believer in the power of prayer as a way to open ourselves to receiving blessings, and as a way to help others. Prayer comes naturally for Christians, but less so for us Buddhists. At least, it's not talked about as much, and, I suspect, it's not something we avail ourselves of as much as we could. It need not be this way. As Ani Tenzin Palmo said, since help is available, then why not call on that help?

There is more to be said, but maybe this is enough to point in the general direction I think is missing and very much needed in today's world, with its problems, and Traditions, and sincere, open minded practitioners.

*May all be well.*

*May all be blessed.*

*May whatever methods people take up,  
swiftly and easily lead them all to the fulfillment of their aims.*

Sacred outlook - Seeing beyond ordinary perception in modern culture, and American Buddhism

*'Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else, for much good would elude you – indeed, the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself for all forms of belief, for God (Truth) is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one belief rather than another.'* - Ibn 'Arabi

{I write this for myself, and my family; Here is the great 'what if it is so?'...}

So much of our pessimism and despair comes from the limited views we that hold of ourselves and this world that we live in. This is not entirely our own fault. It comes as well from our culture and upbringing.

We would expect that religions, such as Buddhism, would offer an alternative to the one dimensional world of consumerism and competition, and to the flat, affect-less life of scientific rationalism. Instead we find that Buddhism is often presented strictly as another philosophy, or just as psychology, and divorced from many of the elements that would classify it as a religion. This is understandable- to a point. Many people come to Eastern religions because Christianity and Judaism didn't work for them. And what's worse, they've had those teachings proselytized at them by arrogant, narrow minded fanatics.

We like to joke that many American Buddhists are in recovery from Western religion. For many, the straightforward, practical teachings on how to take care of our minds are of great appeal and benefit. This is all good, but, if this is all it is, there are some profound and precious things that are being left out of our understanding of ourselves, and our world and of Buddhist teachings.

One of the great things about these times is that we are able to look at how other people received and practiced these teachings. One thing we can

notice is that the starting place for many other people, in other cultures and times, has been very different than our own.

In most places, Buddhism is a tradition that is alive with wonder, rich with the presence of the sacred, and with the guiding influence of Enlightened beings. Here are a couple of quotes from modern teachers: The first is by Ani Tenzin Palmo, a British born nun, ordained in the Tibetan Tradition. She says, 'We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.'

And Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said: 'You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do...'

Now, if we compare this way of thinking to the general way people view themselves and this world, and the way that Buddhism is usually taught in the Theravada and Zen centers in America, there is a very great difference. One perspective says that we're pretty much on our own. Another perspective says that there are many enlightened beings we can call on, and that can help us. Now, suppose for a moment, What if this were so?

If this is true, as I think it is, then we've reduced our view of this world and ourselves, our traditions, and our options, and this is surely a great loss to us all. What we have when this is the case is a tradition that has been greatly dis-empowered, and therefore generations of students, and those they are connected with, are being deprived of very great benefit.

I recently heard an interview with Sister Joan Chittister, where she said that the maps we use are important, because they are what will be followed by future generations to make their way in the world.

My world is rich, but many modern day Buddhists don't share this view, and they explicitly or tacitly deny so much of our potential and possible experience. There are abundant resources available by which we can actualize our aims, and if these are not taken advantage of, then it's like going hungry, and having our whole family go hungry, while there are fields nearby that can satisfy those needs. It is such an unnecessary tragedy to not see this much.

Ani-la added that: 'This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there's help out there, why not invoke that help?..

May we all be well and happy

May we all awaken to the blessings that are continually here for us!

In a rich world view, Saints, Buddhas, Enlightened Intelligence, Bodhisattvas, and Divine help are available. If we don't know this much, then what are we left with? – a string of doctrines, and we're on our own? No! Our lives, our world, our Traditions hold inconceivably so much more than that! And while it's true that not everyone can perceive these things, or has an affinity with thinking this way - this is how it is in the world - they should at least consider the possibility of help from these sources. And they should at least not dissuade others who can draw great benefit, solace and inspiration from the presence of enlightened beings in their world view.

Another thing that leads people to reject all religious views is that prayers or the methods used don't always work in the way they want them to. It's the truth that many factors are involved either in bringing a result, or when something does not work. Our lives have this inconceivable complexity to it, as much as we may want to over-simplify things. I can say with many others that the sum of it is beyond me. What then to do?

Where the methods, and the views they are based on enter into it, and I think the reason they shouldn't be rejected outright, but taken up where and when we can, is that they are born of our collective instinct for knowing, and for making things right in our lives. These are methods that have been reaffirmed in every generation. They are our inherited wisdom of what has worked in the past, very often beyond anything that was thought possible.

Let's look at this together. This is how it is in these times: the common, mundane perceptions we live with and pass around are really more accurately de-valued, degraded views, of ourselves, each other, and our world. This reaches these days, unfortunately, even into how religions traditions are taught and received.

I wrote this poem a few days ago:

*A grey scale teacher  
splashes his grey scale paint-views  
onto everyone and everything  
They are a danger!*

*There is no joy there,  
no color,  
little depth of feeling,  
little or no poetry or wonder,  
richness or inspiration*

*Deprived themselves,  
they deprive others...*

Part of the problem for us Westerners is our over-reliance on rational thinking. This function has its place, but there are also some things that only come to us through the door of the love, the door of the heart, through

faith and intuition, or direct experience. If we rely too much on the intellect here, it blocks us.

I've thought that one analogy that works to describe both what's true about the rational view and what it leaves out is a black and white photograph of a color scene. It's true as far as it goes, but there are many elements that are not seen.

Another analogy I thought of is this:

*If we look at an ocean through a pinhole,  
what we see  
is a pinhole's worth of the ocean  
It's like this.*

Many spiritual truths don't lend themselves to being contained within concepts, and those who live just in the intellect suffer the loss of so many things, like the perception of beauty, mystery, wonder, intuition, inspiration and delight... These things are seen with the eyes of the spirit, and not with the eyes of the intellect alone.

Another element that plays into a common, mundane view is our pride. Every tradition, and common sense too tell us that humility is necessary for learning. It would be one thing if we knew we were arrogant, but when even this much self knowledge is lacking, it's really hard to learn from our teachers, this world, and our deeper nature. This is related to our receptivity. We can say: great humility, great receptivity; small humility, small receptivity; and no humility, then no receptivity whatsoever...

From culture comes a self created world view, and self fulfilling prophecy

{Here is a sketch of how de-valued, ordinary perceptions of ourselves and our world develop, and how they can be undone. Like any sketch, it leaves



out many things, but hopes to catch enough of the essential structure of what's going on to communicate its message.}

We live in a culture and a time that is lacking in its sense of the sacred. Wherever the best of human values are not given enough attention, or where religious culture is mocked or ignored, and where a sense of the beautiful is overridden by the volume and quantity of meaningless things, then we become inwardly impoverished.

We live in grossly materialistic times, that deny of the existence of everything beyond the reach of our ordinary five senses. Be assured, this has not always been the case in other times and cultures.

We may pride ourselves on having gotten over what we haughtily call 'infantile' views, of a spiritual world, or any higher order than what the average person can see. We denigrate 'magical thinking' as naïve, uneducated, false and misleading. We're so proud of our reasoning and science, and we set that as the standard for everything.

Modern consumer culture then isolates people, and over time, the human connections we all need grow thin. We become suspicious of our neighbors and friends, and set apart from family. The prevalent perspective is actually nihilistic, life denying, a tragic distortion of who and what we are.

The views many of us have inherited, just by the fact of having been born here, are then reinforced by our emotional reactions, which are then reflected back to us as appearances that are colored or tainted by our own minds. If our mind is not dealt with skillfully, a patina can cover everything. What all this adds up to is a disempowered view of what it is to be alive, to be a human being in this precious world of ours.

Collective views are shared in mostly unnoticed ways. They are pervasive, and are the ground of our sense of the choices we have, for change or development, or to remedy the problems we face.

To counteract this perception, or rather, misperception, we should be able to recognize diminished values, and degraded views wherever they exist, in ourselves, our family and neighbors, and in the world, so that we can replace them with something truer, something ever closer to the ideal. At the very least, our religions traditions and philosophies should offer us an alternative to nihilism. Life is available, and someone should say it out loud.

To love is to begin to remember who we are

What is it that brings light back into our lives? What will cause us to see ourselves and our world as it really is? Where will we find strength for all we need to do, and vision, and grace? Everyone, no matter whether they are affiliated with a tradition or not, can love. It can be a love for family, for art, for nature, for our teachers, for our young...

Love is the eye that sees beauty. In that one virtue there is light, and strength. There is daily food for the journey, courage and healing. We can add to this affection for our world a basic practice of meditation that quiets and clarifies the mind. Together, these two can enhance and deepen each other.

We struggle more than we need to, when we do everything but our inner work. That, we give short shrift. But this is that 'one needful thing'. With love, and regularly taking time for meditation and self cultivation, as a basis, and a way of life, we can begin to appreciate what Traditions offer, their great gift to us all.

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call 'impure perception', or 'ordinary perception', the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer. The opposite of this is called an enlightened view,

pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view. Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

that all life is sacred;

that the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

that our fundamental nature is pure

therefore, that we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness; we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others

that this world is sacred, alive and responsive, and that we are inseparably connected to it;

that we are always connected to each other, to our whole family

that there are other worlds, other realities

that there are many levels of beings, seen and unseen

that we are not alone in this world

that there are powers we can call on, Saints and Saviors, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Ancestors, and divine beings that will respond and help

that we are multi-dimensional beings, and so, things such as distant viewing, absent reading, and distant healing are possible

that there are faculties beyond the ordinary that can be developed, each according to our unique temperament and gifts, but to some extent by everyone

that prayer is effective

that ritual works

that mantra works

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us support, whenever and wherever it is needed most. I find such views closer to the truth of how things are. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living that is full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, aim to clear away what keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

*May we all be aware of our true heritage,  
and live lives of generosity,  
great joy, and fulfillment,  
of great peace, well being,  
and benefit to all!*

From *A Belief in the Miraculous - Buddhism, Magic, and A Sense of the Sacred*

## Westerners and Prayer

*I thought to include this article here because it introduces the role of a world view. More is said on this subject in the essays that follow.*

The practice of prayer comes naturally for many in the West, and the idea of serving others is there in us as well, powerfully. This is one of the reasons Tibetan Traditions have caught on as they have in this country. With their emphasis on compassion, sacrificing the ego and dedicating oneself to others, Americans find a match for what many of us already have in us, on account of our Western religious heritage.

Because of our often understandable estrangement from organized religion (read: Christianity) for many reasons, however, we've often been lacking the framework to think about, and the methods to put in to practice our noble religious motivations. Buddhism is providing these things for many people.

One thing that does seem odd to me though, these days, is how little Westerners who practice Buddhism know about our own religious heritage, and the many parallels that can be found.

It's ironic that Western Buddhists pray to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and to Buddhist saints for blessings, for protection, for inspiration and for healing, without seeing the parallels that Western Traditions have in them.

Catholics, for example, have a rich tradition of praying to, or through, Saints. It's interesting that some feel at home making offerings and praying to the Buddhist Saints, without accessing sources that could be considered 'nearer at hand' so to speak. One day, I'm sure, Western Buddhists will include the person of Jesus, chief among Western Bodhisattvas, among the sources of blessings that can be invoked.

## The West - Compared to Eastern Cultures

As Buddhist teachers are moving from the East to the West, it highlights some of the differences between our cultures. For one thing, modern Westerners don't have very much of a conception of other worlds besides the material. In contrast, Asian cultures' view of life includes other worlds, and other dimensions that influence their lives.

What we look at in Eastern Cultures and call 'Ancestor Worship' could perhaps better be called 'Honoring the Ancestors'. There are pictures of relatives on family altars, and many homes have a book with the names or their relatives going back generations. Every time someone is born, or someone passes away, and every time someone marries, it is entered in this record. Ancestors are honored, and their protection and wisdom is sought regularly (such as at the beginning of the Lunar New Year) and when there is some pressing need.

When I lived in Taiwan, one of the first things I noticed was that people were making public offerings, of chicken, fruit, rice crackers and incense, on tables set up in front of their homes and businesses, to what they call local spirits. Offerings are made with prayers for success in business, and for protection.

People in Taiwan frequently go to temple to make offerings and to pray for success or for guidance in business or relationships. I also sensed that a much higher percentage of people there consult fortune tellers. It's not considered as much as a 'fringe' activity- it is much more mainstream. And, in Taipei, there are many small temples dedicated to Buddhas, or Gods or Goddesses and Bodhisattvas or helping spirits that have specific purposes, for example to help get pregnant, or to pass an exam. There is a temple dedicated to Confucius that receives offerings around exam time. People photocopy student Ids and leave the copy with an offering at these temples.

In Asian cultures, people make offerings to appease ghosts, or spirits who would otherwise cause harm, especially during the time known as Ghost Month. Some people even conduct what are called Spirit Marriages to pacify the spirit of someone who died before getting married.

I say all this only to point out how culture is a whole way of looking at this world we live in, and the influences, for better and for worse that can effect our lives. In the East, the concept of other worlds influencing this one is woven throughout people's everyday lives. We don't have this idea nearly as much in the modern Western world view.

In Catholicism, people pray to, or through a vast array of Saints. They recognize the existence of Angels, and a Hierarchy of Spirits, and helpers, Jesus and Mary being foremost among them. In other centuries and other countries, people had more recourse to help from what we call the other side. Remarkably, in our modern Western culture we've lost this sense of other worlds and the beings and life forces that are available to assist us in our lives.

Prayer of all types calls on something greater than ourselves, or how we conceive of ourselves. It opens a channel between the worlds so that life and light can come through. Even if we are just saying, 'I pray I will be able to... stop smoking... to give up drinking... I pray I will have enough energy to accomplish this purpose...' we are referring to something greater, to some potential.

If it is true that we can tap in to powers beyond our usual abilities, and that we can transmit helpful, healing energies, then why would anyone choose *not* to pray? Perhaps overcoming disbelief happens slowly. In a materialistic society, Spirit and more subtle truths are denied, in many ways, from many directions, every day, until it is the dominant view that such things do not exist, and all other possibilities are temporarily shut out. Here I can only encourage people to experiment honestly, as experience of spiritual truth is the only antidote to such harsh, anti-life materialism.



Some people say we don't need traditions, but it remains true that there is an abundance of resources available to us; energies, unique qualities to match our needs, and these have been preserved and transmitted and added to over generations in Traditions.

Reading the prayers from the various traditions, the essential expressions, both in terms of the ideas of the tradition and the energy of them, can help us to most quickly find what is suitable for us individually. This is vital for our own lives and the life of this world.

The purpose of Traditions is to benefit and to assist our reaching the Ultimate, the Source of all traditions, our true home, and living from there, and with that as a basis.

Oh, Good-hearted people! - I urge you to search out Traditions and methods to see what is effective for you- what riches there are for you, what powers that can help you and can help you to help others; what clarifies and can heal, and then share from this abundance that you find with others - with friends, family, strangers, with the whole world!

## An Introduction to Buddhist Prayer

In America, and in the West in general these days, people don't usually associate Buddhism and prayer. We usually think of Buddhism as a tradition that teaches quiet sitting meditation, and it is certainly that. Right below the surface, however, we find that there is a great deal of prayer in Buddhism. Some schools, such as Zen, may seem to use prayer in the usual sense only sparingly, while others, such as the Tibetan tradition use a wide range of prayers for different purposes. There are prayers for healing, for cultivating compassion and other qualities; prayers to pacify difficulty, and prayers invoking the blessings of our teachers, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for support in all aspects of life.

To say what Buddhist prayer is, we would have to include two things: generally speaking, what Buddhism is, and, the nature of prayer.

First, a few words on the nature of prayer: What all prayer has in common, whether it is Buddhist prayer, or theistic prayer, is that prayer expresses a world view. Whether a person believes in God, or in angels, or in the intercession of Saints; or in the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, prayer shows what a person believes in.

Even more simply, with some people, praying shows their belief that prayer works for them, even if they don't understand completely why it works. We don't need to have a lot of philosophy behind it. If a person has some experience of prayer being effective for them, that is enough to get them to pray.

### A universal human activity

It's clear that people worldwide pray for all kinds of things. It seems to be a completely universal human activity: for example, parents pray for their children, without having to be taught; people everywhere pray for good crops, and for safe journeys. I've heard one definition of prayer as

‘a heart-wish’. In that sense, even atheists pray. And if there is a religious world view, then that is the form in which the prayer gets expressed.

As it is usually defined, prayer is reaching beyond what we usually think of as ourselves to receive support, grace and blessings from some benevolent power in the universe. It could be for ourselves, or for another, for a child or friend, or for the world. It is entirely natural, and spontaneous. It is the human expression of some need, or of gratitude.

### Two kinds of prayer beyond words

In a brief overview of prayer, finally, there are two kinds of activity that need to be mentioned here, that are sometimes referred to as prayer, even though they don’t follow the most known pattern of using words. These two are silent prayer, and what can be called prayer-in-action.

The term silent prayer may be familiar to those who have studied Christian contemplation. Sometimes called ‘the prayer of the heart’, or ‘practicing the presence of God’, silent prayer can be a form of adoration, of thanksgiving, or it can be sitting quietly, with receptivity, a deep listening for guidance or for the answer to some problem.

A second type of prayer that may not usually be classified as such is sometimes called prayer-in-action. This is where it is not enough to wish for something, or to hope and pray for something with words alone, but when the opportunity arises, to sit still, or to speak, to recite, or to chant, or to move our limbs. This is inspired action, not separate from our prayers of aspiration. Here, there is a clear continuum between our thought and action. The same power flows through them, from the same original intention.

In both of these, silent prayer, and in prayer in action, there is experience on a level beyond words. Such prayer-fulness is then the state of a person’s whole being, an expression of values, and an expression of their faith.

Of course it will remain the case that most of what people identify as prayer uses words, but this dimension of prayer is also fully deserving of our recognition and respect. The deeper, more encompassing definitions will always be there, for anyone who wants to pick up on them.

The second part of introducing Buddhist prayer, after speaking of prayer in general, would have to be to say something about what Buddhism is. Buddhism is a way to live life with greater wisdom and compassion. Its teachings concern the nature of suffering, and propose a path that leads to the absolute end of suffering, and to genuine happiness. This is accomplished through meditation and insight into our nature.

Prayer comes into the picture as soon as we start to consider the role of cultivated thought and intention in the spiritual life. Buddhism teaches training the mind, and one of the ways we can do this is by learning to direct our thoughts in a positive direction, away from harming others, and towards actions that benefit. Prayers of aspiration can set our motivation for a session of meditation, for a day, or for our whole life. Examples of this might be for a person to pray,

May I keep pure ethics today

or,

May I give up that habit

As with other kinds of prayer, the different kinds of Buddhist prayer express a set of values and a world view. Buddhist prayer, then, is prayer informed by a Buddhist world view. In every case, it is made up of a sense of where we are, and of the resources that are available to help; by what is going on and what is needed in the world and in the lives of living beings. It should be noted here that there is more than one valid, workable Buddhist world view.

A note on a Tradition that is beyond being theistic or non-theistic

In contrast to Western theistic prayer, Buddhism does not make use of the idea of a creator God. This is one significant difference. There are, however, many forms of Buddhism that recognize the existence of different levels of beings, such as devas, guardians, and local spirits. Many practitioners recognize and call upon the power and benevolent influence of our spiritual ancestors, present day teachers, as well as different levels of spiritually accomplished beings, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said,

*You are not alone, because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do...*

It may also come as a surprise to Westerners that, by sheer numbers, the great majority of people who refer to themselves as Buddhist practice what is called Pure Land Buddhism. Most of the Buddhists in Japan, Korea, and China, as well as many Tibetan Buddhists pray with great devotion to Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. Many millions of people recite his name-mantra 'Namo Amitabha' (homage to Amitabha) or 'Ami-tofu' and pray to be born after this life in his Pure Land of Sukhavati. This is regarded as being a heavenly realm, with ideal conditions for spiritual practice.

I think then that it's not enough to refer to Buddhism as merely non-theistic, and leave it at that. It is clearly not monotheistic, but it is, I would add, grounded in spiritual realities. Perhaps a better pairing then would be theistic and recognizing a diversity of spiritual life.

Generally speaking, theistic prayer is where you view the source of benefit as existing outside of oneself, and non-theistic prayer regards the sources of benefit as existing in oneself, or both outside and inside oneself. In Buddhism it's taught that ultimately the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and

our own teachers are not separate from our own minds. Relatively, however, on the path we usually experience them that way, and so we can benefit from connecting with them and relating to them within that framework, as we develop a deeper realization of our own enlightened qualities.

One of the ways of relating to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is as a method of cultivation, where the 'external' and the internal complement each other. Here, one meditates upon a Buddha form with devotion and prayer, as a way to identify and to produce these same qualities in ourselves. The forms are used to help us to awaken our own Buddha Nature.

It's often asked: does the deity (Buddha or Bodhisattva) have an external reality?, and answered, relatively, yes; ultimately, no (meaning that they are not separate from our fundamental nature).

The reason I would first begin by describing all Buddhist Prayer at this point as the expression of diverse people's world view is to try to be as inclusive as possible. The truth be told, looking at the range of what is taught and practiced as Buddhism, there is simply no one way. Some people relate to the world as having many dimensions, and many spiritually advanced beings, and others just to this one world that we more or less agree on. No matter. Many different cosmologies or world views can work when it comes to Buddhist practice, or to the activity of prayer. However our mind is, there is benefit to be found in prayer.

Take, for example, the wish,

*May you have happiness*

or the verses for the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion,

*May all beings be happy*

*May all beings be free from suffering*

These are purely prayers of aspiration, and no faith is required in anything, beyond recognizing the power of love and compassion, and of our own thought and motivation.

From my own point of view, more important than the philosophy of prayer, is what all these practices point to. In whatever form we engage them they indicate the possibility of working with our heart and mind, and the possibility of transformation, benefiting ourselves and others. If we think prayer is something that could help us to accomplish this, there is plenty of room to have different world views and still have it work.

One example of a prayer that can work with different Buddhist world views, perhaps, would be recognizing that ethical action brings happiness, and unethical or hurtful action brings misery. We can then aspire or pray to live a moral life. Then, if our world view in addition includes the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, highly realized beings that live to serve others, freeing them from suffering and bringing them happiness, or a connection to teachers, then naturally we will ask for their help and support.

*May my teachers, and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas help me to accomplish this.*

Another example of a Buddhist prayer and world view would be that elemental universal wish for our children or family to have happiness. If this is informed by an understanding of the causes of happiness as taught in Buddhism, ethics, the training of the mind or meditation, and wisdom, then that wish for them in that sense becomes a Buddhist prayer. It reflects a Buddhist world view and understanding.

Again, if we include in our view the dimension of the existence of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and the blessing power of Saints and Sages, then, naturally, we reach to these sources of light and inspiration in our prayers, with the deep wish that they benefit those we pray for.

Here is a third example of what Buddhist prayer can be. By contrast, the peace of someone who has only known the effect that comes from taking a sleeping pill, and the peace of someone who has quieted the mind in meditation are very different. When a meditator or contemplative wishes for another to know peace and happiness, they have in their mind the inner peace and joy they have known. Such prayer is informed by their experience, the result of their Buddhist study and practice.

Buddhist prayer is then the expression of what is felt by Buddhists to be ultimately worthwhile in life, and this is where another level of interest enters into it, if we want to know what many Buddhists are actually aiming to do when they pray.

All Buddhist prayer is informed by a Buddhist world view, on the nature of suffering and the path to happiness; of the preciousness of each life, and of our own potential. A fundamental prayer we can have from this perspective is

*May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness*

Then, if we are practicing taking care of our own life in the Buddhist way, by cultivating ethics, meditation and the freedom that comes with wisdom in the Buddhist sense, one result of whatever liberation we achieve is naturally a greater dedication to all others. This arises naturally- it does not have to be imposed from the outside. This is how the path unfolds. Beyond the level of obscuration and affliction, *our nature is compassion*. From greater freedom, and greater empathy, our compassion can emerge. We can begin to recognize the fundamental equality of all, and to live our lives in response to that.

Enter the Maha-yana

What is called the Maha-yana, means the Great Way, in that, in its wish to benefit others, it aims to include all beings. A Mahayana Buddhist, in the



best sense, sees that what we all need for our flourishing is something more than the material alone. What we need, ultimately, for our happiness and well being, is wisdom.

The Mahayana Buddhist Way of Life is in many ways the complete opposite of self centeredness, and of short sighted, hedonistic, materialistic culture. It is mature prayer. It is altruism, and although it includes ourself, it is living in response to the needs of the world and of all living beings. It is a willingness to give one's life to that task of freeing all others from suffering and to bringing them all genuine happiness. Such a motivation places us in harmony with life.

This perspective, of wanting to benefit all others, is more than a reflex, or a superficial emotional reaction. It is the result of contemplation, and an open hearted response, seeing our place in the world of struggling, suffering sentient beings. As Shantideva wrote:

*Although they long for happiness, they destroy the very causes of their happiness; and though they do not wish to suffer, they create the causes that bring suffering on themselves...*

Such contemplations can shift the very center of our life.

Every Mahayana Buddhist, then, embraces what is called the Bodhisattva Vow as the highest ideal and aspiration, to free each and every sentient being from suffering and the causes of suffering, and to bring them all to immutable happiness. We aim all of our maturation, our thoughts and actions, prayers and meditations to that objective, of benefiting all others in every way necessary, material and spiritual.

This Bodhisattva Vow, and bodhicitta – the thought Traditionally expressed as,

*May I become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings*

is a dependent arising.

These causes and conditions come together: our perceiving the needs and seemingly endless sufferings of living beings, with compassion, and knowing a way out, naturally Vow arises from these.

Traditionally, as taught in the Tibetan Buddhism, before any practice, we set our motivation. We have the thought,

*May this be for the benefit of all...*

and this is the great motivation that empowers the prayers and meditations of a Mahayanist.

After that, during the practice itself, whatever it is, we aim to keep a clear continuity of intention, and at the conclusion we dedicate the merit, the positive energy of our practice, to fulfilling our purpose, for example,

*By this practice, may all beings enjoy happiness, and the causes of happiness*

When it comes to the activity of prayer, then, we can view Buddhist Prayer in terms of *path*, which is the cultivation of some motivation or quality, and in terms of *fruit*, which is what we give as a result of our practice.

Prayer as *a path* can be training the mind in ethics, or in loving kindness. We can reflect and cultivate the feeling, for example:

*Meeting this person tomorrow, may I have patience, and not get angry with them. May I develop the qualities that will help them as much as I can...*

In some places, this is called 'prospective memory'. As Matthieu Ricard taught, doing such meditations ahead of time that cultivate a positive quality, 'prime' us, or prepare us to engage with others in a better way.

Some people may wonder if prayer takes the place of meditation that calms the mind and by developing wisdom frees us from afflictions— meditation that has for millennia been regarded as the very heart of Buddhist practice, but it isn't the case that prayer replaces meditation, rather, at it their best, the practices of prayer and meditation are complementary to each other. With prayer we direct our mind and energy, and with calm meditation that liberates we can connect with and uncover more of our resources. We are able to offer something deeper and more useful.

In its broadest sense, prayer can be considered to be another name for Buddha Activity.

Buddhist Prayer *as fruit* then can be offering our light, and our peace to the world. This, at its best, can be a whole way of life for a Mahayana Buddhist.

A Bodhisattva delights in benefiting others, seeing this as the most meaningful use of our life. No matter how difficult it is, no matter how long it takes, no matter what the cost.

The scope of this work is expressed in The King of Prayers, which has a verse that reads:

*Limitless is the extent of space  
Limitless is the number of sentient beings  
And limitless are the karma and delusion of beings  
Such are the limits of my aspirations.*

And by Shantideva, who has the prayer:

*For as long as space endures  
and for as long as living beings remain,  
until then, may I too abide,  
to dispel the misery of the world*

The Lam Rim Dedication has this verse:

*With my heart going out with great compassion  
In whatever direction the most precious teachings have not yet spread,  
or once spread have declined,  
May I expose this treasure of happiness and aid*

Cultivating this path, we become more able to intrepidly engage and to guide others.

In nearly every school of Buddhism, understanding the mind has a central place. The power of thought, and in particular the power of intention is expressed in the line by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, that:

*All of existence depends on the tip of a wish.*

Thought is the power we use to shape our lives. ‘The tip of a wish’ here refers to our motivation. One teaching says if the root of a tree is healing, the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit will all be healing. Again, it is brought out that our motivation is the deciding factor in the quality of our work, our spiritual practice, and in what we give to the world.

As with meditation and mantra practice, an individual’s prayer can become a cultivated power. We don’t know what we are capable of, and what effect our own meditation and prayer can have until we make an effort.

It’s also true that the Traditional prayers we have received can be a great aid to our lives. Prayers that have been recited by many people for generations, with concentration and devotion, have built up tremendous power over time, and if we can connect with them, they can help us a great deal.

Add to this the fact that many of the Traditional prayers were written by people who are regarded as saints, such as Shantideva, Atisha, Tang Tong

Gyalpo, and Tsong Khapa, as well as modern teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, Dudjom Rinpoche and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As such, they are rich with insight, and blessings.

Together with our own practice of having a good heart, meditation and prayer, we can gain the greatest benefit from Traditional prayers.

For some, to be a self defined 'person of prayer' can be a complete way of life, responsive and awake. Prayer can connect us to the Divine. It affirms our connection with each other. It can engage our creativity in the moment, connect us to Traditions, and help us to meet both suffering and joy. Prayer gives us a means to respond, and to offer, if not an immediate solution to problems, then at least solace, and hope, and the best we can give at this time, not turning away in spirit.

Seeing for ourselves the great value and effectiveness of prayer, who would not want to engage its practice in some form? It is completely natural to want to do so, especially when we see more and more of the needs that exist, and what can be done with prayer. We can direct our mind to virtue, link up with and draw from sources of great benefit, and share that with all.

*May all beings benefit.*

## The Prayers of Contemplatives

The prayers of contemplatives are not like ordinary people's usual prayers. In Buddhist language we could say they are spoken from the Dharmakaya of Ultimate Goodness. They have that vision, and that power and quality. As the poet Robert Bly said of images and verses that are spoken from a very deep level, they are charged, they are 'soaked with psychic substance'.

Ordinary people like myself, on rare occasions, can have some insight or inspiration flash to the surface, and, if we are smart, we hurry to write them down. A trained contemplative, on the other hand, has much easier access to the deeper levels of our true human nature, and less obstructing its expression. We ordinary folks are very much a mixed bag— some jewels, and a lot of plain matter. But those men and women we call sages are pure channels— by their very nature, they are a stream of pure truth and blessings to the world.

Reading the prayers of contemplatives, we are nourished by what they give, and not only that. As important, we are also put in touch with that same profound level that they speak from— in ourself. To say that anything else is going on would be to put ourselves down, and to deny our own depth.

If we are inspired to read and reflect on the words of the Saints, it's because of the benefit that comes through to us from their level of experience. They are showing us who we are, what we have each received, and the gifts we have now to give. If we are inspired to think, or speak, or write our own prayers, this can also be something truly significant, a sacred moment for us. Our heart is moved, and it is actually light breaking through to the surface of our lives, and going where it is needed most.

The value in a contemplative's prayers, in the prayers of Traditions that have gathered power over time, is this same value that we can find in our own prayers today. It is made of generosity, and insight, and the delight of something reaching us, and awakening in us.

Each generation has its poets, its seers, its lineage holders, its light bearers. So who is to say who has 'got the goods' so to speak? From an individual's point of view, if their own prayer works for them, if it gets them 'unstuck', or brings healing energy, for me, that is proof enough. Whether it would work for someone else is another matter. Of so many things I am not sure, I am far from complete in knowledge. But what I am sure of, at this point in my life, is this:

1. that it's a great thing to read contemplatives' prayers, as great benefit can come from it

2. that it's a great good also to be inspired by them, and to think, and speak and write our own prayers,

and

3. that we should do all we can to encourage each other to pray as much as possible, or to put it another way– to access the deep levels of our true wisdom nature and to think, speak and act in the world from there.

Because of the great benefit that can come from it for us all, we should do all we can to pray our own prayers and the prayers of the Saints and Tradition. We should do all we can to fill the world with beautiful prayers.

The world needs our prayer, so much now, and what prayer can be at its best: the expression of our pure positive intentions, made of love and wisdom; vision, light, healing energy, nourishment, inspiration, comfort and joy. Prayer can illuminate, and can set our lives and our world in order.

However it moves in us, prayer is the quintessential human expression. It is our thirst for light, and the powerful deeply rooted-wish that we have, to give, in words and actions, of what we have found. Beyond disillusion, we find the way again through what I call prayer. I mean this in a way that is

not restricted by any one concept of the Divine. It is open to every possibility, to every way of ever saying it.

The way opens again because of the heart's intent. The world opens, and the way forward once more becomes clear. May it be this way for us all.



## Praise and Thanksgiving

Praise and thanksgiving are a part of every spiritual tradition for a very good reason - they help us to touch the deepest truths of our being here. We all need to connect with something greater than ourselves, that upholds and sustains us. Especially in times of difficulty, we need to look up:

*“My eyes turn to the hills,  
where I have received my help...”*

Without this, our view is too small, and we don't know the resources of grace and blessings that have carried us this far, are with us now, and will continue to be with us for all time.

When we praise a brother or sister, a child, or a great and noble teacher, or what is divine in this life, in a way, we return their gift multiplied to them, and help their light to grow even more. Recollecting what it feels like to have the good in us encouraged, and how vital that is to our flourishing, we will then be sure to go out looking for opportunities to praise and encourage others.

Isn't the sky beautiful today?

Aren't the works of our brothers and sisters in this world a wonder to behold?

If we start here, every other kind of spiritual work, of contemplation, meditation, prayer and mantra all have energy behind them that they wouldn't otherwise have.

If we can stand back with some objectivity and take the time to appreciate our own work as well, it makes for a feeling of worth and belonging that is not so easily swayed by changing conditions, common values, or other people's opinions.

Praise all the good work going on in the world today, all the kindness, all the great far reaching positive motivations that our kin have; all the inventiveness, all the generosity, all the forgiveness, all the genius... it's all here, and our praise helps us to see it, and to be empowered by it.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddasa

*Homage to the Blessed One, the Noble, the Perfectly Enlightened One*

*“Lineage is very important in Buddhism. Lineage is not only the historical record and genealogy of masters who have held a particular teaching, nor is it only the teaching itself expressed verbally or on a page. These are important, of course, but what is even more important is the spiritual vitality of that teaching as it is transmitted from mind to mind and heart to heart. In other words, the lineage lives in the thoughts, words, and deeds of persons who have received, cherished, practiced, and accomplished it.”*

- Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche

## Blessings, Faith, and Devotion

The blessings of the Divine, of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints, and liberated Sages encircle the globe at all times. Whether or not we are receptive to them, however, or draw these currents to ourselves, depends on our own inner state. This is where faith and devotion come in.

One kind of faith is receptivity. With it, we are open to something greater than ourselves reaching our lives, healing, illuminating, and guiding us.

Disbelief or spiritual pride block the receptivity we could have. Once we've made up our minds that things are a certain way, and that we are without support from the subtle realms, we've removed ourselves from the benevolence that is always here, at least consciously; And whether or not we put it in words, if we hold ourselves as equal to, or better than our wise spiritual guides, ancestors and teachers, we place ourselves above them, and can't receive very much from them.

*Humility is a prerequisite for learning anything, and never is this more true than when it comes to connecting with the divine in human form, or from the unseen, archetypal levels.*

Alone one night, out of distress and shorn of pride, crying out, the hook of our faith can, in that moment, catch a pure force at work everywhere in the world. And our lives can change just like that. We may fluctuate, or even fall away from practice altogether for a time, but a seed of transformation has been planted. The world can become luminous again, larger by an untold measure, as new possibilities dawn.

Once faith has opened the way, and an intimation of a greater love and wisdom has reached us personally, the devotion that is then born is best described as a depth of love and trust that acts as a magnet for blessings. We begin to orient our lives around the sense of the divine wisdom that speaks to us in our own innermost language.

Faith then matures in us to a deep peace that comes from being held in tender, divine care, and from knowing our capacity to grow and change. Such trust in our teacher is also responsive. It strives to be ever more awake, learning the language of the heart that is becoming more sensitive to being guided.

The path develops in this way. We are not alone in our reaching for happiness. On the contrary, this world abounds with grace and blessings. If we are receptive to it, we can know this for ourselves, manifesting beautifully in our lives.

## Saints East and West

{A brief essay on Saints, outlining their nature and activity, written as an introduction to the prayers of the Buddhist Mahasiddha Tang Tong Gyalpo.}

*“Man generally is not conscious of the power he has. When a man becomes conscious of that power, he is able to do things which people cannot ordinarily accomplish.” - Hazarat Inayat Khan*

The mention of saints from the outset challenges our ordinary ideas of the way things are. The thought of extraordinary individuals has the power to shift what we conceive of as possible in this human realm. It also changes what we think of our teachers, ourselves, and our brothers and sisters.

A saint, both in the East and in Western traditions, is something more than a good person, or someone of exemplary character. Moving past this mundane conception, we enter into a supernatural framework for understanding the lives and influence of a saintly person.

In Western Traditions, and Catholicism in particular, we find a saint defined as someone who facilitates a connection with the Divine. They are formally recognized by the Church because they have been a factor in a miracle of some kind. Informally however there are many more people who are prayed to in times of trouble who are ‘under the radar’ of the official church.

The most frequently prayed Western mantra is the rosary, or the prayer to Mary, and a great many people over the centuries have reported experiencing her blessings.

In Judaism and Islam as well, the existence of holy men and women has been a part of their traditions of prayer and a source spiritual support.

When I was in Taiwan, I noticed that there were altars in various neighborhoods, where people prayed and left offerings. I asked the people at the school where I was working who as being prayed to there. They told me they were 'local gods'. I asked, How many local gods are there in Taipei? and, after going back and forth in Mandarin for a couple of minutes, my co-worker turned to me and said, "Fourteen". I later learned that in Taiwan's blend of Buddhist and Taoist traditions, a person could, through their conduct and activity, ascend to the level where they are recognized and honored as divine. Quite different from our ordinary ideas!

As a Buddhist in the West these days, not much is said about saints, or holy people, or the help they can give a person. It's considered for the most part to be fantasy, or belonging to the realm of the mythological, at a remove from our actual lives in the world. And yet, the entirety of Vajrayana Buddhism as it is practiced today worldwide rests on this view that there divine beings or energies within and around us, that can be called upon, and that can help us in all kinds of ways. The well known practice of the Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara, for example, for many people has the reputation for being swift to respond, and for helping people in distress or in various forms of material or spiritual need.

In addition, some South East Buddhist schools as well have elements that can be considered magical in their working, although these are not nearly as well known about or discussed here in the West. In Thailand, in the last century in particular, there has been a subset of a tradition of monks making amulets for people's protection, and a legacy of stories of their effectiveness.

When we speak of a siddhi in Buddhism, there are two types, the ordinary, and supreme accomplishment. Ordinary siddhis could be such things as clairvoyance, a lesser or greater ability to heal, to pacify or purify a troubled environment, to control the weather, or to gather needed

resources, The Supreme Siddhi, it's taught, is enlightenment, which includes all the other capacities.

Mahasiddhas, or Great Beings in Buddhism are those individuals, such as Tang Tong Gyalpo, who have extraordinary qualities and abilities to benefit others. Their words as we have received them have power, and time and distance are not obstacles to our receiving their positive influence. We may not believe any of this, of course, until we have some experience of it ourselves, and then even then, we may have some difficulty getting our heads around it. This is only on account of the persistence and strength of our habitual mundane views, on personal and collective levels.

There have been societies in the past, and there are still a few today that honor what is called Pure Perception, or Sacred Outlook. They are not easy to find, or receive with respect, but they do exist, for those willing to make an effort to find them.

In my own experience, I have the remarkable example of my own teachers, and witnessing the effect they've had on my life. I count among them even teachers I haven't met in person, but with whom, for some karmic reason, I have a connection. And this is what it comes down to here, it seems, when talking about the influence of holy people, and spiritual beings of all types, angels, and ancestors. When we have a connection to one or more of them, it broadens what we think of as life in this world. We know we are not alone, and, what's more, in times of trouble we have a resource we can call on.

Dogmas often enter into into because of our differences, but it need not be that way. If we can see our connections with the divine as a personal matter, and our commonality with the others who make up our community, it opens the way to having respect beyond those names and forms and practices that work well for us.



Those great beings who have made their way onto our personal altar, or refuge tree are there for a reason. We have faith that is based on some experience of their beautiful effect in our lives, and in this world. It doesn't matter if others don't have the same experience. The spiritual life in this way is like eating. No one can do it for you, and no one can deny or debate your experience of being nourished and sustained spiritually. And so I offer this prayer:

*May we all find strength and support throughout all our lives*

*May we share abundantly the riches we have received from our teachers and from traditions, and from the divine in all its forms in our life*

*and may there be peace and harmony, well being, and an abundance of blessings everywhere.*

## The Nature of An Awakened Person

The *very nature* of an awakened person is to benefit others. His or her tangible qualities are like the sun; they are bright, and joyful, and endlessly beneficial to others. They are effortless, spontaneous, impartial, enduring, bringing harmony, joy and peace, healing, strength and encouragement.

I think of Thich Nhat Hanh, the 16th Karmapa, Lama Yeshe, Bokar Rinpoche, Tsultrik Rinpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and Saints of other traditions, as having wisdom, as being free, and as effortlessly manifesting such virtues as these.

By their very nature, seeing them, looking at their photograph, or thinking of them now immediately brings light to the mind, and can re-establish health and harmony in a person. They are such powerful objects of refuge, faith and devotion for this reason. They bring peace and joy, and help us to awaken.

The perfectly divine, original nature that is known by and then is revealed in a Noble person communicates with words, by look, gesture, touch, and by its presence. This nature is what relieves suffering and brings happiness, everywhere and at all times. This light removes the darkness from the minds of ourselves and others, and destroys wrong views. It establishes people in right views about themselves, and others, and this world.

With buddhahood, or someone with any degree of realization, it's not that one achieves something and then just sits there peacefully, doing nothing. In fact, they are *most* active, for that is their very nature. In a saintly person, or in a Buddha or a perfectly awakened one, it can be most clearly seen how being *is* doing.

Even with an ordinary person, with ordinary states of mind, being is do-ing- their qualities are being manifested in what they think, say and do.

We don't usually notice this however, since its not so pronounced. With a saintly person, an arahat or bodhisattva, it is far more tangible.

Buddhahood, the highest achievement of the contemplative life, the pinnacle, that which is most worthy of reverence, and the well-justified aim for all who would bring the greatest benefit to the world, is also the clearest expression of the divine life working in the world. This Buddhahood is *synonymous* with Buddha-Activity: It is spontaneous, impartial, intelligent, creative, adaptive, compassionate, and joyful, all without any effort at all.

An awakened person is never separated from and are never unaware of their boundless, peaceful and free nature, therefore they can most effectively help others, while maintaining their view, and access to rich inner resources.

## Prayer as Buddha Activity

Prayer is Buddha Activity - the awakened heart responding to the needs of the world. To think of it this way is different from the usual idea about prayer, but doing so helps us to understand both the act of prayer, and what is meant by a Buddha, or one who is Awake.

The mere gesture of placing the palms together may or may not be one of prayer. It all depends on what is going on inside a person. Someone can be thinking of anything at all. When they are thinking of and appealing to the divine, in the unique way that only they can know, then the outward gesture of prayer, in the traditional sense, matches what is going on inside.

Prayer has been described sometimes as a conversation, and at other times as praise, or as a deep listening for 'the still, small voice'. It can be an upwelling, an exuberance. At other times, and it can be an attending to what we know, buried deep within us, as a source of solace, guidance and encouragement.

Prayer has been described as changing *us*, and not the nature of the one prayed to. We become more receptive, more malleable, more attuned to truth and love. This is true whether our prayer is in the Christian context, to God, or Jesus, or to the Saints of that tradition, or in a Buddhist framework, to the divine as found there.

Rumi said:

*Work on your stony qualities and become resplendent like the ruby*

Prayer also reaches out, in every tradition, it moves through us, and into the world. This is true whether we are in our cell, meditating on the world as it is, and on the needs of our loved ones, strangers, friends, co-workers and adversaries of the moment, or whether we are out and about in our daily lives, speaking, and working.

I remember a book of Christian prayer I came across in India in the 90's with the title 'Prayer in Action'. Its theme was that there are forms of prayer that are active, and that are without words at times, doing one's share of the will of the Father, building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

This broadens the definition of prayer to divine activity, or to the activity of the divine in us and through us.

*Dig a well in the earth of this body,  
or even before the well is dug  
let God draw the water up.*

There is an effort to be made, then effortless-ness, something greater than our usual idea of ourselves becoming active.

There are the same ideas in Buddhism, and knowing about them helps clarify the nature of an awakened person, in any tradition.

There is an effort to be made, and then, when there is realization, or an awakening, *the very nature of such a person is active*. Whether they show peace and stability- I'm thinking of Thich Nhat Hanh and Ajaan Chah, sitting with such great stability and dignity- or whether they demonstrate the joy of the Way and the realized life, and thereby energize and encourage us, as with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and some Zen masters, their being *is* their doing. What they are, and what they have realized inside communicates and inspires. It is a catalyst. It edifies and uplifts the mind and the heart. It is like the proverbial 'stream clearing jewel', cleaning the muck from our thought and perceptions, revealing the beauty and preciousness of this life and the world.

This buddha nature - this original nature- also acts by organizing, by teaching, by writing and speaking, by giving food and clothing, and

medicine and care, and every needful thing. It heals. It is grounded in this present reality, and is far seeing.

There is so much to be done in this world as it is now, but I have faith that we can awaken to the truth of our being here, and it is with this wisdom and compassion, this divine life, that we will continue creating a world based on truth, and love.

## Moving up the planes

A word of explanation: in the Western Esoteric Tradition, it's taught that we exist simultaneously on different levels, from the most tangible to the most subtle, and that the subtle levels create what we experience on the more tangible. This is the view that is the basis for what follows.

## From Regarding Tonglen

A friend asked

'I wonder how we could find the right balance to get out of activity and stay in it at the same time, to increase our ability to spread the bright awareness in a kind of speaking silence. Any idea?'

and I thought of how I can feel at times that we are so tangibly connected. I think this is where prayer is surely a way to continue sharing joy and strength. When we hold someone in our heart, we are never apart, and what we offer to one another is always available.

This is from Regarding Tonglen, in [a collection of essays](#) I have on Thought Training:

I've found the following simple and profound teaching, from the Western Esoteric Tradition, called 'moving up the planes', to be helpful: The idea is that we all exist simultaneously on different levels.

One application of this idea is that \*we may not have to be physically in touch with someone to be psychically or energetically connected; we do not need to be psychically connected to be mentally connected, or mentally connected to be spiritually connected, and to be a positive influence.

This kind of verifiable idea helps to cancel the mistaken notion we can have, especially when in meditation or on retreat, that it is somehow selfish to remove ourselves in some ways from others in need. Or the wrong idea that if we have

removed ourself in some way we are not still connected on another, more subtle level. Sometimes, this is the best thing we can do, for all of our sake.



## The Power of the Word – a justification

The value of reading out loud, and recording, and listening to useful teachings comes from their being expressions of the truth. It does not depend on their being read with a mellifluous voice, or on the translation. Something deeper is at work, which I call the esoteric power of the word.

One part of Aryasura's Aspirational Prayer in 70 Stanzas says,

*May all these beings be tamed  
by relying on the sphere of action of my speech...*

and he is referring to something more than mere eloquence, or to a pleasing or authoritative sounding voice. That "sphere of activity" of his speech refers to the function of the truth that is in his mind. This is something mysterious and profound, communicating mind to mind, where time is not a barrier, or distance; and where race, culture, language, and social status are all transcended.

Christians have long known of this hidden aspect of the word, or idea, how it communicates power and blessing, and how it can inspire and guide us beyond what is specifically said. Through reading or listening, to be in touch with the Word is to be in touch with the Author of the Word, and in the case of a holy book, or teaching, it is to be put in touch with Truth Itself.

The Power of Truth in Buddhism also has a long honored tradition. Several early prayers recount teachings of the Buddha, and then conclude to the effect of, "because of the truth of these words, may our noble aspirations be fulfilled".

A recent commentator to this tradition, Piyadassi Thera, described the process of recalling the teachings as having the purpose of uplifting the mind of the listeners, even temporarily, to that level, where there is natural grace in abundance.

When it comes to spiritual subjects, a reading doesn't get its worth then from production values, or from classically appealing voices, or from scholarly translations. The value flows *through* these forms, to reach and to nurture generations of hearers.

## The Resonance of the Saints

Even though a holy man or woman may have laid down their earthly form, their influence remains as a blessing to all who know them. This is hard or impossible to believe for the average materialist, and even in some circles where spiritual or religious matters are discussed, many have trouble accepting this idea.

In modern life, our senses are turned outwards. We may have grown numb and jaded, and disillusioned with false promises. We seldom register the slight changes that happen as a result of a written word, or an image; a voice, a melody, a color, or movement in the world. Still, if we were to train our attention to pick up on what seem to be small changes, they may lead us to discover marvelous things about our being here, and our connections to one another.

Usually when we think of some miracle happening, we assume it would be a gigantic change, something so out of the ordinary that it startles us awake into a new level of awareness. We imagine that something like a levitation, or an object materializing, or some illness suddenly vanishing without a trace would convince us we live in a miraculous world, however, it doesn't usually happen that way. There are great and small miracles happening, and we remain unconvinced.

I try to remember a line I thought of a few years back:

*The problem with a miracle on Monday is that by Tuesday we've forgotten about it.*

Coarse and jaded we are, oh yes indeed.

The problem is that those dramatic moments so easily fade into memory, and disbelief. It would seem we would need to witness ever new and more impressive miracles to keep our faith going, and even then, I doubt we'd believe.

There is a tradition established in the time of the Buddha of not displaying any powers that were developed through concentration, such as clairvoyance. The reason was plain. The Buddha wanted to teach people the way to freedom. We can only imagine how crowds would gather wanting to see some unusual event, and if some display was made, that's what they would remember. They would go home having learned nothing.

When we speak of a holy man or woman, or a divine being, what we are referring to is someone who has reached the truth to an exceptional degree. Saints of any tradition can be known by their spontaneously ethical and deeply loving nature. They often have an elevating quality to them as well - we may feel blissful for hours or even days after meeting one. Witness the response many people have had to the Dalai Lama, or to Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, or to Amma.

That a holy person's influence remains after their body returns to the elements brings another level to it altogether, however. It means that, wherever we are, if we have faith and some connection to that teacher, or seer, or prophet, we can be enriched, uplifted, healed, and guided by them. This is not unheard of in the Indian Tradition. They realize that a saint transcends the limitations of his or her form even while they are alive, and that their blessings remain ever fresh and vital.

Often the reason people go on pilgrimage is to connect with the energy of a saint or divinity. Although a their presence is not limited to any one place, owing to the conditions of our senses, for some people it is easier to connect with that energy on an etheric level in a place where a saint has physically been.

People's respect and devotion to a holy person, or a teacher or divinity can also help us to connect with them. Devotees can consecrate a place or an object. They can literally help to imbue it with a particular spiritual power. More than once, I have seen and experienced how people's devotion can

open a channel between the worlds, so to speak, between these different levels of being.

Even just hearing someone speak of their teacher with great faith and devotion can open up access for us, for a time, and we can see and feel and receive something of what they are so moved and inspired by.

I have thought that we need to develop our language to talk about spiritual things, as ordinary words and concepts do not reach into the mystery, as Rumi says. They often have a way of excluding from our vision and senses those deeper sources of nourishment, strength and guidance.

When we speak of the resonance of the saints, it is their being that continues, and that communicates through their works, and through their students and devotees. At any time, we can pick up on the energy of a healer, a humble, wise scholar, a lesser or more well known protector and benefactor, or a great world teacher. Knowing this for ourselves comes as a supreme gift.

We are encouraged to avail ourselves as much as needed of the energy of the saints and the divine life, for our own sake, and for the sake of our family, community and world. The problem is only that we are distracted, that our senses are so covered over, and that we so strongly disbelieve anything out of the ordinary. But even some slight opening on our part, some remembrance, and all our faith can be vindicated, all of our faith-lessness destroyed. After connecting to a saint, our old habitual sense of the world begins to fade. Our lives are blessed, and they become that much more of a gift to others.

## **Ocean of Saints**

Ananda Mayi Ma, Amma, Karuna Mayi Ma...

Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day,  
Sister Carol, Mother Theodore Guerin...

Sister Annabel Laity, Kamala Masters,  
Dipa Ma, Cheng Yen...

Ani Tenzin Palmo, Jetsunma Kushok Chimay Luding,  
Jamyang Dagmo Kusho, Khandro-la...

Yeshe Tsogyal, Mandarava  
Saraswati, Lakshmi

Indigenous Grandmothers,  
Keewaydinoquay Peschel,  
Diana Beresford Kroeger

## **Holy Women of prayer and action,**

Mother Mary, Kuan Yin, Tara

Divine Activity,  
gracing our world,

All you holy women, pray for us!

**May your blessings be upon us!**

...

*Ocean of Saints,  
Holy Women of prayer and action,  
May your blessings be upon us!*

*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Sora  
Om Mani Peme Hung*

## A few words on Ocean of Saints

We need to enter into the realm of metaphor, comfortably, to begin to speak of things as they actually are. We can see the limitations of ordinary language, how it mistakenly places objects and experiences outside of each other, and then attempts to convey relationship via subject-verb-object constructions. Things are both more simple, and infinitely richer and more complex than this.

When Christian theologians asked how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, by some they were mocked, as if they were looking for an actual number. The ignorance and arrogance of their critics couldn't be more obvious.

In the Avatamsaka Sutra, as recounted by Thich Nhat Hanh, angels, saints, and bodhisattvas come to the pregnant mother of the Buddha-to-be, to ask if he is comfortable. She expresses astonishment that, although there are so many of these holy beings, to offer homage to the future Buddha, they all enter into her quite easily.

Since all is a manifestation of mind, or our spiritual nature, as expressed in this text, and this is limitless, there is no problem. There is always plenty of room.

In this very moment, we are accompanied by the saints and holy beings, enriched by their lives and presence in our lives.

When we count, in a religious work, or in poetry, we are at the threshold of the mundane world, and the spiritual realm. Counting is something we do in our everyday life, and we have to get it right, by consensus, in order to function effectively; counting out change, giving directions, agreeing on when to meet, and telling time.



In the spiritual world, there is one, there is two, as in relationship, and then there are numbers that point beyond all counting. If we miss this cue, it's as if our pant leg were caught on the doorframe - we get no further.

Moving through because we've understood the significance of the metaphor, we can leave behind numbers and walk in the light of spiritual presence and truth.

The question then arises, if one single saint contains the fullness of spirit, why mention two, or more? Our ordinary senses still obscure the intangible, the beyond-conception. Seeing the same vital principle expressed in a few different names and forms disabuses us of the tendency to hold onto a single expression, and miss the inner truth that is being revealed. Once we get to that, then the essence of all the saints and holy men and women is there.

It's this way, then:

Having one form of devotion to focus on, a name and form, a practice, focuses our mind and brings through the blessings. Devotions are our cultivated receptivity, and honor to have with us.

## An Introduction to the Bodhisattva-Divinity Tara

In order for us as Westerners to engage in practices that have come from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, without misunderstanding their nature or purpose, there are a few ideas that need to be spelled out. As Americans, we have certain common ideas, and so the same questions naturally arise, and these can be addressed at any point, but probably the earlier on in our study the better.

I would like to introduce Tara as an example of a practice that can be beneficial, and, when I think of doing this, I can see right away the kinds of questions I would propose we consider so the communication can have a better chance of success.

First, as with any divine being – or bodhisattva, we have the question, ‘Who is Tara?’ Of course we can see that there are different ways to answer this kind of a question. There are different levels to it. When we speak about the ultimate nature of anything, be it God, or Buddha, then this is a really deep question, maybe taking a lifetime to ask or to answer. If we are asking this type of deep question, this holds up a mirror to our own self. We can ask, ‘Who am I?’, and ‘Who do I conceive myself to be?’

Then again, especially if we are beginners, we really need more of an answer in terms of what we can all easily recognize and understand and work with. Maybe this approach will be helpful: using the simplest, least esoteric language to describe something that is both accessible and also profound.

Historically, and now in Western culture too, Tara is regarded as a protectress, a savior, a benefactor. The practice of calling on Tara in times of need has been successful for many people. She is called on to help liberate us from problems, and especially from fears. She has a reputation for quick action, for responding very quickly, with loving kindness and compassion.

Her practice can be done in different ways - with prayer, or through visualization and mantra recitation. Tara's mantra is Om Tare Tuttare Ture Soha (pronounced Om Tah-ray Too-tah-ray Too-ray So-ha). A person can also simply think of her and feel her presence with faith and devotion.

Meditators will tell us that we all have Tara within us; that all these qualities and wonders are contained within our fundamental nature. They tell us that if we do the practice these qualities awaken and are expressed in the world, and that in a sense we become Tara, and this I don't doubt. For the time being though, let's just stay with the outer, common belief and function, that calling on Tara works, that increasing what we can call *the Tara energy* in our lives works, even if we don't know all of why or how it does. If we have some karmic affinity, and some receptivity or openness, and we give these methods a fair try, we can see the result for ourselves.

'If I could only give you the moon...'

Another question that often comes up when talking about any of the bodhisattva-deity practices, calling on Tara for example, and praying for a husband or a wife, or for health, or wealth is, 'How is this Buddhist?', and I think I'm just now able to say what I've been thinking and feeling for a while now that Tara is of a certain class I call 'the Bodhisattva Sangha'. The word bodhisattva means someone who is dedicated to helping others in the fullest possible ways, and sangha means a spiritual community.

As a member of the Bodhisattva Sangha, Tara responds as we would, with kindness, to someone asking for something... If they ask for water, we give them water; if they ask for a coat, we give them a coat...

There's a Zen story about a monk who was told that a thief was coming, and so he threw his bowl and his robes out the window as the thief approached. The thief scooped them up, somewhat startled, I'd imagine, and the monk called after him, saying, 'If I could only give you the moon!...'

Such is the wish of Bodhisattva Sangha – their deep wish is for our true happiness, our freedom, peace and health, and so if we ask for food or shelter or medicine, they give us these without holding anything back, as a mother or father would give to their child, or a friend to a friend. They give out of their great means. They will give to us according to our needs, and they will give to us as much as we can receive. Their wish for us includes both the relative, provisional, day to day needs, and also those things that are of ultimate benefit, such as teachings and encouragement, and good conditions for spiritual growth. Their love and their kind wish for us is of one nature.

I heard someone give the definition of blessing, in the Buddhist sense, as that which removes obstacles to spiritual practice, which I think is a good definition because it includes both relative and ultimate things.

Making a distinction – the word ‘deity’

If I had to choose one term that isn’t translated well from Eastern culture to Western culture, it is the word ‘deity’. More often than not, translators are not communicating the intended meaning. The reason is this: whether or not we identify with the Western religious traditions, as Westerners we have ideas about God as part of our culture. We have all these associations, automatically, for the word God and its synonyms that, in this case does not apply. When trying to understand what words are referring to that come from non-theistic cultures, some effort is needed to get at a clear sense of their meaning.

We can say for certain that Buddhism does not make use of the idea of a creator God, all powerful, and all knowing. It does however have teachings, and it does make use of practices that call upon and access what can be called ‘help from the other side’. There is calling upon beings that help.

When Tibetan teachers speak in English, sometimes they don't translate the word 'yi-dam', and they explain it as keeping the bodhisattva – divinity 'held tightly in the mind', as a method of meditation, as a path, and as a means of benefit.

A first level bodhisattva, in some teachings, is described as having at least the experience of insight into the cause of the end of suffering, that freedom and joy. And Buddhist teachings on what is called refuge tell us that if someone or some being is still subject to suffering or change, then that is not a reliable source of protection in the long term. We should seek true refuge, true and lasting protection and support. This, in Buddhist teachings, is what distinguishes Buddhas, or enlightened beings as true refuge.

Perhaps, rather than use the word 'deity', sticky, or perhaps misleading as it is, I would propose the term 'divinity' – since we do have the idea that the sacred can be here in this world; that it is here for us, available, and to be received with deep respect. The sense of divinity can be cultivated and awakened throughout our lives.

One more thought: regarding a question such as 'Where is Tara?' We usually divide the world up in our thinking in ways it is not actually divided. We say there is an inside and an outside to our life. Looked at energetically though, the so-called inside and outside are one.

If we think of Tara as an archetype, an aspect of the universal soul we all share, this can have connotations of being purely something inside. My sense is that it's truer to say that Tara, and the other Buddhas, Saints, or Bodhisattva Sangha exist in the realm of one-ness, where the inside and outside are both included, where they are one. I think this accounts, at least in part, for the effectiveness of these methods.



A note on the prayer that follows:

I usually don't comment on anything I write out that is more lyrical, since these sorts of things should speak for themselves, but in this case maybe it would add something to say the following.

I had the idea that describing a bodhisattva, or a guardian or benefactor can be likened to talking about a person. We may say the person has this quality, or likes to go here or there, or spend their time like this, all of which would be for the sake of trying to give us some idea of the person. All the different things we could say would be to introduce us to the essence of the person. So it is with this poem about Tara. The different aspects or qualities mentioned refer to something that is one essential nature – that is Tara. The purpose of writing this, and reflecting on it is to get in touch with what is being talked about.

One more thing may be worth mentioning. While much of this is very personal, I've been surprised to learn that others have had similar experiences with Tara. And so here I am writing this out this prayer and sharing it with others, with the hope that it brings others, my dear friends and family, the same, and greater, benefit.

## In Praise of Tara

Holy Tara, Protector of living beings,  
 May your blessings flow throughout all of our lives  
 and by Your Compassionate Activity,  
 may all the myriad needs of all the myriad beings  
 be completely fulfilled

Tara

Your beauty tames the minds of living beings.  
 You draw all beings to yourself.  
 Your virtue calms their fears and brings them all fresh happiness.

You are the one who makes what seems to be the impossible entirely  
 possible  
 You conquer disbelief, and dispel doubt  
 without leaving even a trace  
 You are miraculous activity, beyond comprehension.

You are 'swift to regard', quick to respond,  
 the remover of obstacles.

You are our protector

You are grace and blessings,  
 the relative and ultimate liberator of beings

Your beauty inspires uprightness of moral character  
 You pacify habit energy  
 We shed our skins, lose our old ways,  
 like leaves falling off of trees

You bring new birth, and give new strength



You purify the mind - like the stream-clearing jewel  
You uplift and brighten the mind

For those with positive aims,  
You are their Great Benefactress

You set all things right  
You bring about reconciliation without impediment  
without anything blocking it  
You bring harmony to every surrounding circumstance

You help us to gather all positive conditions  
You bring out the best that is in us all  
You make all practices effective  
It has always been this way  
It is this way now  
It will always be this way

You are the spring-like feeling of 'yes',  
the sum of all optimism,  
joyful positive energy,  
the feeling of 'I can'

Tara,  
May your blessings completely illuminate all of our lives  
and may all the myriad needs of all the myriad beings  
be completely fulfilled now

O, Bright Virtue!  
You are light  
You are grace in my life  
and subtle nourishment  
The blessing of all the women who have ever wished me well

You are instinctive love,  
all-accommodating  
naturally inclusive  
comprehensive

You are embodied enlightened intelligence,  
intuitive awareness, the heart awake,  
and the flourishing of joy

You are playful, youthful, joyful, quick, charming, elegant, inspiring, wise,  
warm, strengthening, encouraging, healing,  
calming, stabilizing;

How can I call you? Tara - hope, positive energy, joyful, pure, wholesome  
energy

With your rivers  
nurture my limbs, these fields  
With your warmth, your light  
bring about the total flowering of goodness...  
Tara,  
May your blessings be established in all of our lives

Because this is Divine Feminine energy, quick to respond  
with magical activity,  
the equivalent of the patron saint of lost causes,  
grace,  
spiritual beauty bringing light, giving hope,  
removing obstacles,  
calming fear, pacifying suffering,  
and protecting  
bringing harmony to every surrounding circumstance,  
bringing life, health, happiness, good fortune, and stability

and, being the Spring-like sum of all optimism, inspiring,  
positive energy,  
enabling all the good things we would do to become effective,  
to become fulfilled,  
to become complete,  
This is called Green Tara  
May all share in these blessings...

## On Mysticism

*Meister Eckhart said, "God is a great underground river," and the wisdom in all religions taps into this one source. – Matthew Fox*

*We must all become oceans now,  
deep at that,  
and as broad*

There is a passage in a short biography of Inayat Kahn that reads as follows:

*'Inayat began to teach and discuss his world view with different people who would ask what to call this mode of thought. For a long time, Inayat refused to give it a name fearing it would create barriers between people. He would say only it was ancient wisdom from the one and only source.*

*'He emphasized how none of the great spiritual teachers gave a name to their religious views. Finally, knowing that a body of thought needs some identifier to unify it, he told people it was Sufism.'*

## The World Today Needs More Mystics

A mystic is someone who has taken their spiritual path far enough to see the universal truth of it. This gives them an understanding of other traditions, not in terms of their history or doctrines, but from the point of view of their goal. They have reached 'the one without a second'. Now, isn't it just this depth of realization that is so needed in the world today? This is what enables people to give up their exclusive claim to the truth.

*'Truth is one, but people call it by different names' – The Rg Veda*

Think of all the wars in history that have been carried out in the name of religion– in all of these, people felt that they alone knew the will of God, or

Allah, and that everyone else was a threat and needed to be converted or die.

One of the great world scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita has this remarkable exchange on the subject of narrow mindedness that has stayed with me since I first read it more than twenty years ago. It goes like this:

*Someone asked a wise person, what is the most amazing thing in the world? and the wise person answered, the most amazing things are two: first, that all around us, people are dying, and yet we think that we will never die, and second, that everywhere, people think that others are fools, and that they alone have the truth.*

!

I've brought this to mind many times over the years, to try to pry open my mostly unconscious grip on ideas, to try to let some light and fresh air in. It is so on the mark, I'm happy to say, I think it's worked more often than not!

Think of all the close minded arrogance there is in religion today, and all of the fear and mistrust of others. All of this comes, not from religion or spiritual practice itself, but from a lack of depth, from a lack of realization within those very traditions. The traditions themselves are all perfectly capable of producing saints— what's lacking is profound understanding.

We so live surrounded on all sides by a sea of ignorance of other beliefs, and intolerance, that most of us take it for granted. We seldom look, or ask how other faiths can be seen and profitably understood. The closest we may come to getting a glimpse of how pervasive intolerance is in these times, is when we see the sectarian divisions within religions themselves. Sometimes these are the most antagonistic— the most famous these days probably being the Catholic-Protestant divisions in Ireland, but there are others that I know about closer at hand.

For example, when one of the followers of a Buddhist teacher disagrees with another person who is being taught *within the same lineage*, you can be sure they don't even regard other schools of Buddhism as genuine, or as being worthy of respect and consideration, let alone study. And if this is the case *within one school*, then other religions are not even viewed as anything other than mistaken. Their perspective, time honored and filled with saints in their history, nevertheless, at the very least, is not received at all. And never mind those who have no religious affiliation– they are not even registered as having anything of truth and genuine worth to offer to humanity.

And remember, here we're just talking, thankfully, about the most benign form of intolerance. At the very least, there is an absence where there could be a greater flourishing of understanding, learning, and even practice. This kind of extreme, closed minded sectarian thinking is there in American Christianity, and in Islam too, and I'm sure in other religions as well. Narrow minded intolerance everywhere has the same characteristics, and what a loss it is to us all!

The problem of idolatry

Every religion has recognized the danger of mistakenly worshipping what is not the real source of benefit to ourselves and others. This may be like seeing a tree, but not seeing its roots.

In the Old Testament the idol was 'the golden calf'.

In the Book of Mark, Jesus says,

*I will destroy this temple, made of hands, and, in three days, build another, made without hands.*

Further on in that same Book, it says:

*... and the veil of the temple*

*was torn from top to bottom...*

Islam, to this day, has a prohibition against *any* representation of the Ultimate truth. And the Zen Buddhist Tradition, throughout its teachings, is especially keen on exposing the limitations of language, and where we get caught by forms.

In the account of what is regarded as 'the first zen discourse', the Buddha, without speaking, simply held up a flower. Only Mahakasyapa saw the Buddha's intent, and he smiled. The Buddha then said,

*I have a treasure of insight that I have transmitted to Mahakasyapa.*

Thich Nhat Hanh commented that, while everyone was wondering, what is the deep philosophical meaning, only one person saw. When someone holds up a flower, well, he wants you to see it!

{a paraphrase, as best as I remember it}

*Build me a seamless monument*

they also say in Zen. Go beyond the words, and then go beyond the going beyond, i.e., don't be attached to that either.

It is, as I have heard Meister Eckhart express it, that,

*as long as we love any image we are doomed to live in purgatory.*

{i.e., as long as we're thinking this way, we're only half way there}

But forms alone are not the problem. The crux of whether some form of worship is idolatry is the extent to which we have penetrated the meaning of the symbol. If we have not, that very act sets us up against every other symbol, and every other form of worship. If we have, we find ourselves in deep accord with them all.

We should all be offering each other our best gifts, but instead, because of limited understanding and our attachment to forms, the door is shut and barricaded before our guests even turn up the lane! We go to war against our brothers out of that very same narrowness of view.

Here's part of a poem:

*We must all become oceans now,  
deep at that,  
and as broad  
anything less  
and the light that could feed,  
and save us,  
instead  
turns against us*

Religions become most dangerous forces when they are not fully understood, when we don't penetrate to their universal depth. They can rouse natural devotional passion, and instead of that illuminating reason, and people's lives, and the world, that same ardor can go in terribly wrong directions, as evidenced by so much of what's in the news this last decade and more.

Maybe once long ago, and until recently, people could survive, and even thrive holding to one perspective, one teaching, one teacher and tradition. It may have been that there was *no need* to understand other faiths, as people either didn't come into contact with them, or else they were not dependent on them in any way.

Although I would argue that their lives would have been enriched, and wars based on misunderstanding would have been avoided had people actually learned in some depth, and with respect, what others believed, still it may have been possible somewhere for people to live in peace and fulfillment with secure in just their one set of beliefs.



But these times we are living in now are different. In our increasingly globalized world, we are confronted more and more, whether we like it or not, with different faiths, different languages, different poetics, and different tellings of history. The one thing we can't do any longer is to ignore that there are other traditions.

At this time, we can either choose to attach even more firmly to our beliefs, and, with even greater fervor and intensity, deny any validity other than that, which fundamentalists everywhere are doing, or we can go in the opposite direction and begin to open to the possibility that truth itself is not just contained in one tradition or set of beliefs. In other words, we can become more realized in our own tradition, and to some extent at least, in our own way, touching universal truths, we can become mystics.

As each day goes by, the need for mystics grows more and more. We need people who have taken the practices of their tradition far enough so they recognize the same essential truth shining in those who walk other paths. More and more, we need people who will spread this truth about the religions of the world.

In the past, it may have been enough to just produce realized beings who had no contact with or knowledge of other traditions. In these times though, it's a dangerous thing *not* to understand that our own path aims to bring us to a goal shared by others.

Add to religions devotional passion the contact with other traditions, without understanding this truth, and this is exactly how fanaticism comes about. People blow up buses, clinics, open fire in churches, burn mosques, and deny that we are all of one family, all out of this kind of blindness.

What we need is a depth of realization, produced everywhere, in all traditions and non- traditions, such as the arts, that sees the universal truth of our own particular path, and that then goes on to embrace all of

humanity, all of life as its own, naturally encouraging others to do the same.

We need to reach beyond distinctions, *where there is neither East nor West.*

Rabindrath Tagore offers us these timeless lines:

*O, grant me the prayer  
that I may never lose the bliss  
of the touch of the One  
in the play of the many*

and,

*Where the mind is without fear,  
and the head is held high,  
where knowledge is free;  
where the world has not been broken up  
into fragments,  
by narrow domestic walls –  
into that heaven, wake!*

When you look at mystics across time and cultures, it's reassuring to see how they have more in common with each other than with many of their fellow believers.

*All mystics, said Saint-Martin,  
speak the same language and come from the same country.*

They all teach that life is sacred, and that the highest ideal is love. They all affirm that life is one, and that, whoever we are, wherever we are, we belong to that one life, and to each other.

Twentieth Century theologian Howard Thurman wrote, in *The Luminous Darkness*,

*'It may be, I don't know, that to experience oneself as a human being is one with experiencing one's fellows as human beings. It means that the individual must have a sense of kinship to life that transcends and goes beyond the immediate kinship of family or the organic kinship that binds him [or her] ethnically or "racially" or nationally.*

*He has a sense of being an essential part of the structural relationship that exists between him and all other men [and women], and between him, all other men [and women], and the total external environment. As a human being, then, he belongs to life and the whole kingdom of life that includes all that lives and perhaps, also, all that has ever lived.*

*In other words, he sees himself as a part of a continuing, breathing, living existence. To be a human being, then, is to be essentially alive in a living world.*

Isn't it clear now more than ever, with all our differences emerging, that this view what we need more of? This is what will harmonize the differences, and make the cacophonous discord of Babel a great ocean-like symphony, enriching to us all.

Other mystics come to mind here, such as Rumi, Hafiz, Meister Eckhart, Hazrat Inayat Kahn, Lama Yeshe, Thich Nhat Hanh, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King, the poets Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye and Pablo Neruda, and of course the Buddha, and Jesus.

There are greater and lesser mystics, people with deeper or less profound realization, but we do need them all. It is also entirely possible for someone to reach a depth in their practice without thinking of it as mysticism. Seeing a unity behind the multiplicity of forms, depends on contrast, which goes like this:

Whether someone recognizes that they've found a unifying truth depends on whether they come in contact with other language and methods, and, in

an open-hearted, open minded way comparing their tradition with his own, he sees with joy that they come to the same conclusion.

Part of it, certainly, is having the intention to look. There can never be a legacy-tradition of realized beings, passed down like so many physical goods, for this reason. We each need to affirm certain truths for ourselves. But when we see the need to look deeply, the same truth we find within also begins to be seen elsewhere, to shine from other sources.

I recently had the surprise and delight to hear the following, expressed by Father Thomas Keating:

*If one completes the journey to one's own heart, one will find oneself in the heart of everyone.*

How wonderful!

Rabia has a poem in which she says:

*In my soul  
there is a temple, a shrine,  
a mosque, a church  
where I kneel.  
Prayer should bring us to an altar  
where no walls or names exist...*

And St. Theresa of Avila has said:

*This magnificent refuge is inside you.  
Enter. Shatter the darkness that shrouds the doorway...*

*Be bold. Be humble.  
Put away the incense and forget*

*the incantations they taught you.*

*Ask no permission from the authorities.  
Close your eyes and follow your breath  
to the still place that leads to the  
invisible path that leads you home.*

If we see this much it should be enough.

It is clear to me on my good days that traditions have these two aspects to them, the precious historical dimension, and the ultimate dimension, which goes beyond any one tradition, and that empowers all traditions. Recognizing the aspect that is beyond names and forms, then we know at that time our unity with other people, in other places and Faiths.

It is this ultimate dimension *that gives life* to traditions, both our own, and those of others. It's like when the roots of a tree go down deep into the earth and reach water, and that life nourishes the whole tree. Then all the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit will certainly flourish. It has always been this way in the past, it will always be this way in the future, and it is this way now.

How to pray, How to act, and How to live in this world

The strength of devotion, and the joy of believers in the different traditions tells us is that they have each found a source of strength and sustenance, and that they know keeping in contact with that is essential for their spiritual survival and continued strength.

One of the great things about being alive in these times is that we have so many choices of teachings and teachers available to find what meets our needs, our karmic affinities, and character. I have no doubt that anyone who searches sincerely, without giving up will find the living water.

It gets so personal at that point, and it never need be anything other than that. Think of a rose, or a pine tree, or a wave- they can only be what they are, thankfully. It's in being what we are made to be that we give our gift fully to this world.

A version of 'think globally – act locally'

I remember being surprised a number of years ago, when I went to receive acupuncture treatments, to find out how they can place a needle in one part of the body, to effect another. I remember this now because it seems to be exactly analogous to what we would think of as acting locally. The truth of it is that, just like the body is one, this life is one, and anything we do on a personal level, even the smallest action, effects the whole of life. We may not see it, but we can be sure that it is so.

Wherever we are in life then, as long as we are acting with a positive motivation, with kindness and compassion, and being as inclusive as we can, we can be sure that life beyond what we see benefits.

We can continue to learn throughout our whole lives, and share what we know, and the basis for doing this will always be the depth of our own spiritual practice and insight. This aspect of living *must* be honored, my brothers and sisters, in all its forms.

Our eyes and our heart are privileged to see many of the ways people live, and believe, and practice their path today. Even if we don't understand the language, or what they do, or if we see them practicing their path only partway, still the common basis of our faith and life can always be clear to us, and constant. And, life with all its challenges, at that point, as the mystics love to tell us, is fulfillment, a great festival of celebration, and of service.

Hafiz says:

*You carry all the ingredients  
To turn your existence into joy,*

*Mix them, mix  
Them!*

and

*We have not come here to take prisoners  
Or to confine our wondrous spirits,  
But to experience ever and ever more deeply  
Our divine courage, freedom, and  
Light!*

and,

*You are with the Friend now  
And look so much stronger.*

*You can stay that way  
And even bloom!*

*Keep squeezing drops of the Sun  
From your prayers and work and music  
And from your companions' beautiful laughter.*

*Keep squeezing drops of the Sun  
From the sacred hands and glance of your Beloved*

*And, my dear,  
From the most insignificant movements  
Of your own holy body.*

*Now, sweet one,*

*Be wise.*

*Cast all your votes for Dancing!*

A mysticism of personal and collective value

I know that when many people read lines such as these they think, 'what does this have to do with my life?' Spirituality in general, and mysticism in particular have gotten a bad rap over the years as having nothing to do with life in the world, and as having little or nothing to offer, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Who among us is actually able to bear witness, and to respond to suffering effectively, other than people who are liberated from their own inner conflicts, in other words, those who have matured far enough in their spiritual life. This maturation can take any form, but everywhere it is the same story unfolding, wherever there is an effective method at work – born of empathy, then, by their fruits we know them.

What mystics especially have to offer, in addition to being able to respond to the lives of those around them, is an understanding of our common ground, that we are all of one family, and that it is our responsibility and privilege, the greatest joy for us, to care for one another. It is this universal perspective, a unitive vision, and active engagement in healing the world soul, that truly characterizes the mystic, and not those caricatures imagined from a distance.

Addressing an unfounded bias against spiritual practice, Matthew Fox, the author of *Original Blessing*, was asked the following question about the place of the mystic in society:

Sam Keen:

*It seems to me that psychotherapy, like religion, is concerned with healing and that it has the virtue of providing a time and place for remembering our individual*



*wounds and for private lamentation. But don't both fail to lead us beyond our private suffering and into the wounds of the body politic?*

and he replied:

*Both therapists and politicians should join the mystics in leading us, gently but surely, into the wounds of our times, because if we did not live in such denial we could develop the collective imagination necessary to deal with our problems. But we are afraid to face the nothingness.*

*The mystics tell us that from the encounter with nothingness comes a breakthrough into imagination and creativity -- the next step in the journey. Once you experience the awe and face the darkness, creativity is unleashed. It's not something you have to manufacture. Creativity is utterly natural in us. It's our divine power.*

*In the final stage of the journey, creativity gives us the impulse and power to transform ourselves and our society. I think of the transformative way as the practice of compassion, the struggle for healing, for justice, for bringing the balance back into our bodies, our psyches and our communities.*

Acting this way, always and everywhere, we are taking part in something larger than ourselves, *carried on the tide of the spirit*, as Rumi said. There is little or nothing of the ego there, with none of the separation that comes from false distinctions.

Were the time not so pressing, I wouldn't have tried to write at this much on something so seemingly vague and impractical as mysticism.

Actually, from another point of view, there is nothing more precise, and necessary in our times than pointing out how our religions have a common basis, and to try thereby to foster greater respect for other faiths.

In writing this then, it is my hope simply that enough of the great value and necessity for our times of a depth of realization and universal

perspective, will have come through to encourage people on their path, for all of our sake.

May all benefit.

## From Healing the World Soul

Beyond the partial identifications, and beyond exclusion, there is a wholeness that acts dynamically in us when we sense it. This work that we are doing now, on any level we identify is really the work of healing the world soul. Artists and parents and recluses and activists are all working, united by hidden lines of force that are made of one kind of love.

Imagine an underwater system of channels

Lineage

prayer

The ocean

This is the way light moves

Imagine an underwater system of channels  
one channel opens  
and the stream of cool, pure water can be felt moving through  
felt all the way back to its source

Contacting a spiritual tradition can be this way  
the clean, clear life moving through  
felt in this very place, and known to its origin

Teachers, practitioners, deities, protector spirits  
virtues faithfully maintained  
and given forward through lives

We are welcomed by this, our family  
They are eager to assist the awakening life  
the heart becomes very quiet watching this work  
this far reaching, unceasing compassion

They speak behind their words  
move behind the curtains of form  
in silence, shaping  
All of this is given to you, it is immanent  
the life within the life

## Lineage

{This one was written for my musician friends, but what it says fully applies to our spiritual life as well, and so I include it here.}

This morning as I was making breakfast, I was listening to my ipod on shuffle. Doing this is a modern day equivalent of listening to a favorite radio station, in that you don't quite know what you're going to hear. It can be like going out into the world, or into nature and saying 'surprise me'. I heard then, in succession, Haydn, Joni Mitchell, Bach and Mozart, and remarkably some sense that had gone dormant in me once again stirred...

In times like these, I want to tell everyone I meet that we should all be experiencing what Abraham Joshua Heschel called *radical amazement*. There is simply a super abundance of reasons to feel joy and wonder simply by virtue of our being here and being able to see and to hear and to feel. We need only look, and to open our heart to the music...

And if you are a musician, or a writer, a photographer, or a painter, or a dancer, you are blessed, and a blessing to the world, without a doubt. No matter what your standing, reputation or lack of same, this is how it is.

We come from a family of poets, and of seers, and geniuses, and magicians. Ours is a noble heritage. We have somehow, by some miracle, come to be born into an ancient and living lineage of those who labor into the night, often working doing something else to pay the bills, but who live to create meaning and beauty in this world.

We don't do this for money or for applause - there are far easier ways to get those! Going back as far as time itself, I can sense the solitary hours and years shut away in work rooms, and in the vast scheme of things how rare and precious it is to then meet the fruits of someone's devotion. Bearing their gifts, they come out, and squint in the sun, with a satisfied look spread across their face.

For most, only a few see the artist in us. It's always been this way. A great majority do not know our heart, but this hardly matters at all. We have received, and worked with, and shared what is vital to being human, and there's dignity in that.

When I remember something of what we are all heirs to, a new power enters my limbs, and I'm aflush with love and devotion. I am carried along, even as I labor. And how is *that*, exactly? Even I wonder at it, but if you want to know just what result can come from fellowship, and knowing yourself to be part of this family, this lineage, and the inspiration that brings, then I can only advise this: stay here a while, and then look at what is born. Surely we do our ancestors and teachers proud, continuing what they have given us, aiming always to do it justice, and adding ourself to it, as they would have wanted. This love now continues with us, fashioning the best of all gifts for those we meet, and for our children, and our children's children.

prayer a small candle  
eclipsed by the light of day  
a prompting to open the door and see who's there  
a messenger announcing the arrival of the king,  
medicine that grows as it's needed  
with grace, and comfort

Search out the beginning of this movement in us  
and it's of the same glory as its end  
like holding a small gold coin close  
and passing through gates  
until you arrive at a city  
where everything is made of that same light...



The ocean

If you had never seen the ocean, we could go down the street from where I live, and I could show the Pacific Ocean to you. I would enjoy that, actually. I could experience it anew alongside you.

How does a person respond when they see something magnificent like this for the very first time?

The feeling is one of wonder, of our heart opening; it is joy, and a kind of awakening, to be sure.

If we just stayed for a few minutes, and then I asked you, What did you see? You could tell me of the waves, of the swelling tides, of the breeze and sea birds, and the color of the ocean in that place, on that day;

How it is at once a feeling of mystery, of exultation, and of great peace.

I have thought about this a little.

The waves and the ocean - could they ever be known apart from each other?

And, if we were to see just one expression on one day of the ocean, could we really say we have known it in full?

I'd say that we need to spend some time with it, to know its many moods, rough days and calm, and the storms and peace and every day rhythms, then, maybe after some weeks or months or years, we could say that we know the ocean a little - but, we would also know that there is more to it.

The more we study the ocean, the more we find there is to learn about it.

There is depth, and amazing diverse animal and organic life beneath the surface;

beautiful colors, not seen on land;

there are treasures, and there are jewels;

scents and worlds;

there is life that communicates with its own, across great distances

*and this is just what we know from here...*

On the other hand, when we have really felt what is to see and feel the ocean waves - to wade in, to feel its coolness, to feel it on our feet and legs, to swim in it and be lifted by the tides and the waves, then we really have known something of what people all over in all times have known.

The same joy and refreshment they have felt, we have also known.

Somehow, we share this common divine experience, with other people and places and times.

Swimming alone, at dusk, looking up as the stars come out... feeling peace, apart from everything else that is going on the world, and in our lives...

I have thought, looking out on the waters

A wave can only be a wave because of the ocean, and the rain, and the tides, the shape of the ocean floor, and the warmth of the sun, and the wind.

So much has entered into this one unique expression of a wave, something that by its nature is not fixed in time, but that moves, with a beginning, a middle at its height, and a conclusion...

We can say that the wave is the ocean, and that knowing the waves, we know the ocean; without the unique waves, or the temporary, this day's, this hour's expression, what we call ocean would just be an abstraction.

The ocean is the source of life here; the sun makes the waters rise high into the sky, and rains then fall on the mountains and come streaming down, making everything green again. Harvests depend on this cycle, of nurturance; our sustenance, the becoming of each day's grain and fruit.

The ocean, we can say, is part of us, and our lives are part of it. As it goes, so we go, and as we go, so it goes as well.

To touch something eternal like this, even for a few minutes, and know it, changes how we feel about everything.

We can call music an ocean, or language, or prayer.

There is something greater than ourselves that we draw from, and return to, to be restored.

A person can be known as an ocean also - *as a mystery*, with unseen depths, and treasures within, with hidden powers and life sustaining gifts, beneath what is seen.

They may appear only momentarily in this world, as a unique wave does, but they are no less the ocean for that reason.

They are a gift to us all, to be received, and to celebrate, and to share with all our family, and neighbors, near and far, with all the world

That we don't see ourselves and each other as bearing divine gifts, as having an ocean of light within is the greatest loss, but recollection is always just a moment away.

To turn from the dusty road we have traveled to get here, to turn our ear to the roar of the waves breaking, at first in the distance, and then more and more clearly as we approach; to have our first glimpse of the endless sea, or our hundredth visit, changes everything, renews everything, gives purpose to everything, silences everything, and brings song again to everything.

I have wondered how I could possibly introduce the ocean, vast as it is, without leaving anything out.

I see now that the best I can do is to bring another to the shore, with the faith that a kind of love will awaken in them too, this meeting, this embrace.

This is all I can possibly do, and this is sufficient, the ocean tells me so.

This is the way light moves

Your life  
having travelled far  
reaches me

Half a day's meeting is enough  
or a verse  
or a song played  
and it's all here

and I see how  
something of what you gave continues  
and appears again in new forms  
the same gift  
the same love you unfolded so beautifully

this is the way light moves  
from one time and place and person to another  
not bound by convention  
or age  
not limited by our language

Seeing this much  
I am at home again in this shimmering world...

Essays, continued

The Blessings of Paritta

Tantric Refuge

Fierce Compassion

Introduction to the Commentaries on the Metta Sutta and the Prayer of Saint Francis

See How Far Devotion Will Take You

Untying the Knot of the Ego

On Wisdom and Compassion Together

From The Inseparability of the Two Truths

On Dedication Prayer

## Introduction

### The Blessings of Paritta [{Audio}](#)

The Tradition of reciting or chanting Buddhist teachings is mostly practiced in South East Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma and Thailand. These cultures are different from the West in that they have more natural faith in the Dhamma, from long familiarity with it. Their world view also supports their belief in the effectiveness of hearing and reciting teachings and prayers. In the West, by contrast, most people have a lot more skeptical doubt about such things, and they need to see evidence before they believe. Fortunately, if there is even some small amount of faith, receptivity and sensitivity, the power of hearing teachings can be felt. From there, greater devotion and more subtle awareness naturally develop, leading onwards.

A few factors are coming together when we hear, or recite what are known traditionally as *Paritta*, or protective chants.

One is *the power of truth*. These are all statements that can be verified, and that have gathered power over the centuries for that reason. They are in accord with the way things are, and they resonate in a deep way with reality. Many of these teachings you will notice, have lines to the effect of 'By this truth... May you be well', or, '...May your aims be accomplished'.

Another factor at work here is *the power of faith and devotion*. Paritta praise the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and raise up our own faith. This is another power that gathers over time.

Recitation falls under the category of learning, and recollection, and here, also *bhavana*, or the cultivation, of devotion. When done regularly, this is something that can deepen our meditation practices, and support our lives beautifully in this world.

Whereas faith refers to openness, trust, and receptivity, devotion draws positive energy, or blessings to us.

Sometimes I can see how devotion and ardor opens a door between the worlds, or the levels of our being here. Pure faith opens a channel for blessings on our lives and on the lives of those we love. This is something that can develop over time and through practice, in this case, by reading, listening and recollection.

*The power of loving kindness* on our part makes these teachings even more effective. Love is the greatest power in the universe, and when it is brought together with wisdom, I know we can accomplish all our aims.

These Teachings were given by the Buddha out of his *Great Love, Wisdom and Compassion*, and as we receive them, we are further empowered, and our own mind is purified and uplifted.

. . .

There is *blessing*, as in a special energy associated with Traditional teachings in all religions, that has the power to heal, to illuminate and inspire<sup>5</sup>. We can receive this delightful, subtle benefit from reading, reciting, or listening to a teaching, and from remembering and reflecting on it. We can also feel a special energy when we meet a fine teacher, someone who has cultivated a deep practice. It can be healing, re-vitalizing, and deeply nourishing.

Some people may like to stop there, and just enjoy those temporary pleasant feelings, of peace and well being, but we are encouraged again and again to receive the teachings even further and *to put them into practice*, to attain their lasting blessings, which are the results of greater freedom, and the ability to care for others, in the best possible ways. Many of the

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this subject, see *The Power of the Word*, on [jasonspada.com](http://jasonspada.com)



traditional paritta are indeed exhortations to practice, and they include concise instructions, or reminders of profound teachings we can study in depth throughout our lives.

There is such need in our world for the articulation of uplifting, clear teachings. There is so much need for more real peace in our world, and in our lives. Compared to previous decades, in my view, there is more addiction and distraction, more despair, disconnect, and pessimism. There is more danger, and this, *the power of need*, I would say, is the main reason why spiritual reading should be done these days, and listened to, remembered and put into practice. Because of the great need that exists, our doing such things now, by nature, has real strength.

Hopefully this is enough to generate interest in the study and recitation of paritta.

May all beings be blessed by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,  
the Arhats and excellent practitioners.

May we all put the teachings into practice,  
and share the blessings with the whole world,  
and all beings.

May all beings benefit.

## Tantric Refuge

When a Westerner takes up Vajrayana practices, I think it's because they have a sensitivity to those finer spiritual forces woven throughout this world, and they are able to make use of their benevolent influence in their lives. Without this sensitivity, such practices as prayer, mantra and visualization would not make very much sense, and indeed we hear them criticized by outsiders to these traditions. There's not much value in debating people with greatly different perceptions, but perhaps describing the world view and ways of engaging the divine in the Vajrayana will be of interest and even practical to some and so I thought to write out a few thoughts on this subject. Mostly I do this for my own benefit. If others find some advantage in these ideas, even better.

All Buddhists are familiar with the practice of Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels, The Buddha as our Teacher, the Dharma as the Teachings we follow, and the Noble Sangha as our support, those who have accomplished the teachings, and whose practice we can emulate.

People who follow the Mahayana and then, based on that take up a Vajrayana world view and practices also Take Refuge in what are called The Three Roots: The Lama, Yidam, and Dharma Protector.

A combined verse of Refuge is sometimes recited and reflected on in Tantric Sadhanas, or methods of accomplishment:

*I take refuge in all the Glorious, Holy Lamas;*

*I take refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the mandalas;*

*I take refuge in all the Buddhas,  
those who have conquered and gone beyond;*

*I take refuge in all the Supreme Dharma;*

*I take refuge in all the Noble Sangha;*

*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis,  
Protectors and Defenders of Dharma,  
who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness*

Although these are usually thought of as preliminary practices, coming before the main method, they are actually profound practices in themselves that deserve to be praised and taken up. It's a great advantage to understand the nature of Refuge and these sources of benefit for our lives.

### The Role of Devotional Practices in Buddhism

Not everyone has a devotional temperament, but we do all need some amount of receptivity to truth as taught and embodied by our teachers, and those throughout time who have transmitted liberating teachings. If our understanding is just in our intellect, that is but the seed of accomplishment. It helps us a great deal to be able to feel in our heart the love and wisdom of our spiritual ancestors. When we resonate with them, beyond the language that is used, we are connecting with a rarified energy that can help us a great deal in our lives.

Buddhism has a reputation for being a do it yourself kind of religion, but that's just how it is seen by outsiders, or by those who prefer to practice by themselves, with the strength of their own will. There are other ways to connect with these lineages and practices though, and all are equally valid approaches. We're all so different in our makeup, there's no one way, honestly.

As Ani Tenzin Palmo said:

*'We are not alone. This universe is full of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are on our side. And, as is known in all Buddhist countries, although it is not always emphasized in the West, we can pray to them.'*

Ani-la added that: *'This is not being theistic – this is being practical. If there's help out there, why not invoke that help?...*

In Zen Philosophy Zen Practice, Thich Thien An describes what he calls Self Power and Other Power, and optimally, how they work together.

*The methods of self-power and other-power were both originally taught by Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. According to the teaching of the Buddha, every living being has a Buddha nature. Therefore, it is within the potential of every man to realize that Buddha nature and to become enlightened. But to reach that state is a tremendously difficult task, calling for dauntless courage and unflinching will power. Thus, very few people are capable of reaching enlightenment by themselves; very few have the required spiritual qualification. For the majority of people it is necessary to rely upon the help of others, and here we find the germ of the "other-power" schools.*

We could also say that here is the reason we have the devotional practices. Connecting to wise teachers, and to the benevolent forces in the universe supports and helps us to to develop ourselves, to transform, to experience states of greater freedom and ease, and to help others. They can miraculously appear and provide just the help we need, against all disbelief. More commonly, they are a steadying influence, gentle encouragement, synchronicity or what mundane thinking would simply call good timing.

We do live in a magical universe, with an abundance of spiritual forces around and within us, permeating all of our lives here. That we don't often know them is on account of our obscurations, and our ordinary conceptions, but they are there.

The purpose of changing our thinking is that it leads to more openness, more receptivity to these positive spiritual forces, which facilitates their functioning in our lives. This can be done more formally, through reciting verses, but the actual change happens within, and is more subtle than that.

It's worthwhile to consider each of the practices of taking refuge in the Three Roots. Each of these are profound means of transformation, healing, liberation and enlightenment; they provide help, support and strength in various areas of our lives. This illuminates the meaning of taking refuge, and the advantages that are available.

When we contemplate

*I take refuge in all the Glorious Holy Lamas*

inwardly, we are turning towards our teachers. There are many ways this can be done. What they all have in common, I think, when they are effective means, are that these are heart-practices. Here especially, I think we have to find our own way, and that we can be open to learn from what works for others. Here is a simple verse I reflect on at times, along with directing my mind and opening my heart to the gifts and the light of my guides and mentors:

*With gratitude,*

*I turn to my spiritual ancestors*

*I ask them for their support, protection and strength*

*and I open myself to their inspiring, positive energy...*

Traditional Guru Yoga practices describe merging with the mind of the teacher, and this is surely one way we can connect with their wisdom mind. I also like to think that the function of a teacher is to help us to awaken our own wisdom, love, and strength. Reflecting on their lives and teachings and inspiring example, from our heart, awakens the sense of their presence in

us. This comes as assurance, guidance and revelation beyond what we knew before.

Taking *Refuge in all the Glorious Holy Lamas* is uplifting; it brings energy and inspiration. The Lama is called *the Blessing Root*, as connecting with our wise and loving teachers always has this joyful, exhilarating, and enlivening quality to it.

I've heard one definition of *a blessing* in Buddhism as that which removes obstacles.

In one teaching I was listening to recently, Lama Lodro Rinpoche mentioned that the Three Roots are included in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Why then would they be mentioned separately, meditated on in this way? I think the reason has to do with our teachers being closer to us than the Buddhas. They are the ones that make the teachings available, and cause them to appear to our minds as something we ourselves can achieve. There is no way to measure the great value of such a blessing in our lives.

*I take Refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities gathered in the Mandalas...*

The Yidams are referred to as *the Accomplishment Root*. These are the names and forms, and mantra practices we take connect with and take up to bring the result of our own and others benefit, in accord with the Holy Dharma. More than this, the spiritual life we are connected with has profound influence. This is so personal it's not easy to talk about, but something should be said, I think.

If you ask someone who is steeped in the Indian Spirituality whether they are monotheistic, or polytheistic, they may say they are both, or neither, or that such terms don't accurately apply. Truth is One, and the help that comes to us appears in many forms. Even for one person it can be that way.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said:

*'You are not alone because all the time there are numberless buddhas and bodhisattvas surrounding you, loving you, guiding you, that is what they do...'*

It can be surprising to find that others relate to the Divine in the same or even similar ways as we do. It's uplifting to find that there are traditions we can relate to deeply, but the source of this feeling of being inspired by teachings on Buddhist Divinities is within us, as our own experience on some level, even just that of faith and intuition.

The *Yi-dams* are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we take up as practices, either over the course of our whole lives, or when we have the need for certain qualities and powers to manifest.

When I think of the Buddhas on this level, I remember more fully that they are always with me, always available. I know in the next instant that these same Divine Qualities, of love, strength, are wisdom are in everyone, all throughout this world.

To *Take Refuge in all the Yidams, the Deities Gathered in the Mandalas*, changes what we think of ourselves, and others, and our world. A mandala is a sacred symbol we enter into in meditation, with a center, the particular aspect of the divine life, surrounded by all that we could say naturally emanates from and supports that Divinity. This includes His or Her Pure Land, and Hosts of Bodhisattvas, Protectors. We contain all this within us.

It's true, we are inherently rich, all of us, and this practice makes that abundantly clear. We all have access to resources we can make use of throughout our lives, for the sake of all beings in every realm, to ease their various sufferings and to provide whatever they need.

*Avalokiteshvara*

*Tara*

*The Healing Buddha*

*Manjushri  
and Vajrasattva*

When we engage in Vajrayana practice, it's universally taught that we visualize ourselves and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Pure Lands not as flesh and bone, but as beautiful light, transparent forms, communicating, love. This is entirely in accord with how things are, as expressed in the Avatamsaka teachings:

*To all internal and external worlds  
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,  
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;  
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*

*In all lands in the ten directions  
They do not depend or dwell on anything;  
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,  
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings  
In all worlds in the ten directions;  
Observing their essential nature,  
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

There are a couple of ways we can hear the term 'non-attachment'. One assumes there is something there, and we are not going to take it up, or pursue it. This is ordinary non attachment. The other way, based on Buddhist Wisdom is to see there is nothing to be grasped, as far as an ego or identity goes, and so the mind is naturally liberated from attachment in a different way. We are then free to receive and give without obstruction, *unimpededly*, as they say.

The lines:



*I take refuge in all the Dakas, Dakinis, Protectors and Defenders of the Dharma who possess the Eye of Transcending Awareness...*

bring us to the third of the Three Roots. In general *the Dakinis* are referred to as *the Activity Root*. I have elsewhere written about these as the Buddhist equivalent of what we in the West refer to as angels. There are many levels of Divine Life, and safety and protection, healing and comfort, guidance and care comes to us in this form, at times, whether we see it or not. Being open to it makes for greater receptivity, appreciation and confidence in our lives that we are not alone, that we are helped in inconceivable ways on spiritual levels.

Taking Refuge in this Divine Activity is surely a gesture on our part of faith and a way of honoring the sacred help we have received in the past, are upheld by now, and will continue to be guided by and cared for in the future, until we reach an advantageous rebirth, liberation from samsara, and enlightenment.

Over the course of our lives, we're going to meet all manner of conditions that need to be responded to skillfully, with various means. We should all know the resources we have, simply by virtue of being human, and because we live in this world where there so many capable, compassionate spiritual lives dedicated to helping others. The way we find out just what we can access to help us is through faith and devotion. We move from a mundane world view to sacred outlook. The way opens just like that, and we learn gradually, almost imperceptibly, until we find ourselves one day standing on a very different ground, with this divine life all 'round.

## Fierce Compassion

*Like a mother or a father for their beloved child...*

If I were to tell you something of what has been in my mind, it may frighten or repulse you, but what follows has been the truth of it for me. It may not be believed, but I think it speaks of something universal, and relevant, so here goes.

*The scenes of desolation, abandonment, horror, and depravity we see in fiction are but a shadow. They offer just a hint of what we are capable of becoming within and in the outside world, but their imagery at times evokes the fuller sense of it.*

How to explain what it feels like when some quality awakens from within? I have felt this before, and written about it.

*When I'm beaten down  
and the wolves approach  
the ones I guarded in my thoughts  
step forward to protect me  
They emerge from between the layers of my skin  
They come out from my breath,  
looking fierce, confident,  
and they set a halo of peace around me...*

This is enlightened activity, the activity of Divinity, or of our deeper compassionate nature appearing in our lives, well beyond anything we could have imagined.

We carry these potencies that can arise at time in our lives when we need them most. Who can even begin to speak of this? And yet at times at least we have to try. There is some truth here that is too seldom told.

*I have found urgent, fierce compassion arising in me, and now all they say in Buddhism about the traditional names and forms of the protectors I have found to be true in me too.*

A mother sees her child in danger, and acts, immediately, with universally recognized inconceivable power to protect them.

There is a form of the Compassion Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, that is ferocious, and that appears in this way and then acts out of sheer necessity. One name for fierce compassion and its enlightened activity is Mahakala.

His teeth bared, he stands in the center of a great conflagration; garlanded with freshly severed heads, and a tiger skin; he is victorious over the enemy, and his form speaks in ways that other language and symbolism could not reach.

He arrives with his retinue of holy beings in terrifying forms, at midnight in a windswept charnel ground; these are menacing figures, shrieking blood curdling cries and curses. They ride powerful swift horses or mules, or mad bears, and they chase down what threatens us, and our loved ones, and utterly clearing the way.

When our own delusions have given rise to terrible visions and all the desolate wastelands, compassionate wisdom can rise from that very same ground, or from within us with tremendous power to meet these challenges.

Where the gentle, persuasive Dharma that was given has had no effect, and the tide of delusion rises up to engulf us and our world, Avalokiteshvara, the power of the compassion of all the enlightened ones, from Shakyamuni to our very own root teacher takes these forms, to overcome obstacles, the inner and outer enemies to the Dharma.

A protector actually goes out to meet danger before it ever reaches our life and our children, all our precious ones;

And if they are already in a hell, or a tormented hungry ghost realm, he goes there to get them out, and bring them home.

I have found that all they say in these teachings is perennially true, for each one of us.

## Urgency

I almost lost my life,  
my one precious life

In my failures, and my delusion,  
I thought of abandoning the teachings,  
the only way I have seen and believed in  
to be a way out of suffering,  
for myself, for my loved ones, for the world

All I had hoped for and believed in seemed lost,  
and I thought of giving up my life  
the sky darkened in me  
and what felt like the weight of a thousand worlds  
came to crush me

but then some tremendous strength rose up,  
fierce compassionate protectors came to me  
a vision of something altogether new, and unexpected,  
and before this unimaginable

a great assembly of protectors,  
all the Dharma Protectors

baring fangs,  
wreathed in intense flames,  
some forms truly hideous, grotesque,  
so utterly strange and fearsome  
to see to hear to feel -

and before I could speak a word,  
they spoke to me  
of their unhindered virtue and power

They appear this way when it is a matter of life and death

Because there is so much at stake,  
this is for lifetimes, really

*And this fierce compassion is compassion itself,*  
this form, this sound, this vision  
is no less than every benefactor I have ever known

and with every new appearance,  
with every effective action opening the way  
You are the one who helps us to complete our journey safely,  
to peace  
You are the Great Compassionate One  
who helps us to uphold the Dharma,  
flourishing through the ages

When we are weak, don't let go!  
Keep us from the abyss

Protect me and all others like me!  
I call to all you Great Compassionate Ones!  
Extend your hand and your Power now!

Protect the Dharma in me and throughout the world,  
and help us all to accomplish every one of our Noble aims!

## So That All Are Included in Our Love

Commentaries on the Metta Sutta and the Prayer of Saint Francis

With Additional Essays

Introduction

I

I've been thinking to write this for the last few months, and I've mostly enjoyed waiting, and taking this time for reflection. I've also noticed some resistance, and that has been interesting to investigate. I thought about the differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and how I've come to regard them in a positive sense, and I'll try to describe this here. The resistance I found though came from thinking of describing something as personal as my own feelings and devotions. Whatever we think and intuit, and believe and aspire towards, I've found, resist being shared in a common way, as if we were talking about what we had for breakfast.

That said, my wanting to write a little about Buddhist and Christian prayer in general, and the Prayer of Saint Francis in particular then comes from the hope and trust that others can engage this beautiful prayer more deeply, and bring forth its benefits for themselves and others. This tips the balance for me, and has led me to this point, of wanting to write out these thoughts. Lord knows, our world needs more peace and the other qualities we seek, and that are mentioned in this universal prayer.

II.

I have read that what has come down to us as the Prayer of Saint Francis wasn't actually written by him, but by someone in the first part of the twentieth century, at a time of crisis during the First World War. This anonymous person was well versed in Franciscan spirituality, so much so

that the prayer is regarded as being very much *in the spirit* of Francis, which to me accords it equal validity and value. The Divine works in mysterious, and vivifying ways.

Like the Metta Sutta, the Prayer of Saint Francis is a classic of contemplative spirituality, that richly repays any amount time we are able spend with it. It has the power to transform our life, and to help us to mature and support others.

### III.

With all that's going on in our world, all the violence, the wars, the destruction of our living environment, the addictions, greed and the general apathy, it seems worse than pointless to argue about theology, or philosophy. One of our biggest problems these days in fact is the dogmatism of nearly everyone with any religious or spiritual point of view insisting that they alone have found the truth, and negating what others have found, and the ground of their spiritual life.

My approach is different. It is that truth is universal, and that there are many ways to truth. You can call this anything you like, mysticism perhaps, but for me it opens the way to studying and benefitting from what many different traditions and lineages offer.

Here, for instance, although I identify myself as a Buddhist, I have great respect for the Christian Tradition, and I see the divine power there, at work in people's lives, in the Word, and in the person of Jesus.

I also see universal truth there, and relate to that tradition through an ecumenical Buddhism that is my own, surely, and that I don't need others to agree with. Take whatever is useful for your lives and leave the rest, as the Dalai Lama says.

Starting with the historical Buddha, through the Ancestral teachers who



arrive and abide in our world as fresh streams of insight and inspiration, to the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that bless and support us in countless ways, this whole life bears witness to the truth that we are not alone in the world, and in our efforts to find peace and health and to offer that to others, as much as we can.

I have heard that Thich Nhat Hanh has an image of Jesus on his altar, and this is only fitting for one so noble and wise. Like other wonderful teachers of these modern times, such as Lama Yeshe, he sees truth wherever it is found and wherever it is at work in people's lives. He celebrates that and relates to it as a source of support and profound benefit.

*Oh that we could all reach such inclusiveness!*

I'll not pretend that this would be easy or even approachable in our lifetime, but for a few.

#### IV.

Contemplatives are a natural family. In any time and place and culture, we recognize each other. We're more at ease with one another than with organized religions or exclusive lineages. It's for those that I can easily imagine writing this commentary.

For contemplatives, poetry is their mother tongue, and they are at home with different expressions of truth. Far from being seen as a threat, these differences are celebrated as demonstrating the creative power of the spirit. Imagine bowing to a single image, or to a leaf on a tree, and seeing all that is sacred in that one form. At once, they are all honored.

The word 'God' at its best points to something universal, eternal, benevolent, and inexhaustible, and that unites us as one family. How wonderful. That we don't have the equivalent in Buddhism makes me think we need to make an effort to highlight what we have in common, as the

basis for our understanding and having respect for each other.

I think we can learn a great deal from what people have gotten wrong in religion, as well as what was successful. Clearly, the narrowness and destructive fanaticism is a warning, even when we're practicing with respect. It tells us to take care not to denigrate other paths. On the other hand, when there is peace and joy, the fruits of the spirit, we should be able to celebrate and learn from that.

V.

Buddhism and Christianity differ basically in that Buddhists don't believe in a creator God. They may believe and appeal to Enlightened beings, and have a close connection with forms of the divine, but it's not thought that everything is under the control of one all powerful, all knowing and loving deity. Much is up to us as far as what this world is going to be. We do have abundant help, it's told, but the work is not done for us once and for all.

As for myself, personally, I've always had a belief, or a faith in something greater than myself. I've felt cared for, and rescued, healed, and guided, and it feels like this connection goes back further than I can remember, maybe lifetimes. How I've defined this has changed over the years, but the fact of it remains, and it leads me to this Prayer of Saint Francis. You see, what I've found present throughout my life, and what I see and hear about others doing has something universal about it, after all. We all reach beyond our normal frame of reference, with a deep aspiration for freedom, safety, health and peace, of ourselves and our loved ones, our community, and world.

Einstein said that we can't solve a problem with the same kind of mind that created it. We need something more. In Christianity the language they use is to say that

*Except as the Lord build a house,  
he labors in vain who builds it....*

In Buddhism, we start with Right View, and everything follows after that. If our view isn't correct from the beginning, anything we attempt will be limited by that. Of course, this understanding of ours can and does change. It deepens and becomes more true over time, especially as we recognize its importance, *its urgency*, and turn our direction to developing our inner wisdom.

## See How Far Devotion Will Take You

When it comes to devotion in Buddhism, we can see a great range of differences in people's temperament. It has always been this way, and so traditionally, different methods are offered, all with the same aim in mind. Buddhism is about ending suffering, and bringing peace.

Many modern Western Buddhists feel they have no need for devotion, that their intellect alone is enough, with their own determined efforts. Others, especially in the East, have more faith in the care and support of their teachers, and transcendent Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Some pray for inspiration, and guidance, and if not for a response, people would have given up the practice long ago- but some do feel they receive blessings, and encouragement, and another order of knowledge and insight. Respectfully, what to make of this?

*May all meet with the Dharma that befits them best...*

It's even said at times in the Nyingma and Kagyud Lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that devotion to an enlightened teacher alone is enough for a person to realize the truth, and to become liberated themselves. Here are a few passages from this tradition:

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche has these beautiful and true things to say about devotion:

*Devotion creates readiness, just as in the Spring the sun and rain make gardens ready to plant seeds and start growth.*

and,

*Devotion is the key that opens the door of pure vision. It leads us beyond*

*darkness, doubt and hesitation; it will help us recover from periods of difficulty. Devotion takes us beyond conceptions to an understanding of the true nature.*

Tulku Urgyen taught that:

*If one just focuses on devotion one does not need to spend years studying debate, philosophy, grammar, art and so forth. In the past, thousands of practitioners attained accomplishment through the path of devotion combined with the paths of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.*

And Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche said

*...if you develop fervent devotion and fuse the guru's enlightened nature with your ordinary mind, enlightenment can be realized.*

See for yourself just how far your devotion will take you.

What I can say for sure is that, everywhere it is found, devotion is a kind of love. For people who have a warm hearted nature, and who are capable of deep faith, there can be a profound intimacy with their teacher, with the Buddha or a Bodhisattva, such that their light is very much part of them. The beloved is always with them, always in their heart and mind.

It's said in many of the Mahayana Sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra, that remembering the Bodhisattva Guan Yin will be enough to save a person from danger;

*Whoever says her name, whoever sees her image  
With mind perfectly collected and pure  
That person shall be able to overcome  
The sufferings of all the worlds...*

The same is said of Tara;

*When a warrior from Oddivisa,  
who fell asleep in a grove,  
was surrounded by enemy soldiers,  
You, Liberatrice, protected him.  
I pray, protect me as well...*

It's said also that seeing or hearing about the Medicine Buddha will cause one to be safe forever from rebirth in the lower realms;

And in the Pali Suttas as well, in the Banner Sutta, the Buddha is recorded to have encouraged his listeners

*Think of the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha,  
and you will move beyond all fear...*

How can this ever be, if not for faith and devotion?

It's said though that

*Buddhas do not wash away sins with water,  
Nor do they remove the sufferings of beings with their hands,  
Neither do they transplant their own realization into others  
but by their teaching, and encouragement they liberate beings*

and when we think about it even for a short while, if there was even one completely wise and capable and compassionate person in the past, not one of us would be suffering now. All our problems would have been solved by them long ago, but it's not this way now, is it? It sure seems there is something required of us by spiritual teachers, and that is our own effort.

In The Blessings of Paritta, I wrote that

There is *blessing*, as in a special energy associated with Traditional teachings (and forms) in all religions, that has the power to heal, to illuminate and inspire. We can receive this delightful, subtle benefit from reading, reciting, or listening to a teaching, and from remembering and reflecting on it. We can also feel a special energy when we meet a fine teacher, someone who has cultivated a deep practice. It can be healing, revitalizing, and deeply nourishing.

Some people may like to stop there, and just enjoy those temporary pleasant feelings, of peace and well being, but we are encouraged again and again to receive the teachings even further and *to put them into practice*, to attain their lasting blessings, which are the results of greater freedom, and the ability to care for others, in the best possible ways.

And, In *How Do Prayers Work?*, Venerable Sangye Khadro said,

‘We should think about what causes will accomplish our prayers. If we create those causes, our prayers will bear fruit, and we will be receptive to the inspiration of the Three Jewels.

‘When we request spiritual mentors or monastics to pray for us, we should, from our side, refrain from nonvirtuous behavior, and act constructively. That way their prayers can be effective. The actualization of virtuous prayers and aspirations is *a cooperative effort*: prayers are made, we engage in virtuous actions, and the Three Jewels send their inspiration.

‘So although it’s good to make prayers, or ask our teachers, or the Sangha to also make prayers for those who are in need of help, but, don’t leave it at that. Also insure that you practice, that you live ethically, engage in spiritual practice as much as you can, and try to encourage others to do the same, especially those that we’re praying for. That’s the way to ensure that the prayers are more likely to come about, to bring success.’

This is surely a difficult matter to talk about well, without falling into extremes.

The truth is there is no way we can even begin to measure the result of people's having devotion to a tradition, or to a great being.

We may come to our own conclusions independently about this, but, for myself, I do feel there have been countless blessings received, a great many people healed and saved from danger, many more than can be counted, on account of prayer, or someone out of compassion reaching out to save us from harm. This is happening even now.

At the same time, it's just like we find in world's spiritual teachings. Whether it's Jesus saying after healing someone, *Go, and sin no more*, or the Buddha telling others to

*Do no harmful actions  
Accomplish all that is good,  
and purify your own mind -  
this is the teaching of the Buddha*

- the message is the same.

We are helped from within and from outside ourselves from the enlightened guides of the world, so that we can reach spiritual maturity and fulfillment.

I find it interesting that in the Early Buddhism of the Pali Suttas it's said there are three causes of reaching the irreversible stage they call *Stream Entry*, that will continue on, without regressing, to full awakening. These are given as:

not grasping at the idea of self as who we are



having faith in the wisdom of our teacher, his teachings, and accomplished followers

and,

*having a right understanding of ceremony*

- which includes truly understanding the meaning and function of metaphor.

It's this last factor, seldom spoken of, that relates here, to the subject of people's faith and devotion, and just how far that can go.

The reason this is given as one of the essential factors for not regressing, I believe, is on account of the possible limitation, for some people, of devotion alone.

People can make offerings, do prostrations, engage in service to the community, read and write and recite praises and sutras, and write them in gold, view relics, sponsor statues, build monasteries, listen to teachings, and tell others about what they have found, all with passion, and conviction, and all of this is beautiful and onward leading *if* these blessings lead to practice and inner transformation, if they lead to their growth and maturation.

The teachings in spiritual traditions are given so we can ourselves awaken, and transform ourselves. We are all meant to become, to some extent at least, saintly, holy men and women, spiritually mature and fulfilled in our purpose. Anything less than that, and we can still fall away from the teachings. This is one possibility we should be very careful about.

This is why I think it's said that a right understanding of rites and rituals is essential. Without understanding the meaning of the symbols we use, and grasping at them as external only, without knowing that their purpose is to

inspire us to practice, we may become dependent on them. Without knowing their meaning and purpose, these may instead become a form of idolatry, or superstition.

In time, we may have our views straightened out, and find the way, but how long that will take is uncertain. I think this teaching on the factors that lead to irreversibly entering the stream is telling us that a person can get lost, or sidetracked for an indeterminate length of time, if the meaning of rites and ceremony, symbols and metaphors are not well understood.

Who can tell what is going on in someone's mind and heart, when we look from the outside and see someone bowing, or making offerings? Is this onward leading for them? We are responsible mainly for ourselves to begin with, and we need to know our own mind, and see the effects of our way of practicing for ourselves. We can ask: Is it helping us?

This is why I also at last have come to this thought that we each need to see for ourselves how far devotion will take us. Respecting others, and each of our differences in temperament, and seeing that even for one person, different ways of approaching teachers, and great beings, and their teachings will be more effective at times, I would have us embrace and awaken to all these liberating and transformative means.

*May all beings realize the way to fulfillment,  
freedom and ease*

## Untying the Knot of the Ego

*One cannot rely on the dualistic, deluded mind to undo its own delusions (which is using the same kind of mind that created the problems)*

*Finally, it is the non-deluded, noncompounded, nondual, ultimate reality itself that has the real power to remove delusions...*

- Shenpen Hookham, from *The Buddha Within*

*The ego (wrong view) dissolves naturally through deep insight into the nature of mind... until then it is the self, the ego that walks the path...*

- Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo

Passionate convictions, strong feelings and motivations, deep remorse or high aims can accomplish one of two things. They can either lead to the realization of our goals, or they can cause a person to get stuck.

When it comes to Buddhism, the aim of all the teachings and practices is to become free from suffering, and to attain greater peace for ourselves, and for all others. If any part of our practice does not accomplish this, clearly something is lacking.

Vows can also be based on self grasping, a wrong view about ourselves and others and this world. The Diamond Sutra addresses this in its first declaration, where the Buddha says

*However many species of living beings there are we must lead all these beings to perfect peace and freedom. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.*

*Why is this so? If a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva.*

The aim in Buddhism is freedom and true beneficial action, and so this right view is essential.

There is a prayer by Mipham Rinpoche where he says

*May I realize the absence of a self nature, by seeing that,  
even though there is an appearance, it is not truly existent...*

And the Seventh Dalai Lama wrote:

*At the crossroads of diverse perceptions,  
Are seen the hazy dualistic phenomena which are baseless.  
There is a magical show that is by nature, deceptive.  
Don't believe it to be true,  
but view it as having the nature of emptiness.*

*Don't let your mind go astray,  
but place it in the nature of appearance-emptiness.  
Through not losing mindfulness,  
hold it in the nature of appearance-emptiness...*

We meditate and then carry the practice into our lives in this way, by seeing through our concepts in all situations, cutting through appearances. This is the key point in Buddhism, and what all the practices should lead to.

As Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo said,

*The ego (wrong view) dissolves naturally through deep insight into the nature of mind... until then it is the self, the ego that walks the path...*

I recently had an analogy come to mind for knowing whether I am practicing in a way that leads to either the continuation and increase of suffering, or to its resolution.

The image is of a knot. When presented with a challenge, we need to handle it carefully, with patience, and gentleness, love and attention. If we were instead to take it up without skill, it can be like we are pulling the two ends of a rope in opposite directions, and tightening the knot. Slowing down, with great care and attention, we can look deeply into a challenge, and find a way to resolve it, to loosen and untangle the knot.

We especially need this practice when there are strong feelings.

I identify feeling upset, or afraid, or restless, or enthusiasm, generally, as turmoil, or agitation, and whatever meditation practice we do, whether it is cultivating qualities, or calmly directing attention, or investigation, these should all gradually bring more ease, and lead to freedom.

Check up and see whether of agitation or peace are present, and ultimately, if self grasping and suffering are continuing or increasing, or decreasing? Examine all the teachings carefully and see if you feel they are complete in this way, as the Buddha taught - they should be integrated with the wisdom that leads to an end of suffering. Look into refuge, metta, purification, calm abiding, ethics, study, prayer, mantra and visualization, and see for yourself.

Some practices by themselves go only so far, as it's said explicitly in the metta and calm abiding teachings. If we do not know this, progress can be blocked, for some indefinite time. Practice should always be onward leading.

To make this clear, my own rendering of a teaching poem by Khandro-la reads:

*The worldly wisdom of good and bad,  
and all the compassion and collections of virtue of ordinary sentient beings  
cannot become causes for liberation.  
If you fail to give rise to non-referential compassion,  
liberation and enlightened understanding and activity cannot be attained.*

and in A Direct Meditation on the Graduated Path, it says:

*In dependence upon higher rebirth,  
even if we achieve the levels of a deva or human,  
we will still have to experience endless suffering in samsara  
because of not having completely abandoned from their root  
ignorance and the afflictive emotions.*

*Therefore, I will look deeply into the nature of all of samsara,  
and continuously follow the unified path of the Three Trainings,  
of Sila, Samadhi, and Prajna,  
the way to peace, nibbana,  
true and lasting health and happiness.*

We can see the purpose of the provisional, and that at last we need is the freedom that is experienced and actualized with wisdom.

As the Aspiration Prayer for the Attainment of Mahamudra says,

*In the moment of love, the empty essence nakedly dawns...*

See also the two essays that follow, titled *On Wisdom and Compassion Together, and From The Inseparability of the Two Truths*

## On Wisdom and Compassion Together

### From The Continual Practice of Right View I

In Buddhism, the cause of suffering is a self grasping ignorance that is habitual, and pervasive, and reflexive. When this is seen through, or seen for what it is, we experience ourselves and others and our world differently...

Grasping at a self unconsciously cuts us off from our ancestors, our teachers, from one another and from our natural world. Removing this false view, we awaken to our connectedness, and inner treasures, joy, compassion, and peace. We enter into a dynamic, creative involvement with all our family and world.

\* \* \*

When teachings speak of non-referential compassion, there is an immediacy that is referred to, a newness, and resourcefulness, and timeliness.

\* \* \*

When we can begin to see with the eyes of the spirit, we are not separate from one another, or our own depths.

This is referred to at times as non referential compassion, seeing in a way that is not separate, dynamic and resourceful, and naturally responsive to every need.

As Suzuki Roshi said,

*Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity.*

And as the Thai Forest Master, Ajahn Maha Boowa said,

*For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.*

How then can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

The way we can have both wisdom and compassion present in our mind then is explained by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, where he asks,

*'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion?*

and he answers:

*'To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.*

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this same subject, when he said:

*'On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.*

*'On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'*

In the Diamond Sutra, The Buddha said:

*So, Subhuti, all the bodhisattva mahasattvas should give rise to a pure and clear intention in this spirit. They should give rise to their intention without relying on*



*form, nor should they rely on sound, smell, taste, touch, or objects of mind... They should give rise to an intention with their minds not dwelling anywhere.*

From The Continual Practice of Right View II - in the Vajrayana

We can represent *our motivation and Right View* to our minds symbolically in practices that use visualization.

The following is adapted from a teaching by Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche:

*(In Vajrayana) We aspire to a nonconceptually performed practice, free from grasping or clinging. This means that when we practice or meditate, we should not relate to our visualization as if it were a solid object.*

*Our visualization must be experienced as a dynamic display of the true nature, like a transcendent wisdom rainbow body. We must understand that the visualization is totally empty of inherent existence, yet totally full of dynamic energies of love, compassion, and wisdom.*

Here is where we can use meditation to integrate our understanding. We train in seeing the world we live in as translucent, made of light, and holy, and that we are upheld by countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Saints and Sages, ancestors, and the sacred powers of the earth, sky, water, and fire. In this way, the tantras affirm that divine help is always available in abundance. Visualization in this way is the expression of Right View.

We can familiarize ourselves with the way things actually are by the practice of seeing ourselves and others and this world as transparent like a rainbow, with light shining through, appearing and yet ungraspable. What's more, when we realize our inherent worth and the preciousness of ourselves and others and this world, we can intentionally visualize all this as being divine in nature, poetically adorned with jewels, exalted, and uplifting to behold in every way.

With this Right View and a pure motivation, as we recite verses of refuge and aspiration prayers, meditate, and recite mantra, we visualize that we receive blessings from the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and from all the Bodhisattvas and Devas in the form of light and nectar. These dissolve into ourselves, and into all those we see as being with us now, our family and friends, those we don't know, and those who are experiencing any difficulty at all...

We visualize that the light and nectar heals and calms, and nourishes, and inspires us all.

*May all share in these blessings.*

*May all beings receive all they need to awaken and be free.*

*May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing.*

Meditate like this... Make prayers of aspiration...

Before dedication - A preceding reflection from the teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche:

'All phenomena – including the I, the action of dedicating, the merits that are dedicated, the goal of enlightenment to which they are dedicated, and the sentient beings for whom they are dedicated – are completely empty of existing from their own side. With the continual awareness of this, I now impute labels, and dedicate...'

In the words of the Avatamsaka Sutra:

*To all internal and external worlds  
Bodhisattvas have no attachment at all,  
Yet do not abandon works beneficial to sentient beings;  
The great ones cultivate this kind of knowledge.*

*In all lands in the ten directions  
They do not depend or dwell on anything;  
They do not grasp things, such as livelihood,  
And do not arbitrarily create distinctions.*

*They engage with all sentient beings  
In all worlds in the ten directions;  
Observing their essential nature,  
They practice dedication reaching everywhere.*

May all beings have happiness, and all the causes of happiness flourishing.  
May all beings enjoy an abundance of positive conditions,  
well being, and peace.

## From The Inseparability of the Two Truths

There is an easy way to recognize the inseparable nature of the relative and the ultimate, enduring truth. If we begin with enlightened activity, we can see their essential unity, plain as day.

There have been times for all of us, I'm sure, when we have given or received help and support *that happened spontaneously, creatively, and in a way that surely felt not-separate*. These are the very characteristics of enlightened activity- the compassionate motivation, together with the intelligence or wisdom responding to the needs of the moment.

Now, we can't say that the words spoken, or written, or the compassionate gestures were at all separate from this awakened nature we can find in our teachers and in ourselves- they are the expressions of this nature, like the rays of the sun.

As Suzuki Roshi said,

*Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity.*

And as the Thai Forest Master, Ajahn Maha Boowa said,

*For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.*

In the same way, the work that we do, and our everyday activities are not at all apart from the true, unchanging basis, the ground of our living.

What we call 'the relative' is just this nature rising to meet the needs of the time, and these expressions are not for a moment separate from the ultimate truth.

## On Dedication Prayer

Dedication makes a bridge from our own practice to connect with people. The more we dedicate the merit of some positive activity, in our hearts and minds, the more we are sharing whatever positive creative energy we have produced by our practice with others. As with all acts of sincere generosity, this increases its value for us all even more, and makes it shine even more brightly within us.

On another level, since there is no separation between us in reality, this kind of orientation is also an affirmation. It says, in effect, 'this is who we are'. We are connected. It's right to always be as generous as we can, and our true nature is this active love and compassion.

If we are cultivating love and compassion, we are naturally producing what could be called 'continual dedication'. This quality of mind is naturally connected to others. This is the one quality of mind that most facilitates re-integration with others after meditation or retreat.

The final dedication prayers we make at the conclusion of any particular practice also affirm to our own mind this knowledge we have, that the practice we are doing has the power to work for us as we intend. It's a statement we make to ourselves of confidence in its effectiveness.

When we do the practice of dedication, it's taught that we shouldn't think that our merit—our positive creative energy producing happiness—is divided up between all those we share it with, but rather that every being we are dedicating to receives the full measure of our what we share. We dedicate, or give over, in our mind, in our heart, all our positive energy, good fortune, health, peace, learning and enjoyments, and the causes of these. May all beings benefit.

It's important to dedicate the positive energy we create not only to friends, family, those we feel we owe something , and to 'neutral' people, but also to those who give us problems, the people who we sometimes perceive as antagonistic towards us. This gives our practice an indestructible quality, and makes it truly extensive, without limitation and without obstruction. No one can keep us from wishing them well, regardless of their attitude toward us. This is the freedom of the mind that we have as human beings, and such wishes are sure to bear fruit in time.

In 'The Heart of Compassion: The Thirty-seven Verses on the Practice of a Bodhisattva', concerning the practice of dedication, Dilgo Khyentse says,

'Dedicate all the merit and positive actions you have done or will do throughout the past, present and future so that all beings, especially your enemies, may achieve enlightenment. Try to dedicate the merit in the same way that the great bodhisattvas do.

'Not a single prayer vanishes. Dedicating the merit of every positive action you do with a pure mind will continuously bear positive fruit until you attain enlightenment.

'The attitude of a bodhisattva must be extremely vast, constantly keeping in mind the infinity of beings and the wish to establish them all in buddhahood. If your mind is vast, the power of your prayers is unlimited too. If your mind is narrow and rigid, your accumulation of merit and the purification of your obscurations will also be very limited.

'Do not let yourself be discouraged by such thoughts as that it is not worth dedicating what you see as your miserable accumulation of merit because it could hardly benefit anyone; or by the idea that for you helping others is just talk since you will never really be able to benefit them. If you keep your mind open and vast, the effectiveness of your bodhicitta (the naturally enlightened aspect of the mind) will increase, and so too will the benefit and merit of all your words and deeds.

‘In your daily life and practice you must keep developing the excellent mind of enlightenment.’

Seen in one way, in the beginning we set our motivation. Then we do a particular practice, whatever works for us, and are attentive to just this. Then, at the conclusion, being as generous as we naturally know how to, we joyfully dedicate or give over whatever positive energy we have created through our practice to accomplishing our intention.

Sometimes dedication is referred to as ‘sealing’ our meditation. In this sense it does two related things: First, it keeps whatever positive energy we have produced from becoming, even unconsciously, a cause of the negative sort of separative pride, and second it concludes and integrates the formal practice on a most positive note– that of kind regard and abundant good wishes towards others.

One last note on the subject of dedication: It’s taught that the best way to dedicate merit, if we can, is with the right view, that is, without clinging to oneself, the action or the recipient of an action as having intrinsic reality, as it appears to our mind. This is called ‘sealing the dedication of merit with wisdom’, or emptiness. We can at least have this as an aim.

In The Thirty-seven Verses, the verse that refers to this says:

Dedicating to enlightenment

Through wisdom purified of the three concepts  
all merit achieved by such endeavor,  
to remove the suffering of numberless beings, is the practice  
of a bodhisattva

This may not be easy to accomplish, and yet there is always much we can do. In the Traditional teachings on dedication, there are many ways to engage this wonderful practice.

As expressed by Dilgo Khyentse:

‘To dedicate merit in the best possible way– a way entirely free from the three concepts of a subject, an object, and an action– is possible only for someone who has fully realized emptiness. How then should we ordinary beings dedicate the merit, (as yet) incapable as we are of such perfect dedication? We can do it by following in the footsteps of those who have that realization.

‘The bodhisattva Samantabhadra mastered the ocean-like infinitude of a bodhisattva’s aspirations, while Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara mastered the ocean-like infinitude of a bodhisattva’s activity to benefit beings. When you dedicate merit, do it with the idea of emulating the way these great bodhisattvas dedicated merit.’

Feel free to use any or all of the following prayers if you like, substitute prayers or verses of your own choosing, or write your own prayers.

May all beings benefit.