

On Compassion

Essays and Poetry

By Jason Espada

Preface

The Buddhist Response to Suffering

Compassion is the natural response of any awakened heart to suffering. It's something we all recognize, as universal, our true identity, our true home.

Compassion is the most general way we know each other, before religion, before traditions and different ways of life.

There is something we call *secular ethics*, and compassion is found there, as our common language - its true worth being something we can all agree on.

Religious traditions start just there as well, meeting the needs of the time, the needs of the poor and those who are struggling and suffering in any way. They then go on to add another element not found in the secular response.

Religions or spiritual traditions have the common aim of alleviating all suffering and its causes forever. They do this in different ways - in Christianity, for example, their devotion is to Jesus as their redeemer. Other Traditions offer their Way with this same end in mind.

Today, all over the world, traditions are both meeting the pressing needs of this hour, and leading beyond suffering, to paradise, to heaven, to the Pureland.

Within the world's traditions, the Buddhist response to suffering is then something distinct. As with secular ethics, it meets the world and people, animals and our natural world with far seeing love and care;

And in common with other spiritual traditions, it aims to go beyond the reach of all sorrow, and all hardship. The end of suffering is also its objective, as the Buddha taught.

Ultimately, *the Buddhist response to suffering is wisdom*, as understood in their traditions.

We use this word, as it is commonly understood to mean knowledge, learning, or a skill we can acquire, or see that others have. Wisdom in Buddhism is something different though.

They speak of liberating insight, freedom from ego grasping and the afflictive emotions, the realization of the nature of mind, or our true nature.

This is accomplished through meditation, with the blessings and support or realized beings, from the historical Buddha down through to our venerable teachers.

When we look at those who are Buddhists responding to suffering, we can see *all* of this: It includes the loving actions and prayers that express the common ground of all our humanity, including those without any connection to a tradition;

We can also see their commonality with other Paths, that aim to lead us beyond all sorrow;

and *the particular expression*, what at last makes this response to suffering one that is Buddhist *is this wisdom*.

When reading prayers and essays that express the different facets of compassion, and seeing their activity, it is useful, and complete to keep this in mind.

A note on what follows

Most of the essays in this collection view compassion from the perspective of a self in relation to others. This is necessary so that we can gradually talk about and practice liberating insight - wisdom. It is also true to the result of an awakened mind, which has compassion as its very nature. Relative truth is of course part of this life of ours.

For those not yet familiar with what is called in comparison, *absolute truth* or *the ultimate truth perspective*, I have included a few essays on this theme in this book, for completeness' sake, beginning with the one titled *A consideration for all that follows* (number 41 in this collection).

Ajahn Buddhadasa taught that when we get to insight practice, we can go back and review again all of the stages of our path that led us to this point, and see each of them with new eyes.

For more on this essential subject, see the collection titled, *On the Wisdom Aspect*.

May all beings be free from suffering and its causes
May we all enjoy peace, and good health, and have long lives,
caring for each other in the best of ways

Jason Espada
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On Compassion - Poems

All the more reason

There really are those

Clashing cymbals

Awake

Hey, fortunate one!

Is there no one now

Someone's child

How can I help those who have no one

This morning I felt your pain

I won't refuse sadness

All the lawyers

I want a judge who's been where I've been

If you suffer, friend

No place I'd rather be, with an introduction

It amazes me

There are so many ways to save a life

A doctor would not ask

Volunteers needed

Why I live by the edge of the river

You do not need to ask

promise

Beside those at the bedside

To those who are spending this, their first Christmas

This ragged commoner

If I am to pass on from this world

For the sake of all who struggle and suffer

Did you go outside today?

Winter dreams

And so I wait on the still water

dreaming of perfection

Parents praying for their children

If we had eyes to see

A Wednesday poem

Bankers run out into the street

Sanctuary

During the night it must have rained

Archeology

For further reading and listening

Awakening Unconditional Compassion for Self and Others

As Westerners, we have inherited the dysfunction of self blame, and the bitter rejection of parts of ourselves and others that don't fit with an idealized image.

Whether or not we consider ourselves Christian or Jewish, the ideas of good and evil, and the rejection of what is confused and suffering are the shadow side of our collective values, but these can only take a person and a culture so far. If we are going to understand ourselves and others we need to understand how our mind works, and that we can either avoid, or learn to look deeply into our experience, and find resolution to suffering.

There is a phrase by Milarepa that I found on a card at the first retreat I ever went to here in California, in 1989.

It said,

Contemplate all energies without fear or disgust, for that is the stone that turns everything to gold.

- and I've been thinking about this a lot lately, because I have found those qualities in my own way of looking. Fear and disgust are certainly rejection and avoidance, sometimes subtly, or aggressively pushing away, or shutting down perception, and I can see how these effect not only my own looking into problems, struggling, and difficulties, but how it also extends to the way we deal with challenges collectively.

To begin to see more clearly, and to learn to care for ourselves, we need qualities that are *completely* different.

We need honesty, and courage, the willingness to look, and most of all, we need compassion.

When I think about shame, the image that represents this universally is a person covering their face. This means, literally, 'I cannot look', or, 'I do not want to be seen like this'.

Imagine if we went to a caring and skilled doctor, with a wound, but would not want to show it to him. He would have to patiently convince us that we are safe with him, and that he needs to see the condition, to begin the process of healing.

The opposite of fear and rejection is clearly open hearted compassion, and this is the path we need to take to begin to tenderly hold our own suffering, and that of our family, neighbors, communities, and world.

We begin with ourselves to understand what it feels like to have a part of life not known, or seen, or that feels shameful to us, and is hidden away for that reason. It can lead to every strategy ever invented to avoid feeling, or knowing directly - binge watching programs, alcohol and drug use, or relationships, for example, and endless activity for the sake of distracting ourselves.

What we need is something very different. The one quality that is not judgmental rejection, but is the exact opposite of this, that has not least

denial, or aversion, but is wanting to know, and to care for ourself and others is a great compassion, that is gentle, and courageous, dedicated, and enduring.

We naturally relax and open up when we meet this quality of heart, whether it is from a kind parent, or from a wise teacher, or from our own deeper nature.

We need to tenderly hold what is hurt in us, not turning away at all, so that we can begin to see more deeply into the causes of our suffering, and its cessation.

The appearance of suffering is actually a precious opportunity to witness, to begin to understand ourselves more and more, and to heal.

We can do this without even the slightest irritation, or neglect, or impatience, but with more attention and care, with our resources of light and peace, and strength. This is what is needed, for as long as it is needed.

What is true on a personal level, we can also tell is true with those we know and care for - our friends and family, and those in our community who suffer and cause suffering. They too may have learned to reject themselves, mirroring the reactions of authority figures and society, and feel shame and guilt, keeping the truth hidden, but this does not further any of our aims for peace and wholeness.

What has been rejected here as well needs to be warmly embraced, with no judgement, and with no shame; with steady unconditional love and

compassion, and the willingness to look deeply for as long as it takes, in order to understand.

This is the Great Work of healing deeply, and then becoming an effective agent of change in the lives of others, and this is all one action of the spirit within us.

Compassion and Self Compassion

What we call compassion is the love we have in us, meeting suffering in ourselves, in our family, and in the world.

We are closest to ourselves, and so of course we know our own suffering better than that of others. We need this one quality called self compassion to turn to what is difficult, and to keep our attention on it, and hold it tenderly until it begins to transform.

Sometimes this feels like caring for a young child, one who is frightened, or in tears. At first it may be that all we can feel is our own hurt, trembling, uncertainty, remorse, or fear. When we can hold this feeling, encompassing it with the warmth of unconditional love and compassion, we calm down. We find a sense of ease restored.

Thinking back now, I can see how compassion for myself is what had me begin to search for a way to live in this world, and to heal myself. It's what led to what is colloquially called taking refuge in sources of safety and protection.

In my thirties, I travelled to Asia for this reason.

In my 50's I went on retreat for a year, from this same compassion for self and others.

Self compassion is like this - it has us begin, and it's the power in us that has us continue, until we find deeper answers, and deeper healing.

Some traditions speak mostly of love for oneself, as essential, but to me compassion is more to the point here - that we are addressing the suffering we have known, and carry.

It's easier to speak of compassion and care for our loved ones, and those all around us in this world, but this - *self* compassion, is how we know what it is to be human, to struggle and suffer, sometimes to fail, and to endure. It's what we need to find comfort, and relief that is longer lasting than what the world commonly offers.

Having compassion for ourselves is what has us begin a path of practice, or begin again, as many times as needed, and then to continue, and from that, we are able gradually to be more available to others, and to share what we have found that actually helps.

The warmth we feel for others we have to have known ourselves.

As it's said in the Bible, in the first letter by John,

We love, because we were loved first

which I can read now as,

We have compassion for others, because we ourselves have received compassion first.

This can be from a parent, or a teacher, or a friend, or a Holy Being, or it can be from ourselves, from a pure, deep place inside ourselves.

When we choose to let go of negative, destructive habits, or an entire outlook and values, it's because of this self compassion, that is protective, and that has wisdom, knowing the effect of actions over the long term.

Refuge and renunciation of samsaric suffering then both have this basis, of feeling worthy of love, and of self compassion.

How often do we really appreciate the indestructible, healing quality of compassion throughout our lives as it arises to meet our needs? It's a truly beautiful quality that isn't talked about or highlighted enough, I don't think, but it should be praised, and cultivated, and honored by all, and its importance shared with others.

Over the years, I have taken the bodhisattva vows many times in my heart, but I have to say, in truth, that I have not yet fully resolved my own samsaric suffering. What I have found is that it really is difficult, and it really does take time and dedication to practice for a person to completely transform the mind, as our great teachers have done, and to accomplish the stages of liberation, and non-regression.

Until then, what is plain to see is that *What I can give is limited by my own lack of freedom*. How can I give to others what I don't have myself? To modify the language just slightly of something I wrote over a decade ago, about cultivating love for ourselves

I know that some people, especially in spiritual traditions, would try to skip this step, of having compassion for themselves, or gloss it over lightly, on the way to the

great, heroic, and truly praiseworthy actions of a bodhisattva living in this world, but I've come to realize that this is a mistake.

We can only help others to the extent that we understand our own experience, our own samsaric suffering, and get free of it, and we do this by receiving and awakening compassion for ourselves, and learning what it means to care for ourselves well, for our whole lives.

I'm afraid that those who would skip this step, and even put it down, achieve neither their own personal liberation, or the ability to help others. So the more I think about it the more it seems that this is something that is absolutely necessary.

Compassion leads to Great Compassion

This precious quality of self compassion can be with us all throughout our lives and meditations, and it is naturally onward leading. When we are in touch with how hard it is to overcome suffering in our lives, over time we become less judgmental, more patient, and gentle, and generous, creative and adaptive, and willing to meet ourselves and others wherever we are in our lives. This only comes about because when we have not turned away from our own difficulties, sorrow and confusion, however much of it remains.

The clouds part at last, and the sky clears, and this one sun illuminates us all.

Look at the dedicated lives in this world, at our spiritual teachers, at those with something to give, and you will see it is this way.

So please, do your best to be kind and loving and compassionate to yourself. It is the way out of the wilderness, to safety; it is a protector; it is light and sustenance all along the journey, and the way to find purpose and fulfillment here on earth.

If you are a person who is kind to others, be that same way towards yourself

For many of us, for some reason, it's easier to be gentle, and patient, and encouraging to others who are struggling than it is to have these same feelings towards ourself.

I remember the first time I saw this vividly.

My sister and I are close in age. I'm about a year and a half older than she is, and I remember back to when we were teenagers, perhaps fourteen and fifteen. One day she was telling me the problems she was having, and how difficult things were then for her. She went on for some time, one thing after another, and I listened, with sympathy, really wanting her to be free of *all* that, and finally I said to her, If it were me, and I was telling you what you were saying, what would you do?

Immediately, she got this soft look on her face and looked at me, and didn't need to answer with words. Of course she would embrace me and tell me, it's going to be alright. And I said to her - there! look! that feeling you have now - turn it around, and give that same feeling to yourself...

She understood what I meant.

I don't know why it is that some of the kindest people you will ever meet have a hard time extending this same quality of love and compassion to themselves when they are struggling. It's one of the mysterious things about us as human beings in this place, in these times.

But this can change. We can gradually learn to be more patient, and forgiving, and warmly encouraging to ourselves, as we are to others.

The reason I began by saying, *If you are a person who is kind to others* is that I know that not everyone is patient, and gentle, warm and friendly to other people, or to animals. Not everyone has these qualities awake in their lives, and their lives are hard because of it.

I would not want to live in a world without kindness and respect, and grace being offered and received. No. We would only accept such a world if we didn't know any better.

And truly this is the medicine we all need, the balm, and sustenance, shelter, safety and strength...

When I think of offering myself the same kindness I would to someone else who is going through the same challenge or difficulty, something of another order of love awakens in me. I see it is without judgement, or hesitation.

It is unconditional, saying essentially,

Whatever you are going through, I am here for you. I am on your side. You can count on that. If you need me, I am here...

Most of us have old wounds to heal, and present day difficulties, and this is the way forward out of all that. We *can* find someone external to our lives who cares for us in this unconditional way, or we *can* be touched by the

Divine in some form, external or in our thoughts and prayers and meditations, and what all these lead to and accomplish is this one quality of pure love awakening and being felt in ourselves.

I can see my younger self, and see others as 'another me', as one teacher put it.

Of course I didn't know better back then what roads would lead to what results, and I think now, oh, have mercy;

I hadn't yet met good teachers, and then, even after meeting them and learning a little, it's still been difficult to change. It is still difficult sometimes to find the ease we all seek.

So, naturally, like everyone else, I have to ask, What do to? What do do?

A great twentieth century zen teacher named Uchiyama Roshi said, *Everything I encounter is my own life*, which is something remarkable, when I really think about it. There is no rejection at all in that view, but only this tender embrace of all experience that transforms.

I wonder, what would you say to your younger self? Or to someone making their way, and succeeding sometimes, and at other times falling and suffering, as you have known?

What do we say to those following ways we know will bring them harm?

Or, what do we say to ourselves when we are swept up in some delusion, and drawn to suffer more? How do we hold all this?

Of course, it is the very same response we really need, one of unconditional compassion, with understanding.

Here's an example of what that looks like:

A grandparent's love is something we all recognize universally. It is so patient, and so gentle, and so nurturing, and so effortlessly generous....

This is how we should be towards one another, all the time (and not just on Sundays), and this is how we should be towards ourselves when we struggle with something.

If we can do this, an ease of body and mind descends upon us, as grace.

Our full breath returns, the way before us clears, and we can move ahead when we are ready, meeting the day, with the light of optimism, and faith...

If you are kind to others, be that same way towards yourself ... is a kind of equalizing self and others meditation, only now, these days, it is taking how we are towards others when we are kind, and 'equalizing' or seeing ourselves as being exactly the same as them in deserving the same qualities of gentle attention and care. In these times especially, I think this is something we really need.

Traditionally what is called 'equality' or equanimity meditation was introduced and cultivated to overcome common selfishness, and self centeredness, that insensitive 'me first' attitude, that neglects the needs of others. This one is more to overcome self neglect, or the self denigration, and actually harmful attitudes towards ourselves which are so prevalent in our times.

And I look.... hmmm... Am I kind to others? really? Well... sometimes... maybe just a little, and sometimes... a bit more...

I owe this to my parents and teachers, and to my sister and friends who have been there for me, and the Divine in my life, in all the ways its been there...

Then I can take the same advice I offered to my sister all those years ago, and see if I can be this way to myself, at least a little more, day by day...

(2024)

Comparing the Idea of Original Sin with That of Original Purity and Perfection

*I live in this world where so many people suffer
because of their own past actions, and regret, and shame
They identify with their delusions and wrong actions,
and believe themselves to be wrong, lacking, innately sinful,
when nothing could be further from the truth –
They are all innately whole, perfect, and pure...*

We may not think in philosophical terms, but everything we do is based on a view of ourselves and our world. Dig down into the Western psyche, and whether we consider ourselves religious or not, in almost all cases you will find the idea of original sin at the foundation. This can be changed, but it needs to be engaged with, understood, and resolved.

I agree with Ani Tenzin Palmo here, when she said that the Western concept of good and evil, and man's 'fallen nature', is an unimaginably harmful, destructive idea – 'It's wicked', she said.

The author Matthew Fox wrote about this in his 1997 book 'Original Blessing'

He said in an interview:

I also object to original sin as the starting point of religion because of the tremendous psychic damage it has done. People are already terribly vulnerable to self-doubt and guilt, especially members of minority groups... The whole ideology

of original sin increases one's alienation and feeds the sado-masochistic energies in the culture - the sense that one is not worthy...

This common view we have is at the root of our putting ourselves down. It results in our feeling less than capable of handling problems, without relying on an external agency, far from where we are. {*when 'It is near to you!'*} The veiled conception then is that we are innately without resources, when nothing could be further from the truth...

While it may be so that, experientially, we have been deluded and suffering for such a very long time, there is a great difference between saying this, and believing this is who we *are*, fundamentally. Our view of ourselves and others and our world not only determines where we will go, but what we have with us to draw from, to change. In Buddhism, saying 'a long, long time' is radically different than believing that something is eternal.

These are like the sky and the earth apart.

In contrast to the idea of original sin, and brokenness, eastern traditions in particular the Buddhism of the tantras and the Kagyud Nyingma lineage posit *original purity and perfection*, and that pure perception of our life here can become the basis of all our thinking about ourselves and the world, and the practices we do to reveal our true divine nature.

It is like the sun shining through the clouds...

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche expressed it this way:

This is our original, unborn, and undying wisdom, which radiates all the time,

and,

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...

As Mingyur Rinpoche said,

Your essence, and the essence of every living creature, is pure, whole, and complete... There is nothing missing, and that is why we call it the Great Perfection....

Original purity is always present, especially when it feels like it isn't. Every step you take on the path should reinforce your trust that pure awareness is right here, right now...

While not understanding our nature is the ground of our doubt and despair, this can definitely change. This is what I would like to say this morning. Like removing an obstacle from the road we're on, once we are

have looked into and dispelled our mistaken ideas, the world opens up again.

(2024)

Unconditional Love and Radical Inclusiveness

When live our days with acceptance of ourselves and others, and love, we open. We find that what we need, *what we all need*, is not some partial, conditional love - the love that bargains, but an *unconditional love*. This is kind of love that says,

“No matter where you are, or what you’re going through, I’m here for you”.

This is what we need to truly open to ourselves, and to each other, and to see our depths; to support and encourage ourselves and others, and to heal and to be whole.

We need the kind of love that is *a radical inclusiveness*. It is radical in the sense that it is a sharp turn from the partial, the measured, the conditional. Depending on where we are, radical inclusiveness is going to mean different things: for some it will mean learning to embrace old or new hurt, missed opportunities, or grief; for others, it will be expanding to include more of our ancestors and family, or republicans, militarists, the addict, the disengaged... and on and on...

This same kind of love is what we then bring out into the world, with all its divisions, strife, hunger, despair, and immaturity; with all its beauty and potential. With the radical inclusiveness of love at its best, we feel there is no obstacle that can't be overcome, no state we have to recoil from. Even those challenges that have not yet risen are included.

This great love goes out to meet the world as it is, knowing without the slightest doubt how beautiful it can be, and knowing this basic nature we have to work with that is everywhere. This love is unyielding, irresistible, inspiring self and others. It is in our eyes and in our hearts, and in our hands, working to set our world right.

Unconditional love has the advantage over other kinds of love in that it can remove fear of, quote, 'the others', and any doubt in our capacity to respond. However we name it, the Divine, our Buddha Nature, our own depths, it opens us up to a resource that is limitless, creative, and skillful.

If we leave anything out, any person or group or state of being, we've somehow fallen short of what love can be. To take up *all of our life here, and all our relations*, is to see their worth, and to bring out the best we have in us and in this world. Is there any other way forward to positive, lasting change? Is there anything more grounded and optimistic than starting where we are, with a vision of truth and beauty?

*May we all find and make manifest
such love and inclusiveness,
and teach our children,
all their days,
to do the same*

Because it is this difficult

*What I have not practiced, I will practice,
and, what I have not yet healed, I will heal...*

Thought Training practice derives its strength from knowing just how difficult it is to become free from suffering. It is exactly because it is this difficult that we dedicate ourselves to practice.

As the vows from my heart say,

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

There are times when this is not something that is abstract for us - it is immediate, and painful, or depressing, directly knowing our own states of confusion, limitation and suffering, and just how our efforts to become free of these have not yet accomplished a full result.

Instead of there only being despair, and the loss of faith, it is also seeing -

'This is how difficult it is!'

This is how it has been in the past, both for myself and for others...

*This is how it is now... for myself, and really for so many others in the triple world,
beyond counting...*

And how it will be this way in the future too, unless something is done about it...

We suffer and struggle; and we may find what we feel is a viable path, led by our intuition, and then apply themselves, maybe for years, or for decades, and so often we ourselves and others will fall. We will fail, and continue to suffer, and descend to states that may be even worse than before. What can we do?

This awareness can be a source of strength for us like no other. We can see and feel directly how it has been in our own lives -

To maintain sound ethics, to clarify the mind, and to liberate ourselves more than the briefly can be so difficult... At times, it can seem almost impossible...

And these times we live in can really feel overwhelming, with wars and the threat of wars, the destruction of our living environment, and the inertia we see in people all around us... it can seem to be almost too much...

But we can turn toward *all* of this with compassion, for ourselves first, and primarily, seeing and knowing personally that - *It is like this for me...*

That feeling flows for me a little at a time, or, it can be like waking up into a world with a greater motivation than I had before, one that includes others, as far as this life can reach.

There is a visualization that is used in Vajrayana Buddhism for invoking a powerful, mythological, protector called *a Garuda*.

It is said that this being *arises from an ocean of poison*, and the meaning is that this is a dependent arising:

When things are terrible, as they are now, threatening our very lives and the lives of our loved ones, and future generations, and all living beings, then something in us *must* awaken, in response. Out of sheer necessity, from our basic nature, fearless ones of great power like this are called forth from within. They are the manifestation of compassion, and they are described this way:

In Tantric Buddhism, the Garuda is yet another form in which various buddhas arise for the purpose of removing disease and injury caused by nagas and poisoning... Metaphorically, the worst 'poisons' are desire, hatred and ignorance...

Tantrayana puts the Sutrayana and Mahayana Thought Training teachings into images that we can meditate on to realize and free ourselves, more and more.

To call forth a fierce protector like this is a way of saying also that * our own deep potential awakens, according to the great needs of the time.

In another example, to illustrate, it is said that *Tara*, the Buddha of swift, compassionate activity, *is born from lotus in an ocean of tears / of Avalokiteshvara, Lord of the Three Worlds...*

And the meaning here is the same. It is the true heart responding, with sterling dedication, and with great love and strength.

I have heard it said that in times like these the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and Holy Ones will manifest as books, images, and inspiration, and whatever way is needed to benefit beings. There is no limit, they say.

And as I look at this world, and my life as it has been until now, I think,

'Oh! Precisely because it is this difficult now, I have to produce from within myself the clear and powerful commitment to match it.'

Especially now, I can feel this, and can say,

*May I actualize in its entirety the path to freedom from suffering,
and lead all others to that very same state...*

May we care for each other in the best of ways...

*May each one of us find a path that works for us,
practice with faith, become capable,
and then share the benefits with others,
with all our relations, as much as we can...*

This is how we practice the Dharma as needed, the Mahayana, and Thought Training teachings, and the Vajrayana, all of it.

Tenderness - The Womb of the Tathagatas

If we begin with even the smallest amount of tenderness, and stay with it, and allow it to increase, eventually it will include all living beings.

We can begin with kindness towards ourselves, as we are closest to our own experience, and it can be immediate, and intimate. This self-care is then onwards leading, without our having to add anything to it. We learn what it is to feel, to want, to struggle and suffer, mostly in the dark about causes and the solutions to our problems, and if we stay with it, gradually the day breaks for us. If instead we had turned away, or hardened ourselves for any reason, out of doubt, or self denigration, not knowing our own worth, we will have missed the new beginnings.

Something so small, so common as tenderness, holds wonders within it. It is truly the tathagata garbha - the womb of the tathagatas - the Buddhas, or the Awakened Ones. Our care for ourselves and those closest to us opens us to the deep truth of about our being here together - that we are made for each other, and that we find fulfillment in this life of clear understanding and universal love and compassion.

Some would say you need to enter the main road to make it to the great kingdom of universal love. Some insist there is only one way. Too often though we exclude or deprecate the precious self care that is the seed of our understanding, and greater love.

The beginning and the full result of an undertaking often look very different. Have you noticed? Just as a tiny seed planted in a field looks

nothing like the harvest, attention given to the sweet, gentle, healing care we can offer to ourselves and to those closest to us portends a greater, all embracing life, one that is itself light, joy, and giving.

Welcoming Our Experience

{Formerly 'Embracing Imperfection'}

When we sit in meditation, it's likely that we will experience dullness and distraction, restlessness, various desires and irritations, and doubt about our ability to practice.

We also may bring to our experience a certain idealism, or perfection-ism. Maybe we have had good experiences in the past and want to repeat them, or we have read or heard about wonderful possibilities, and want to pursue them. We may even feel annoyance that we're not immediately completely calm and blissful.

What they call the hindrances are defined as

that which obstructs awareness and weakens wisdom

- and it's true - we can see this for ourselves. It's so obvious, but the way we see these in our practice can make a big difference as far as resolving them, and experiencing a measure of peace and well being.

See how it is: when we meet dullness or distraction, craving attachment, anger or doubt - is it with a mind that is pushing these away? Is there an undercurrent of annoyance?

Oh, how I wish this wasn't there - then my meditation would be perfect!

This is just another form of aversion, and restlessness.

There is another way, that is getting to know mind and ourselves more deeply, and that is to practice embracing these imperfections, the hindrances, in practice.

*There is something of light and peace, something innately perfect in the midst of all of our common, restless, and reactive states. There is something onward leading, and that is our natural intelligence.

For a long time I have had this working definition of *faith as the knowledge of things not yet proven*, and this has been useful for me up to now. Recently though I have begun to think of faith in a more practical way, *as the capacity to be led by our intuition*, and this is something different than using only our rational mind. It has more of a feeling quality, and is an immediate, clear and incisive intelligence.

Faith fluctuates in me, I notice. Sometimes it's less present, and sometimes more. Things always feel easier when I am trusting myself. The real problem with doubt is that it can stop our progress, or even attempting what may help our situation. It has already made up its mind, we could say. Another term for doubt then could be 'active disbelief'.

When we have the kind of faith I am describing though, in ourselves and in our practice, and when we continue with clear seeing, problems and confusion naturally resolve. It's just like the way a flowing stream becomes clear all by itself.

Rather than reject our experience, we can open to whatever is here. We can warmly welcome it, and in fact tenderly embrace it, and see it as ourselves and as our path of practice.

Resistance comes from not accepting on some level, or from wanting things to be different, but the way forward is through understanding of our actual lives here.

We can let go of any antagonism we may have towards thoughts, emotions, memories, or plans that arise, and know them all kindly, with patience, and ease, and grace.

This is an orientation of mind that is fruitful. As long as it takes, we are compassionately welcoming our experience. It is really embracing these our imperfections also as the path to wholeness.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo has rightly said that the whole reason we need to practice is because we are not yet Buddhas, or Arhats, liberated, saintly people, so the hindrances are actually our path. They are what we have to work with and to learn from.

It's not our Buddha Nature or our Original Nature that needs clarification, and release, she explained. It's those very factors we struggle with that need to be understood and tended to in ourselves.

We are not giving loving kindness and compassion to the nature of the mind, to our buddha nature. That doesn't need it - that's already loving kindness and compassion. That's it's nature. We are giving loving kindness to our ego. In other

words, we are making friends with ourselves, because we have to walk the path. The ego is walking the path to its own dissolution¹...

These experiences of ours hold so much potential.

We suffer and naturally want to find our way to freedom. That this takes time, and understanding to know and actualize however needs much gentleness with what is occurring. We can bring patience, and humility, faith, and care from this kind heart of ours.

They say in the Theravada that

the natural result of a concentrated and settled mind is to see things clearly

and in the Nature of Mind and Buddha Nature teachings that

*When the obscurations are removed
realization dawns effortlessly*

With kindness and compassion, and our innate intelligence guiding us, with time and much loving patience and continuing practice, the hindrances simply fall away on their own. Then all they refer to in the texts becomes apparent.

¹ See *A Healthy Sense of Self*, from The Supreme Siddhi of Mahamudra Retreat, by Ani Tenzin Palmo, 2018

The Stone the Builder Rejected

When I come upon that part of myself that is rejected, even by myself, I know what an outcast feels. For the longest time, it can feel like a total loss - exclusion, and darkness.

I have had to ask myself, *What possible use can this be?* and I know- it is at least this knowledge of what others have felt, and are going through now. Somehow, I am related to them, as to my own family, as to my own body.

Past our differences of language, and culture, and religion, and age, and gender, and sexual orientation, deeper than all of that, I also know what it feels like to be alone, and I also know despair.

I think of the verse in scripture, that says

The stone that the builder rejected

I have made the cornerstone of my temple...

- and this, to me, is the meaning of compassion...

This stone - I see as rubble, and tossed to the side. It is what is not valued, and it is this life that is taken up now with such care, and given pride of place.

From my own point of view, having been in exile, I come from loss; I come from exclusion, and feeling unknown, and refused, even by myself.

This part of myself too I see now is something sacred, as it allows communion with all who are lost, and with all who still struggle and suffer.

This temple *not made of human hands* is eternal.

The scriptures rightly teach that from compassion comes everything the saints and bodhisattvas and all good people do to lift others up.

*And now, never again will I look the same way
at those the world deems unworthy,
but I will see them with remembrance,
and with the eyes of love...*

The Quality of Mercy, A Few Thoughts on a Prose Poem by William Shakespeare

From The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath.*

*It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:*

*'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:*

*His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;*

*It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;*

*And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice...*

*we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy...*

I.

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath...*

Once someone points out a truth to you, it gets easier to see wherever you go. If someone tells you, for example, that *your original nature is one of kindness*, even if it's the first time you hear it, there's a chance that recognition may stir in you; and you can also start to verify that *all living beings are by nature kind* by looking at the best in your family and public figures, and strangers too.

From that point, another challenge, of course, is to see how that can possibly be, with all our emotions and beliefs that seem to contradict that idea.

How did we stray so far?

The Buddha said that,

*The mind is luminous,
but it has been covered over by adventitious defilements
and these can be removed.*

Lama Yeshe said that we have these 'heavy blankets of superstition', that hide the truth from people about themselves and others.

The good news here is that these obscuring veils can be removed, and our original nature can shine again. It's the best possible news, really.

The truly revolutionary Buddha Nature teachings from the 6th century onwards make use of the idea, that we all have beautiful, noble qualities within us already. They say that

'when the obscurations are removed, then realization dawns effortlessly'.

This is a very different starting point for spiritual practice than our ordinary view.

Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche describes meditation from this point of view, saying,

During meditation you do not need to think any particular thoughts or make any effort to change what you are. Just simply maintain where you are and what you are, without trying to do anything unusual. If you meditate by simply maintaining the natural state, then everything unnatural will be removed. You do not have to do anything except remain on your cushion. In one sense this is something of a joke, but in another sense it is true. You simply relax on your cushion, and that's it!

II.

When Shakespeare said, *The quality of mercy is not strained*, in a way, he was calling us to remembrance.

We have all witnessed kindness at one time or another, and seen how easy it can be, how natural and comfortable it is. Having this pointed out to us can come as an awakening. We ourselves are kind not through some special effort, but because this is *who we are*, in truth.

When we become aware of this, we don't have to make an effort to be kind, (as *mercy is not strained*) or to be generous, or gentle, and patient, and compassionate, because *our true nature is - - all of this*. The Taoists would say *it is an effortless effort*.

If we feel that we need to struggle all the time, chances are we're coming from our ego, and not from our original nature, and letting what the zen folk call our interdependent 'whole function' manifest through us as needed.

This original nature of ours, we should know, is not anything we need to run towards, or something we can lose, because it is *who we are*;

{This is called *Apranahita* - aim-lessness, or wish-less-ness - which Thich Nhat Hanh describes by saying, 'we do not put something in front of us and run towards it'}

Just like a person not needing to make an effort to sit, if they are already sitting, or stand if they are already standing, it is entirely natural -

like that, we don't need *to try* to be a decent caring person, or to give of ourselves. We can be at ease then in our life and work, awakening the best gift, that of self knowledge, and our true nature of love.

III.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Maha Boowa said, *For an enlightened person, there is no other response to the human condition, other than compassion.*

We can be tragically formed by hard experiences, or training at the hands of cruel men. Witness how soldiers have their humanity beaten down, so that they can kill others; See how the truth about war, or exploitation, or about factory farming *has to be hidden from people*, and lies need to be told to make it all seem acceptable, and even glamorous to fight, or to seize land, or to consume and be among the so called 'elite'.

And yet *even this* testifies to something great within us, if we only knew it!

We may have learned to have a low opinion of ourselves and others, but the pointing out instruction that is in Shakespeare's poem would have us see things differently. Saying that

*The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath*

is telling us that we all have this heavenly quality within us, it is our nature, and it is a delight to give and receive. All that we look to in our Traditions is within us.

*It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes*

There is no joy quite like giving from our effortless, kind nature. It is verily the fulfillment of our purpose here on earth. And both we and those we share our life with are truly blessed, and enriched, by the love we share.

We may admire power or wealth, but those are nothing compared to love. As Shakespeare says

*'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:*

*His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;*

A ruler who loses this quality of mercy, becomes a tyrant, and no longer deserves the support of his people.

Here, *mercy* is that quality that meeting the needs of those who suffer, or who have gone on a wrong path. There is wisdom inseparable from such kindness, because any other response misses the mark. Through punishment, we accomplish neither our own aims, nor the aims of others.

The great need in this world of ours, as it is now, is mercy, or also known as compassion. With compassion we remember and are aware of the past, and we protect our family by holding what is broken, tenderly, with affection.

There is something beautiful about this one word that Shakespeare has chosen, *mercy*. There is something gentle, and approachable about it. We would trust one who is merciful, forgiving, and able to embrace us with whatever flaws and limitations and hurts we may have.

What *other* way forward is there? It's not in blame or fighting hostility and degradation with just more aggression and exclusion, building up distorted caricatures of 'the enemy.' There's been enough of that already, far too much in fact.

Here, loving kindness is described like this:

*It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;*

*And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.*

We underestimate who humans are when we don't see what we are capable of, that we have this divine beauty and power within us, the ability to love. Something of another order enters our world when we awaken to this truth though, and '*mercy seasons justice*'.

It seems to be the common view that we all want strict justice delivered to others, but if asked, mercy for ourselves and our loved ones.

Turning it around, seeing how others want to be treated as ourselves and those closest to us,

*we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy...*

When we receive this quality from another, or awaken it within ourselves, at that time we know just how elevating, and how precious it is. It is the noble heart we all have, that is our true nature, and that needs care and attention, and encouragement to grow.

All the words written, and all our prayers for peace come down to this, the need to awaken to this truth, and to help all others to do the same.

Setting Another At Peace

When I then read {in the Prayer of Saint Frances}

*Grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console...*

I am moved by the humanity of it. That the author saying, *Grant that I may not so much...* tells me the wish to be consoled is still there. It isn't denied, but we are reaching beyond this, in our hopes and prayers.

If our lives are about me only, they become small. We can include self care without it becoming our be all and end all. Everything then takes its rightful place, naturally in the spiritual life.

Without caring for ourselves, receiving love and spiritual food, we'd not have the strength or understanding to know how to best care for others, but we shouldn't stop at just hoping to be cared for ourselves. The way is ever open for us to care for others, in our heart at the very least, if not yet in our words and actions.

The activity of prayer deserves to be highlighted here, as its subtle influence is something that is profound. Even just turning our mind slightly in the direction of loving I'm sure has creative effects in our world. We can so easily overlook this innate capacity, but when we activate it, we begin to see its great value.

In saying

*O, Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console...*

- we take Jesus or the Buddha, a saint or our teacher as our example of loving. We aspire to become more like them, abundantly loving and giving.

I have to say that I cherish this one word, *console*, as it is so tender, and meaningful. I imagine a friend staying with another, to ease their sorrow after some loss. If I needed to write this whole paper just to arrive at this one word, it would be all worth it.

What is this feeling made of, I wonder?

How many times have we needed someone to lean on, and instead found ourselves alone? How much have we felt that absence in our own lives? *That feeling* goes on in how we meet others who are going through the same kind of need we ourselves have known.

*Grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console...*

means we're not caught, as we can be, in our own sorrow or loneliness, but that we actively seek to console others. It's a shared life we're living then, as far as we can reach. Something beautiful in us awakens when we seek to comfort another who is in distress.

Whether or not this is our profession, we find ways to be a support, and the meaning of being born a human being is clear, and apparent.

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.’²

² From: Tara’s Enlightened Activity, Shambhala Publications

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 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...'*³

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.'*⁴

³ Translated by Coleman Barks

⁴ From *The Glorious Pursuit*, published by Nav Press

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

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!

2012

All Are in Need of Grace

From a Buddhist point of view, grace can be thought of as unconditional compassion. We fall, and the power and wisdom that finds us and lifts us up again is a mercy we know, and never forget.

We may have it come to us from outside, or it may arise from within, but the feeling is the same.

Rumi expressed it this way

*I groped for excuses
but love came
excusing me*

*Don't try
to add up what's been given
An uncountable grace has come to you...*

There can be much in Dharma that sounds calculated, as in - do this practice, get this result, or, results arise from specific causes only. That sort of thing.

It is scientific, and exacting, and it appeals to many people for just this reason. Pointing out causality gives us something we can do, to free ourselves from problems, personally, and in our communities.

But there is more to our lives than science tells us, or that is known with our rational mind alone. There is also all that the poets and seers tell us, and this is where the sense of grace and blessings can be spoken of meaningfully.

It takes some affinity, or training, surely, to awaken to this dimension of our being here together, but it is always available, and it is necessary for our living with ease, and the greatest possible helpfulness while we are there together.

There is a kind of love and mercy we can call grace, that is decidedly *not* transactional, and when we know and receive this, it changes everything for a person. Just being aware of this as a possibility offers a higher aim for our entire lives. It is not only uplifting to think of, but it also seems to me to be essential.

When I think of the line

All are in need of grace -

I think of universal compassion, and how it arises from a deep understanding of suffering, and its resolution.

How many times have we fallen into delusion and suffering ourselves?
When this is recalled, we will never condemn another.

It's also said

We love, because we were loved first

and this brings me to the sense of universal compassion.

Universal love is more often talked about, but compassion for all is left mostly as an ideal to aspire towards, and no more. In truth though, it is the very ground of our being here.

When we say that all need grace, it is saying that all need forgiveness, to completely shed the past, to mature, and to realize the fullness of our lives here.

We've all made mistakes, and to the extent that we can understand and forgive ourselves, we can move on, and become new again.

We can see the lack of forgiveness inwardly, and in our news and world as the far branches of a lack of understanding, of how we get lost, and how we can recover our sense. Conflicts, accusations, and deceptions go on and on, and all this is in need of a deeper response, one that will go to the roots of problems.

I think of a mother or a relative who naturally takes the side of their loved one. They are *always* ready to offer them grace and forgiveness, and a way to return home. This is so much a part of our human nature that we refer to it much later as being archetypal.

If we see ourselves and each other in this light, that all are in need of grace,

we can go through our lives with faith that we are loved, and we can love each other unconditionally.

We belong to the same family, and it is our sacred honor, and joy to care for one another, through all time.

Where Grace Can Be Found

Not knowing the beginning, or the end of all our suffering, for all time, we are then somewhere in the great middle, aren't we?

What else can we do then but to pray for this grace, to open ourselves to this light of truth, with some slight gesture at times, or else calling mightily from the mountaintops, and give that to others, as far as we can ever reach...

Spiritual or religious subjects are never easy to speak of, but they seem the most important of all to try to say something about. When things are really difficult, we have no use for what is only philosophy, or anything abstract. We need something we can touch, or see and move towards. Something to re-ignite our faith.

I've been thinking lately about grace, and how when it comes to mind, it's elusive, but immediate as well. There is a warmth, a knowing. I'll explain, to trace it out a bit.

Grace is usually described in Christianity as *God's unmerited favor*, which I take to mean, there is nothing we can do to deserve it. It is always offered to us. It is unconditional.

Here is one way this is immediate and tangible: When one person wrongs another, and although they don't deserve it, they forgive them, we could say there is something divine in that. We are extending grace to another.

All are in need of grace because we have all made mistakes, harmed ourselves and others, and been in the dark about what we were doing. We seek the light, and light is offered to us. It is always a way out of confusion, and misery.

This is a challenge to put into words, but I notice I am not satisfied with either the personal, or the impersonal descriptions of the divine, what goes beyond this one place and time and conditions. Perhaps I am seeking some definitive answer, but, my feelings change. At times I really do need the personal, most personal, and I find then that it always leads me beyond whatever simple idea I may have had.

The personal is so close, it resists being talked about at all with others, certainly. Even thinking about it only gets us to the cusp of this warmth, that goes beyond what we knew even a moment before.

At other times, I can see this one spiritual life being expressed in many ways, miraculously, and in old and new ways, and it resists being called only by one name, or shown in only one form.

On some level, by any name we give to it, there is a wisdom that guides us, and I turn again to that when I am lost.

We reach for grace when all else has failed.

Where does this come from? What is missing in our lives?

They say,

*Except that God builds a house,
he labors in vain that builds it...*

In a state of grace, writes Marco Pallis, a person is able to envisage tasks and surmount obstacles that are far beyond our ordinary human strength.

In Buddhist terms, we need something other than what is encompassed by our usual, ordinary thought. The transcendent, ever new, complete and perfect nature is intimated at times, and can be glimpsed to be the truth of our lives here. This much I know so far. The path arises out of this truth, mysteriously, incalculably, and leads there.

Shenpen Hookham, expressed it this way

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...

All of my arguments with God, the Divine, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, whenever we are giving a name to it, are about suffering, and the end of suffering. If it all could have been ended by another, it would have been, long ago, by even one capable and compassionate person, or saint, or divinity, but it hasn't happened that way so far. There are miracles, I'm sure, but most of our lives are behind a cloud, and the life of the spirit and the pure lands are not seen.

At times, when I find myself in the hells, misery without seeing a way out, my tears fall to the ground, and something new rises from it.

In Buddhism, karma is usually presented as something mathematical, saying that - these actions produce these precise results. This of course has 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, a Christ, or a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, more needs to be said. Somehow we also have to include for grace.

When we are blessed by something or someone, it's a qualitatively different kind of experience. There is no way to measure the great positive influence of a Sage or a Savior or the Divine in our lives. This idea is clarified in Sacred Art East and West, by Titus Burckhardt, where he refers to grace as,

**a breach made in the closed system of becoming...*

and he says,

This breach is the Buddha (divinity) himself; and all that comes from this (the names and forms, and scriptures and imagery, and the strength of our actions following the path) carries this power of awakening...

Going through endless desert wastelands, we seek light innately.

*A cry in the darkness,
and the cry itself is light...*

Light is like a seed, like drawing fresh breath again. Beauty hints at grace, as does the memory, or the living moment of love. It is always the invitation to greater life. Light breaks through.

When there is grace, Marco Pallis has said,

All at once a peremptory urge takes root in that man's soul telling him that Enlightenment (God, or Truth) is the only thing of worth in its own right, and that all other things, be they great or small, can only be properly valued in proportion as they contribute to that end or else impede its attainment. Once this has happened then all the essentials of spiritual life are there...

Bhakti and Jnana

2024

The Empowerment of Compassion

Compassion is that unique human quality that expresses our kinship, and that gives us strength and hope...

It takes strength to be aware of suffering and not be overwhelmed by it. Driving past the tent city on Division street, some people will look at the homeless for just a moment, and quickly turn their attention to something else. For some, the sight of those who own nothing more than they can carry makes a deeper impression, and it can be depressing to think about any long term problem where there is no easy solution.

As it is with the racism in this country, and its inequality, its endless wars, neglect of the poor and our home, none of these can be addressed in shorthand. As much as we may have advanced, we have not yet given enough of our time, energy and intelligence to solve these problems. Instead, in 2016, we are a largely distracted, immature, and self-absorbed consumer culture. Worst of all, too often, those free and educated enough to effect change look away to the next party, the next game, the next escape.

I take solace here in the fact that there are many conscientious people, who work each day to make a difference, but it is not easy. When we meet what seems like an insurmountable challenge, it's tempting to give in to despair, both for this generation, and for our future. Fortunately for us, there are inner resources we can tap into to help us respond more effectively.

Compassion is that unique human quality that expresses our kinship, and that gives us strength and hope.

Compassion is not despair

On the surface, compassion may look like despair. In both cases the initial feeling is one of sadness., but where in despair we are overwhelmed, and made weak as a child, with compassion there comes the energy to work. There are times when some indomitable force rises up in us. Just look at those workers, mothers and fathers and friends and strangers who go out each day to do what's needed, and when there is some crisis, new strength enters their limbs.

When I think of those activists who marched, and who wrote, and who spoke out over the years, I know they did it both for themselves, and for for the coming generations. That strength they had to begin, and to keep going was the perennial strength of compassion, and this is something we can all use now.

Where despair feels like surrender, compassion has no quit in it. The doubting mind is also closely tied to fear, and it is a small and contracted state, but the mind of compassion is broad and clear and fearless. It imagines great things, such as clean water, and people being fed and housed, and gets to work to get them done.

When we are in a state of doubt and despair and distraction, we are shut down. We are confused and only using a small part of our inherent wealth. By contrast, compassion helps us to know just what is essential about our being here: to care for one another as best we can. A light wakes up in us. It is great love and compassion that begins in response to the great and small needs; it is compassion that has us continue; and it is this same power in us

that goes on for as long as it takes to complete the works of justice, healing and peace.

I praise the dawning of compassion in each and every one of us today, and all of its works. May it flourish in us all.

The Empowerment of Compassion – its Prose, and Poetry

Part I

Compassion is something that's with us all the time, waiting to wake up. It's there when we need it; it's a kind of love that reaches out, and acts; it gets involved in some way. It's willing to do whatever is necessary to protect, or to remove the pain of another. It is creative, and it is our intelligence, the best that's in us.

Sometimes though, it only becomes clear after the fact, what was at work in us, and so I thought to write out a few words about compassion, for when we need it again.

In our hard world, in truth, this is what's needed most of all, as I'm sure you'll agree.

Because of the greatness of this one quality, I hesitate, but then only for a moment, and for the very same reason; I know I have to at least try and speak its name.

How to tell when compassion has arisen:

From what I can tell, its chief characteristics are these:

1. It is fearless

There is some need, and if you had any fears, you can see these move to the side; you sense a wide road in front of you, with nothing in the way;

2. There is clarity

All your priorities 'snap to' – they arrange themselves, such that what seemed important only a moment before moves back into place; when you feel like there's no time for games, chances are that compassion is there;

and,

3. You have an uncommon persistence

You don't have any quit in you. This is one we can tell, even when it's going on. Check and see for yourself – the next time you're feeling your courage rise, and a calm, full clarity of purpose, look and I'm sure you'll also see something in you *that won't back down*. When things get scary and uncertain, that's the one that I want to have right there next to me.

The Empowerment of Compassion – its Prose, and Poetry

Part II - The Names of Compassion

So, ok – it's like this: all the best things in this world strain against being spoken of only in prose, and so I'll have to try another tack to say it properly, con permiso.

Here are some of the names of compassion, dear friends, so that you can know it when you see it, and take it up again more easily when you need to:

It's the mother of long range plans

Whenever we think to plant or tend a tree, that will only bloom for our children, or our children's children, sometime long in the future, that wish is born of compassion. It leads beyond these bodies of ours, that are just here for a short time like this. We go on in other ways;

It's the life blood of Workers

Look! What moves all our fellow men and women from their homes everyday, and sends them out to create the beloved community? What may look like a small act, like a tiny seed, or a spark, but that multiplies and fills our homes with light and fragrance, is just this power;

It's the daily bread of those who labor for peace and justice

This caring and dedication is something we all need, everyday, to sustain us; simple as it is, it's the most vital nourishment we share among us; it's the grace that moves, and lifts, and bends, that spins, and turns the lathe;

After the spectacle, and the public face of mourning, compassion is what gets us up the next day, and goes out to do the next right thing.

'Love makes what is heavy, light; and everything that is bitter, sweet and tasteful',
said Thomas A' Kempis

and in The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines, it says

The bodhisattva does not have the idea of difficulty; instead he produces the thought of ease, and that his going is a joy...

This is what would have us cross the ocean of knowledge, and then begin our work

People who study in the arts or medical professions know their long training is necessary, and then that it's only the beginning; it remains to meet the day, as the Zen Ox-herding pictures say, 'with gift-bestowing hands'.

It's the oil in the lamp

Late nights, holding this wounded world tenderly in the crook of our arm, sleepless because our beloved needs us to be; this is the radiance that fills the room, until we understand the meaning of our own religion, and can rest in that, and wake, eager to tend to the people who live on our street and in the town where we live;

It's our common language

We know each other, instinctively, when we see, and speak, and act with compassion; the lines marking the territory of nations, the names of groups, the identities in passports, all fade, and we recognize one another in a true light; and what was hard before, is easier and more joyful, now that we share the work;

It's the strength of those who move forward

One day, when you stand up, after so long, I know what it is that moves in you; I know it because I find that same strength in myself, I honor it, and tend the same fire;

It's the swiftness of the runner

Without waiting to be told, and going while others sleep, there's a boldness we know that has the cadence of the needs of the time, no more, and no less;

It's notching the arrow, the pull of the bow, and the arrow in flight, true to its aim

Being true to the mark, without wavering - we see this long held
dedication in our heroes and revered elders; and seeing this steadies us as
we make our own way;

This is what answers the call

Look and you'll find something in you that responds to needs. We all have
it in us to wake up our hearing, to loose the bonds on our feet and hands,
and join the great festival, of being of some use; you'll know you've entered
the grounds by the satisfied look on the faces you see;

This is the stillness that answers

Leaving the city, with all its weight in our hands, seeking cure in
monasteries, in the desert, in forests, and on lonely mountain tops; resting
there with the deer and the hawk, stepping altogether out of time, your
reply to this question, of 'how should we live now?' is a restored man.

This is what wakes us up

After sleeping for thousands of years, and moving in pointless dreams,
compassion rouses us with strength in our limbs, and the eye of the tiger;
This is what sees and remembers what's important

This is the refusal of weak tea

This is what brings peace in times of war

Even though shells are still falling, and refugees crowd the streets leading out of the cities, some dream gets held in the hearts of those who know compassion, and there is rest too for the weary, fresh water to ladle for those who thirst; and a new world that waits to be built on the ruins of the old;

Rumi says,

*It's tender like the morning star,
then strong as a lion...*

It's like a diamond, the sun, and a medicinal tree, as it's said in the Tibetan Tradition.

Mature compassion is there in us naturally, as the enlightened aspect of mind, our true nature; though there's effort involved, surely, the dedication to helping others is there in us effortlessly.

It's been said that having even a small amount of genuine compassion is like having a diamond in hand – with it, all we need can be easily attained; so it is with our true, innate wealth;

Our real inner nature, it's told, is perfect as it is, quite clear and pure, and inherently rich with good qualities, without our needing to add anything at all to it, or remove anything from it. This can be temporarily covered over, of course, but when the cloud-like veils are removed, by whatever methods we choose, then this light shines forth just as naturally and abundantly as the sun;

Just as the start of the day is a cause for joy, because of what it heralds, so also, from the very beginning when compassion dawns in us, from that time on, all wholesome dharmas, such as faith, intelligence, courage, and so on, will go on increasing in us. It's just this that brings forth buds, and ripens fruit on the branches. When it happens, this is really something to celebrate!

Compassion is like the sun also in that it illuminates all dharmas, all teachings. See for yourself how it is so.

Just as in the full light of the sun we can easily see all around, just so with compassion we can see clearly – our circumstances in life, the times we live in, and what's important to tend to now.

Loving compassion, it's said, is also like a medicinal tree, where every part or expression of it can be used for healing, for the restoration of life and strength to a people.

Ok – enough fooling around -

this is our real family name

this is our inheritance,

and our legacy;

this is what levels the proud,

and exalts the lowly;

this is what is both vulnerable, and invulnerable

– remarkable, isn't it?

this is what sadness needs, the alchemical work;

I won't refuse sadness

because I know

this can become something we need

When held close, guarded,

fed with reason for hope

a pearl may emerge

this worth

out of not-abandoned grief...

this is the one thing worth doing, the one thing worth cultivating and expressing in our lives, when you get right down to it

looked at in the light of our mortality, the brevity of our lives here, and the uncertainty of just how long we have, the only thing I find that eases the sorrow of this – inevitable parting from loved ones, and from all we know and cherish is just this one virtue, of compassionate action;

it can, has, and will take many forms, but when I am able to hold this thought in mind, of what is truly significant here, the fear and insecurity of living matters far less;

there's a dawn over the mountain top, bringing warmth and light, and the rich joy of our sharing this time here together!

this is the map in your hands;

imagine a future without compassion, it's only roads end only in bleak places; but if our history has compassion written at the top of every page, we know the story will be one that restores the breath to our bodies, and will do the same for future generations;

This is what removes obstacles;

it's like the man with his shoulder against a mountain – you might think he's crazy, or wasting his time, until you see the look in his eye, and *you know*, somehow, that mountain is going to move!

in the hardest of times, this is true medicine;

*hope is something more
than a pre-determined aim –
it's a direction you give your life to
pressing from hidden roots...*

this is what breaks chains:

look back on where you were freed in the past – see those shattered bonds?
– *what was that hand, and what was that force?*

look in history books, where oppression finally met its day, and there it is! –
that same power that's in you and me *now*;

this is music;

this is the vision and optimism that makes a new world;

and,

this is the strength we give each other;

If you want to help others, you will be asked to face down fear, and to hold
pain, and suffering. You can do this, but it's a learned skill, an art, we could
say. Following the path of compassion, you can in fact become more
capable than you ever knew you could...

Witness the lives of those great people who've come before us – they didn't
begin that way, but grew to be able to hold many in their embrace.

And so, let's call the names, *yes, call the names*:

Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Frederick
Douglass, Archbishop Romero, Lama Yeshe, Howard Zinn, Noam
Chomsky, Muhammad Yunus, Malala Yousafzai,

Dorothy Day, Thich Nhat Hanh, Desmond Tutu, Fannie Lou Haimer, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Daniel Berrigan, Bill W, Dame Cecily Saunders, Cesar Chavez, Mother Jones, the Dalai Lama...

Through their stories, what they've given us is just this courage we call compassion; our reason for real hope; unborn, undying, a bright wind, and joy for the ages.

At the end of the day, you know, this is the beauty we remember, and tell each other about. This is the light that shines in us all...

Aah, my dear ones, I'm telling you the truth, there's no way to end this, and so I leave this poem unfinished, as I myself found it, that you may add a verse, or two...

Why compassion is the most important thing in the world

I think most people could tell you, after having lived some years on this earth that what really lasts in memory is not so much what people do, but the goodwill they share with us. When we're treated with kindness, it stays with us. It can nurture and strengthen us for a long time. Deprived of love, we wither, or become twisted. Cared for, we are healthy and we thrive. After a while we know that love is essential for living.

The last few weeks I've been thinking that compassion is the most important thing in the world, and I'd like to propose, for your consideration, that it has the greatest natural, intrinsic worth. Here's what I've thought:

First of all, how do we measure importance? Clearly, there's a huge range of what people believe to be important- baseball, money, prestige, family, food, study, travel, pets, very clean dishes... make your own list...

I think we'd all agree that even our own ideas about what's important changes from year to year, or even from day to day, and hour to hour. I had to ask, then, what is it we all trying to define here, when we say something is important, that it is worth pursuing, or avoiding, being careful about, or holding on to? I think it has to do with happiness and unhappiness.

When we call something important, it means we believe, rightly or wrongly, that it has the potential to give us happiness, or it could be important to us also because of its potential to cause us unhappiness.

Think of a person's attitude towards a tossed away gum wrapper - not of much value, unimportant - and then think of a mother seeing her child walking toward some traffic, and reacting to that as something important, as something with the potential to cause a lot of unhappiness.

So, as a working idea, I've thought that what we are calling *importance* is our idea of the potential something has for it to bring us happiness or to avoid unhappiness. Right ideas, in this regard, are more valuable, naturally, than wrong ideas, just like an accurate map is more valuable than one with wrong information. By nature, good advice, is of more value to us than wrong, or misleading ideas.

From here, at least, I can see why, in the scheme of things, I give compassion the highest importance. Why do people study, or seek knowledge?, or build schools, or hospitals, or water treatment facilities? It's at least in part because these are seen, rightly, as things that can bring happiness to others, and prevent harm.

Compassion is a motivating force for good. It gives birth to seeking wisdom, and to wisdom, understanding something rightly, and to works.

As the attitude responding to suffering, and the actions that follow, compassion opens the way for every enjoyment. All the enjoyments of the world are blocked for a time when a person suffers in some way. Removing that suffering makes available all the treasures this life has to offer. For this reason it naturally has the greatest worth.

One way I illustrate this to my own mind is that I imagine a party - a group

of loving friends, where everyone is having a good time, eating, drinking, dancing, telling stories, the usual thing, when it happens that, in a moment, there is some danger to one of them - one of them has a problem. Maybe they have fallen into a pool and can't swim, or they need a doctor. Right away, the attention of everyone there would shift to that person.

This is a group, mind you, where everyone is capable of seeing and hearing, not themselves bound up, drunk, or distracted. Naturally, the needs of that one person in trouble become the most important thing. This is just the common wisdom we all recognize.

Compassion is instinctively praised, respected, and honored everywhere, and in all times. Instead of being swept along with so many others, valuing meaningless things, I'd like to propose, here is a true scale of values. See for yourself.

In my opinion, nothing else compares - not generosity, or ability, or wealth, companionship, longevity, pleasures, all of these we can give, but without kindness, understanding, and loving compassion, they are at best temporary.

Even a poor person, without resources to speak of, without much strength or wit or charm, can still, in his room one night, have compassionate thoughts for the pain someone else experiences, or could experience, and that person, despite their limitations, can still get up the next morning and change the world for the better. Even if it's just one person's life they help, it can still be a very great thing.

Anyone who has been in need and received someone's kindness knows how important this is, that someone reached out to us, or gave us their support. Nothing else compares in life. Everything else, compared to having that need met, moves far to the background, leaving only this shining truth, and gratitude.

No condemnation - 'Saving All Beings...'

From what I can tell, there is no condemnation in Buddhism, no 'unpardonable sin', especially in Mahayana Buddhism. As I understand it, there is no fixed good and evil. In this paradigm, instead, human problems are talked about in terms of ignorance and wisdom - the cause of the sufferings of the world being ignorance, and their solution being the development of wisdom. This is a much more workable way to think about things. Here, there is no enemy that cannot be transformed. In addition, whatever good a person reaches has to be maintained.

In the Lotus Sutra, there is a figure called 'Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging', whose main characteristic is that he never puts anyone down. In fact, he always refers to other people *as Buddhas*, because he sees their potential.

In Buddhism, it's recognized that all have this Buddha nature, which is the potential to be free, and healthy, and naturally helpful. Not only should we be free from suffering and confusion, but in this way of thinking, happiness and intrinsic wealth is all of our birthright. Without exception this is true.

Seeing Buddha Nature, our own, and that it exists everywhere, in everyone, this is the understanding that's the basis for working without anger,

certainly, and without getting discouraged. I find even the idea of this to be most helpful when things are really difficult, maybe even looking impossible for a time.

I remember a quote that's stayed with me over the years, that goes something like this:

Buddhas do not blame living beings who are flawed, but with compassion for all sentient beings, lead them from the ocean of samsara

(the cycle of repeated dissatisfaction and suffering)

We Westerners need a lot of compassion for ourselves, to ease the way in our own life, and to know our own worth. This then becomes the basis for seeing just how much others also need acceptance, and support and encouragement to blossom.

Helping others is truly worthwhile, not only because freedom from suffering is intrinsically worthwhile, but also because of the natural wealth of happiness, and peace, that is in fact attainable by everyone.

Of course, it's not easy, or a one-shot deal. There will be very difficult situations, but those should only make us more determined. Getting a sense of how hard it can be, and how long it can take for a person, ourself or another, to get out of suffering - that's when we really see the need for, and value of compassion.

Because it is of the greatest value, wherever we may find ourselves, and however much we are able to do, just living a compassionate life is the way

of fulfillment.

On the Ferocious Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

We may have an image of a Buddha as always peaceful and serene, always happy and warmly smiling. There is truth to that kind of image, but there is more to an enlightened person and their activity. They can also be intense and terrifying when needed. To be more complete in our ideas about the nature of someone who is wise and compassionate and capable, at least this much should be said.

There is no limit to the way that Buddhas can manifest, including as what are called Wrathful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Perhaps the word *wrath* brings to mind anger for most people, and sometimes wisdom and compassion do appear this way as incredibly wrathful, but I think what is being talked about is more a manifestation of divine power.

We have a similar biased view in Western spiritual traditions when we think of angels. Most commonly they are imagined to be ethereal beings, sometimes cherubic, on clouds with harps and wings, but angels in the Western Traditions are so much more than that. There are angels with flaming swords that guard portals, and sacred places, and there are angels that exhibit supernatural strength and abilities when called on, and when needed. They can bring a fearsome, awe inspiring light. They are the power of God made manifest.

The ferocious Buddhas and Bodhisattvas function the same way in our world. They come when needed most, and engage in miraculous activity, beyond ordinary conception.

Sometimes the gentle form of Saints, Bodhisattvas and teachers is enough to educate, to bring benefit, or to stop some harm; Sometimes more firmness is needed, as every parent or good friend knows; And sometimes nothing short of fierce power will stop someone or some thing destructive.

We call on these Divine Protectors from the depths in times of our greatest need, and there are many forms they have taken and can take.

In thinking about the activities of the Buddhas, and remembering back, it's not always as a figure that a Buddha or Divinity is known, but as a potency that manifests and changes a situation, healing, and setting things right.

If we look for angels or buddhas to be only one way in our lives and in our world, we could miss this. It is something that is felt though, beyond all expectation and hope.

When we begin to think or write about subjects such as these, more is revealed, and it certainly feels then like new language is needed. Some experiences go well beyond any ordinary way of expression.

Rather than using a term like wrathful, or even fierce, for me the word *ferocious* better expresses the character of this kind of powerful divine activity. One image is of a blazing fire, like a blast furnace, another is of a wild animal prepared to protect his or her young. They are intimidating, and no one dares approach.

If you have seen the intense haka dance of the Maori of New Zealand, this also gives us some idea of incredible fearsome power manifesting to ward off danger.

What needs are there today? Who or what will not listen to soft spoken, gentle admonition? What will not learn until confronted with a much greater power and stopped?

We call organically, out of necessity, from a depth we didn't know we had, and there is a response in our lives and in the world far exceeding anything we could have imagined...

The Ferocious Buddhas, and Avenging Angels move worlds...

With fierce flame and wind, and shaking the earth, with overwhelming brilliance, and great love and compassion, they protect us and they protect our vulnerable ones, and our future.

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.

The Mahayana Motivation is Like Aiming to Become a Doctor

We can go to the doctor, to a clinic or hospital for any of a number of reasons. If it's some small, temporary problem, we would go to be treated for that. If it is something more serious, or chronic, we could go for example for an operation, or to a treatment facility for an extended period of time, until we were fully cured.

We could also go to a doctor, to or healer, or to a teaching hospital with the aim of becoming a doctor. Following the footsteps of those who cared for us, and being inspired by them, we can determine to support them, and to learn from them how to help others in the same way.

This has its parallel in the different reasons why a person would approach Buddhist study and practice. We can be seeking relief from some temporary problem or suffering of body or mind. This can be likened to taking refuge, practicing the precepts and meditation. Its purpose is to relieve the sufferings we experience, and to restore peace and harmony in our lives.

We can also approach Buddhist practice with an aim to become free from all suffering and its causes. This is a different level of motivation that may arise from the first. Not content with suffering repeatedly, time and again, across lifetimes, once we hear that liberation is possible, and have some faith that freedom from all suffering could be attained, we commit ourselves to that, out of far reaching compassion for ourselves. We renounce samsara, and practice the unified path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom to accomplish our aims.

As it is with someone receiving treatment for an extended period of time, this level of concern and commitment is deeper, it goes much further, and is more focussed. It becomes our priority, excluding other matters for as long as needed.

We can also approach Buddhism to accomplish this path and help others in the same way. This is the Mahayana motivation. We see the necessity of becoming a capable and loving person in the world. What distinguishes the Buddha and all those with realization in any tradition is that they have the living knowledge of how to become free from suffering and to realize true health, peace and fulfillment.

We can see the need for everyone to have this knowledge early on in our study, or after some time. Getting out of our own struggles to some extent allows us to see and feel and understand what others are going through. Naturally the strong motivation arises to help them in the best ways we can. I believe this is what happens with all noble ones. Great compassion is born from their being able to recognize the confusion and sufferings others experience, and from their knowing the way out.

It's said that each level of motivation actually contains the others. So, for example, seeking to be relieved of some temporary difficulty actually includes in it the wish to be liberated from struggle and suffering forever, even if we don't see it for some time. Our kind motivation towards ourselves is naturally onward leading;

And the wish to be permanently free from the miseries of samsara naturally includes within it the aim to become a fully capable being, living

in this world, and caring for others with wisdom and compassion. We may not know all that is contained in this motivation to become liberated until we progress on the path, or we may glimpse it and forget it, but it is there.

It can be compared to the flower and the fruit that is contained within a seed. With the right conditions and cultivation, after some time, all that is held within becomes tangibly known.

In the same way, each motivation we can bring to Buddhist study and practice contains the previous ones. To be fully effective in helping others, for example, we need to be free from suffering ourselves, and to do that, we need cooperative conditions, each day's health and strength and ability. We can find they are mutually inclusive.

A person aiming to be a doctor, or to accomplish a spiritual path in order to help others in the best ways will still have to care for themselves. They may have times of illness, a cold, or problems sleeping, for example, and certainly they will have their own afflictive emotions and ignorance to overcome, but as much as they do this, patiently, and gradually, they fulfill their purpose by that much.

Of course, out of great love and compassion having the aim to become a doctor, or a person with enlightened understanding living in this world goes far beyond just taking care of our own difficult conditions or accomplishing our own personal freedom. We would need to understand all of humanity and the hardships and sufferings in other realms as well. This would of course include many challenges and difficulties we have not personally known, but as we see the universal characteristics of suffering

and the path to freedom from suffering, this is what we then encourage others to understand, and to practice, and to realize.

It is the most worthy aim to want to accomplish the path in order to help all others do the same. We could say it is a kind of awakening. It broadens our sense of responsibility and brings great dedicated energy and inspiration, compared to previous levels of motivation.

I think of a kind parent, or a teacher, or someone learning to become a doctor, waking early, and going to work, and diligently studying, to offer to their family and students the fruit of their labor and meditations. There is joy in that unlike any other.

The Mahayana path is like this.

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, 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, 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*

Meditation on Compassion

From An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism

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, it can be a powerful force for good in our lives, in the lives of all those we love, and in our world.

* * *

Lama Lodro Rinpoche was asked, *How do we increase our compassion?*, and he answered, *By thinking about suffering*. Then naturally compassion will arise...

Just look at the world

Leaving aside religion and what we call the spiritual for a moment - just look at the world and how people suffer and are to each other...

{reflect upon these things, in your own way, in your own time...}

We can see there is this tremendous need for anything that will ease people's suffering and confusion, and not lead to further ignorance, fear, and aggression...

We can all agree with one heart that there is a great compelling need for what will ease the sadness and pain, address injustice, and neglect, and move to correct the imbalance between humans and other species, and our natural world.

Seeing this much dispassionately, we would discard no option offered today, or yesterday, or a thousand or two thousand years ago. We listen to them all and weigh them, critically, and with great hope. We don't hesitate to set to one side what doesn't help now, and embrace and practice what does lead in the direction we want to go.

Traditions at their best are storehouses filled with treasures of knowledge of what has worked in the past, what is said to be of universal value, that can be effective today. It is for each generation to find out if what they say is true. That is how Traditions continue to be viable, not as a memory, or a story removed from where we are today, but as a vital source of

nourishment, strength, guidance and inspiration, helping us, healing us, and enabling us to benefit others, our family.

There is so much need, crying out, and it will continue this way, with even worse to come if the root causes of people's confusion, greed, and aggression are not understood and remedied.

We will naturally disbelieve that any of this is possible. We'll even doubt and distrust anyone telling us that we ourselves can be made healthy, sane, and whole, unless it happens for us, and then our whole life, and what we see as possible and necessary in the world changes.

A summary of the Stages of the Path Teachings

‘There are three sets of causes, with three results’

*Having fortunate conditions, becoming liberated,
and enlightened understanding and activity all arise due to causes,
and we should know what these are.*

I. Entering the Buddhist Path

We all have Buddha Nature, which is the innate potential to have happiness, to become liberated, and to realize enlightenment in this world. Our spiritual teachers help us to know this, our true nature. Remembering their wisdom and their great kindness and compassion naturally awakens reverence, and confidence in the path.

Following their guidance, we then reflect on the subjects of:

the rarity and preciousness of this fortunate human life we have now;

the reality of death and continuation;

both the evident and the hidden sufferings of samsara, or unenlightened existence,

cause and effect, including teachings on ethics and purification, grace and forgiveness, and what it means to have compassion for oneself and others;

and the qualities of the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

Seeking safety, and having diligence comes from this.

Thinking about these, and being aware of the struggles and dangers of samsara; out of real love and compassion for ourselves and for all others, wanting to be safe and to have health and happiness, now and in the future, both for our own sake, and for the sake of others,

and then, with faith, aiming to continually take refuge in the Buddha as our Teacher, to practice the Dharma as our way of life, and to rely well on the Noble Sangha as our Spiritual Companions, *these are the causes, and the result is having fortunate conditions*, both now and in the future, including higher rebirth. From this follows the inestimable benefits of safety, joy and peace, and well being that are the basis for all subsequent attainments.

II. Entering the Path to Complete Freedom from Suffering

We can then add to the factors covered so far the insight that *all* of samsara, or ego-centered, unenlightened existence is suffering, and the knowledge of how liberation is possible.

Understanding these on an intellectual, or an experiential level, even briefly, believing in the possibility of liberation, and not wanting to suffer any more, ever again, *these are the causes* for the motivation to be completely and permanently free of samsara to arise naturally in the mind, and the

unified practice of the Three Higher Trainings, of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom, *and the result is liberation.*

III. Entering the Mahayana directly - the Path of Universal Benefit

In addition to the above realizations, when one has great love and compassion for all that lives, together with the thought that enlightened understanding and activity is both possible, and is the highest good for all, so greatly needed in these times, *these are the causes* for the bodhisattva motivation, which is the intention to live an awakened life in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings, and the practice of the Perfections, *and the result is enlightenment.*

On the Nature of Vow, and the Bodhisattva Vow

Vow is an interesting word, a rich word. It has connotations of a depth of commitment; and of something solemn, and serious; a deep dedication that calls up our resources and aims them all in a single direction...

This word can also be a mirror - as in - *What is your vow?* People can 'vow' to do all sorts of things, as a reflection of who they are, what they believe, what they hold to be of ultimate importance, for example, young people vowing to become a millionaire before the age of 30, or vowing to lose weight, or to never again subject themselves to a destructive relationship.

Then there are those people who don't feel any real commitment to anything other than their own happiness, and of course conflict with others has to come from that. Some people don't feel any dedication to something larger than themselves, but one way or another, this is something we all need. We are all related, so even looking at it from the point of view of our own happiness, we do need some positive motivation regarding others, and the world we live in.

Vow galvanizes our aim

Taking a positive motivation one step further, we come to vow. Whereas being inclined to help is a great thing, vow has more focus, and more power. Forming our intention then helps us to see clearly what is getting in the way of our aims, and helps us to clear away those obstacles. It affirms that we know our place in the world, and it breathes fresh life into us. Vow calls up energy we never knew we had, and strengthens us.

Vow is not fanaticism

The only thing that can possibly keep vow from becoming fanaticism, is reason. What we commit ourselves to should be the result of a great deal of reflection. When instead there is a small amount of reason, and a whole lot of emotion, the results are something tyrannical, unbalanced and destructive - witness all the great evils in history and you'll see, they all had a fanatic ideology at their base.

Ideally, the vows we make should be based on illumined reason, the kind that is the product of deep and careful thought, and reasoning that can stand up to investigation and questioning.

I've heard a traditional teaching about the place of reason that says, if something is true or worthwhile then the more you look into it, the more apparent that truth becomes; and if something is not true, then examining it will remove that wrong idea. This is like seeing a rope at night in the dark and thinking it is a snake - if we take a closer look, the mistaken concept will disappear altogether.

If we are dedicated to something that is really worthwhile, on the other hand, then thinking about it will only increase the energy we have to carry out our aim. This is how it should be.

Vow can only come from oneself

When we look within our own heart and hold the question: *What should I do with my life in this world?*, in time, an answer will come that will be our own. Such a sense of direction and commitment can't be given to us. Although such things as outer ceremonies and readings can strengthen our sense of direction and can help our courage to grow, the initial impulse can't come to us from the outside. It has to be 'self-born'.

We can say that vow is the flower of self knowledge. The advantage to this is that a clear decision we make about our life is truly our own. It can't be given, and no one can take it from us. Once we've had some experience of it, whatever clear sense of purpose we've had can be a reference point. Then, when things get uncertain, as they are bound to sometimes, we can, once more, orient ourselves to that.

Not easy

In all of us there is something called habit energy. By itself, habit is a neutral thing - it can work either for or against our wishes. If we're talking about actualizing an ideal however, almost certainly there are going to be things inside us and in the outside world that feel like they oppose our aims. This is natural and nothing to be afraid of or shy away from. In fact, we can say that the river of our intention flows by itself, but the path to actualizing this aim is made up of gradually removing the obstacles.

If we have clear aims, then naturally we will know what to do and what not to do. There is a perception that opens up that leads us to knowing what is most necessary at any time.

Vow strengthens us, clearing the way, first in our own thinking, and then in its outward expression; based on reason, it holds up where trust alone can get lost. Thinking on those things that are really worth committing to will prove to us their worth to us over and over. The more we stay with it, the better it becomes - the clearer our vision and the more abundant our courage. There is a kind of peace and strength to vows that is nourishing. We all need something of this kind of foresight, knowing the value of our goals. This is what helps when, over the long periods of time, no apparent result can be seen. We don't give up. We know what we have set ourselves to do is worth every effort we can give to it.

Steady

When we know from inside what truly matters to us, it makes for stability in our character. Like a tree with deep roots, we'll be much less at the mercy of outside forces, like income level, or what is current in our culture, changes in our relationships, or other people's opinions.

Vow functions to make our own priorities appear clearly to our mind. More and more, when we have a strong sense of our personal vows, we will find we have things in a perspective that makes sense to us. Little things won't bother us as much, and we will appreciate the big, important things, the significant people, and events, and opportunities, and at least aim to give them the care and attention they deserve.

The words are not the thing itself

Repeated words, as in a liturgy, all by themselves are not vow. If they are gone through mindlessly, they won't help us much, if at all. The ideal with words is when writing and reading, and then reflecting on our truest aims can help us *to touch that force in our lives that moves us forward*. This can certainly help to increase that power in our lives. We should be clear though, that the words are not the thing itself - that's where idolatry comes from - regarding something that is essentially inside us as being separate from our own nature.

When we are able to increase the clarity, depth and power of feeling of dedication to our ideal, that can help to pacify and eventually transform the elements in our lives that obstruct what we aim for.

Will all the hypocrites in the room please raise their hand?

Vows are like a mirror. We can, and should feel uncomfortable when we realize we have fallen short of our ideal. This feeling of discomfort is actually a good thing. Until we have worked through all of our psychology, we will have inconsistencies between our best thought and our behavior. Some people would use the harsh term 'hypocrite', but this only applies if we are not honest, with ourselves primarily, about where we diverge. We need a vast amount of compassion for ourselves, for our suffering and struggle, and we need awareness. Then our vows can gradually help us to live whole, integrated lives.

The heart of the heart

The human heart was made to love. That is its' fulfillment, and that is the shining sun of its enduring nature that we can know in our lives each day. However much we are able to help today, having the highest aim, to help one another as much as we can, this greatly simplifies our complex, worried lives, and makes them so much easier, a delight, really. This one great aim can give to us all, strength and spiritual health. It is this that gives life to our life.

Freedom and service

The more freedom we have from suffering, the more available we are to be aware of and to respond to the needs of others. You can't expect someone who is suffering to try to help anyone except himself. But if even a little freedom is gained, with it comes some ability and naturally greater responsibility.

One analogy I have is, when a parent leaves the children at home, and the older sibling can see and reach the food on the shelf, when the younger ones cannot. That older brother or sister, because they can see and reach the soup or cereal, has a responsibility to help feed his brothers and sisters. It is that way naturally. If the mother were to come home and the kids had not been fed, she'd rightly blame the older child if he didn't do what he could have.

When I think of my family, friends, and myself, I know we each have difficulties to work through, and that sometimes we are not available for each other. Thankfully, at least most of the time I have some people who are available to offer their support.

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. Included in that intention is freeing ourselves from whatever would keep us from offering such service. In traditional Buddhist language, the dedication to help 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

Tradition, 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 Zen Tradition, 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

If we are able to maintain compassion for others, then there will naturally be produced in our mind a certain kind of intention for our whole life.

What is called in the tradition *bodhicitta*, or *bodhimind*, or the awakening mind, is the whole-function, powerful intention to liberate our own mind from confusion and suffering, and to actualize or bring forth all beneficial, necessary qualities, so that we can best serve others.

In traditional terms, *bodhicitta* is made of love and compassion, and is the wish to become a Buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings. That mind itself, that thought, is a holy mind, a holy, profound and sacred thought, bringing only good into the world.

A person who lives to serve others is called a *bodhisattva*. Whatever other elements there are in such a person's mind, they have this ardent wish to live in a certain way and so help others as much as they possibly can.

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, Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

Resolve

I have heard that the Dalai Lama, when asked what is the quickest way to enlightenment, was moved to tears by the question. He answered, with characteristic humility, that he had been practicing most of his life, and had only been able to make a little progress on the spiritual path. Then he said that we shouldn't think even in terms of lifetimes, but that instead we should think in terms of aeons. This is the kind of resolve that we need.

In the following passage, from the film 'Compassion and Wisdom: A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life', writer and director James Zito beautifully and succinctly expresses the Traditional background and the aim of the Bodhisattva:

'The Buddha taught that the enlightenment and spiritual liberation he achieved were by no means unique to him. Rather they are potentially available to every living being. The Bodhisattva is a follower of the Buddha, who in deep sympathy and compassion for the suffering of the world, vows to do the utmost to help all living beings reach their highest potential. The Bodhisattva works tirelessly to release beings from their temporal sufferings into the timeless peace and fulfillment of Buddhist enlightenment.'

'According to Buddhism, the state of enlightenment is the full expression of the innate potential for compassion and wisdom, which lies more or less dormant within every being. This innate potential is known as the Buddha Nature, and it is the Vow of the Bodhisattva to help each and every being bring their inherent Buddha Nature to its full awakening as the state of enlightenment.'

The Bodhisattva vow has as its goal for beings, freedom from suffering, and not just the result of suffering, but its causes as well; and the happiness of all, and not just in a temporary way, but lasting happiness. This all comes from the mind. A Buddhist, therefore, is dedicated to finding freedom himself or herself, and sharing that with all others. When it comes to passing along teachings, our own realization is the vital factor in any communication.

All Buddhist traditions express the utmost need for wisdom. In the Way of the Bodhisattva, such understanding is viewed in relation to the needs of all. In fact, we can say that the Mahayana has as its starting point the inseparability of love and wisdom.

Arya Nagarjuna taught that:

*If the rest of humanity and I wish to attain unsurpassed awakening
{so needed for all of our sake}
the basis for this is bodhicitta, as stable as the King of Mountains:
Compassion, which touches everything,
and pristine wisdom, which does not rely on duality.*

Ultimate Nature, Relative Practice

The nature of mind, our ultimate nature, is described as originally pure, vast, and perfect, naturally awake, and ungraspable. It is beyond concepts, and non-dual; lacking nothing, it is complete in all qualities. In the relative, only apparently dualistic practices that we do, however, the path is described as expressions of compassion: generosity, prayer, patience, forgiveness, the cultivation of peace, and so on. These are all expressions of love.

The Seventh Dalai Lama wrote:

The expanded mind which thinks

*only of that which benefits others
is a tree of endless fruit;
one touch of its divine sap
quenches even the word 'suffering'*

Everyone who has experienced a mother's or a grandmother's love knows how true it can be: being touched by a compassionate person when we are suffering can instantly reduce, or even totally remove our pain. From a loving person, this profound true nature comes forward effortlessly, and heals.

All beings want happiness, but as long as we do not know the causes of happiness, instead, we blindly create the causes of suffering.

In response to this, what is called the Bodhisattva Vow is the dedication that we have in us to helping others, by realizing our own true nature as fully as possible, and drawing from this ocean of light. This sense of dedication to others can be there with or without words, or it can be taken formally and re-affirmed. It is the commitment of our whole life energy to helping others as much as we can, and in as many ways as we can, to alleviate their suffering and to support their health and happiness. *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 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 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.

Here are two traditional verses from the Indian Saint, Shantideva, that express the compassionate motivation at the heart of the Bodhisattva vow:

*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 feed living beings
and in times of dire famine,
may I myself be food and drink*

In one sense, to say that vow is the flower of our self knowledge is to say that vow shows how deep a persons' knowledge is. If there is no deep knowledge, then there is no deep vow either. The vow of a Bodhisattva though, is based on something broad and deep. It is based on universal love and compassion, and insight into our real nature. It is possible to feel

that, not only do we and our family and friends want and deserve happiness and freedom from suffering, but everyone, really wants these things. In that we are equal.

When we aim to benefit even one other person, something in us wakes up. When we extend that and aim to feed, comfort and care for our group, family and friends, then that much more in us wakes up. And when we extend that even further, it's possible to awaken the sense of something universal in ourself, working for the good of all.

Sometimes we are able to glimpse this universal nature, and then again we are taken up with the particulars of our life, but the shining basis, which is our compassionate nature, remains the same. There is always something universal, beyond any one form or action or life span, that supports and sustains us, and is the source of all our vows. Perhaps this is why Lama Yeshe said that when we have bodhi-citta, the thought to benefit all others in the best possible ways, we take on a more universal character.

'When you have this kind of motivation,' Lama Lodro says, 'it makes whatever practice you do very powerful.'

We are saying very clearly and strongly with our life and practice,

'May all beings be free of suffering!' 'May all beings be happy!'

How to increase compassion

All contemplation has one thing in common, as shown by its etymology, and that is that we are giving time and attention to a particular subject. Usually the feeling of compassion is associated with a sense of sadness, heaviness or sorrow, or being overwhelmed, and that kind of feeling can't be sustained for long. There are associations of suffering, and the feeling perhaps that looking at these things too long will actually weaken us. This is because we don't know how to go about thinking about suffering. It's important that we go about this in the right way if we want workable results.

When we are able to successfully contemplate a subject like suffering, and increase our compassion, it is because we do it slowly, and carefully. To do it well, we should reflect and then stop and refresh ourselves and assimilate what we've been thinking about. Then the effect is strengthening. Our determination to help only increases; our clarity and sense of priorities is made sharper; and our delight in doing something useful also increases.

In actual practice

Forming the idea of a dedication before practice, setting one's motivation is like saying, *'I will cultivate this crop for this purpose, for this person or these people'*. Then we cultivate – plant the seed, let the sun shine, water, pull the weeds, and finally, harvest. Then, in our thoughts, when we dedicate at the end of a practice, again we are saying, *'This belongs to this person, or these people'*. *'May it accomplish this benefit'*.

Now, I know this can't be proven to you unless you are a person with some amount of extra sensory perception, but I do believe that, when we have a

clear idea of communicating some benefit, that positive energy is transmitted in that same moment. This is the basis for the concept of absent healing. Most of us live ordinary lives, I know, but I thought I should at least mention it. It really does feel this way sometimes, and it changes the way I think of the practice itself.

When we have others in mind, a universal aim, even eventually, as a long term goal, then we don't feel like the harvest of benefit is ours alone. We also gain, naturally, but it feels like the result is bigger, much bigger than just our own gain. We can live in a state of Magnanimous Mind, or big generosity. Then, when we actually do meet the person or people we have been practicing for, it's easy, natural, to 'give over', or extend to them what we have produced, whatever peace or clarity, or light, health or strength. We share these things in whatever way they can receive them. We can feel, 'Here, this belongs to you...' aah...

Now, about this 'all beings' business...

As soon as we try to practice like this, it's immediately clear that some people or situations are easier to practice for, and some more difficult, or impossible for now. We should take special note of who we have a problem with, and make special efforts to dedicate our practice to them until we wear away that resistance.

Gradually, in every Buddhist approach to developing the good heart we all have, the aim is to become more and more inclusive, and completely impartial in our kindness and compassion.

I think of teachers and sages who seem to have accomplished this impartiality of love. It looks like they treat everyone they meet with the same kindness and compassion. This is a high and wonderful aim, more than worth whatever effort we make in that direction. It's the basis for great things.

Dharma centers' red flashing lights and whooping si-reens

If we go to a center where they chant, '*Sa-ving all be-ings*', but the people there won't give you the time of day, or even look you in the eye, you should know something is seriously wrong. The people there, and especially the teachers, have completely missed the point. A practice center should be a place of mutual support. Warm and alive, it should be a place where people can feel safe, and where inner disciplines can flourish.

Speaking realistically for a change

The Bodhisattva vow is something we will naturally need to bring to mind again and again. At times, almost all of us will only be able to focus on our own struggle. Sometimes this is only right and appropriate, but as long as we live in a world with others, this intention, to help others as much as we can, is a most useful one to have. It connects us to others, or re-connects us to others, and it is the most fulfilling way to live. We may be able to actualize only a small part of that aim, but the motivation itself is something noble, generative, healing, strengthening, illuminating and enlivening.

We never give up

One Tibetan Lama here in San Francisco, Lama Lodro described the depth of dedication of the Bodhisattva, saying:

'A Bodhisattva would go to be born one million times in hell to help one sentient being. One million times he would go, and not complain- he would enjoy that, actually. Beings need help, and he enjoys helping. That's the Bodhisattva motivation.'

Another verse by Shantideva says:

*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*

All my lives

I know that many Westerners, like myself, don't see past and future lives - literally being born back then, in that place, and in the future in some other place. What then to do with the idea of past and future when it comes to vow? For me, it continues to be helpful to think beyond this one life span - however we conceive of ourselves. This works well in terms of the Bodhisattva vow. We can aim to dedicate ourselves to things that we feel can help now, and will be helpful in the long term.

Here is an analogy: If we see that there is a river close to where some houses are, and that each year the river comes a little closer, it would be right to solve the problem now, while we can. If we don't, then it may not be this generation, but eventually the houses of our children or our children's children could be washed away. This kind of thinking ahead puts our own lives in a far truer context than we usually think in. More meaning is evident in our own lives now, also, when we think this way, the present is viewed in relation to the next generations.

Good seeds

We can also think of our lives as a chance to plant good seeds. Of course a tree takes years or decades to grow and become shelter, and bear fruit, but the work of planting and nourishing has great worth. If we think of the wonderful things we have inherited from past generations, such as art, institutions, teachings, and Traditions, we can feel gratitude, and this can also help us to live in a way that is dedicated to those we share this life with, and to future generations. May they have great trees and clean water, and everything they need for happy lives!

Thinking far ahead also makes the problems of this one life easier. We are related to the past and future generations, and we all have our part to do. Our part is not the work of the past - they had their own work; and our part is not the task of the next generation - they will have their own work. We've inherited riches, but also a world of suffering, greed and confusion, so doing our part is a very great thing - really, it is the most important thing individually for any of us.

What's in a name?

When we have insight into conditions, and knowledge of what will bring resolution to problems, then, whatever our place in the world, we can be doing the most needed kind of work. We can be fulfilling what is here being called 'the Bodhisattva vow'. Of course, this goes beyond any one name or Tradition. Whatever group we belong to, when we know something of our human capacities for freedom, health and clarity, and when we know the extent of confusion and unnecessary suffering, then quite naturally we will find ways to work effectively.

We may work with a group, or alone. It may be with a few close friends, or in association with Traditions and lineages that hold the same vows. However it works out, knowing our potential, and how much need there still is - these two make up our response to the world. The response to life of a person awake to this much is the Bodhisattva vow, whatever name we give it. It is the vow to serve. Here is joy, strength, freedom, fire to warm, the fragrant breeze, earth, and delicious water too; food, music, gifts to give, and peace.

When it comes to birth, death and rebirth, they say an ordinary person is controlled by karma, habit energy, and delusion, whereas a person who is awake and free of these is controlled by compassion. He or she has no choice but to work for others.

Bodhicitta, the thought to benefit, equalizes the eight worldly dharmas

There is nothing more practical than working in our daily life with our emotions, and our mind. Whether we want to meet them or not, our responses to life are always there, and they can be changed in a positive direction. Having a strong clear intention in our life meets these factors head on. They say that the energy of the Bodhisattva vow 'equalizes', or levels flat, and frees us from the eight worldly dharmas. These are the four pairs that people spend so much time and energy chasing or avoiding: material gain and loss, physical pleasure and pain, praise and criticism, and good reputation or bad reputation, or recognition.

What this means is that, when the factor of living our lives to benefit all others as much as we can is strong in us, then we don't get caught by these things. They don't limit us or obstruct us or disturb our mind in any way. Even just having this aim with our life, there are already real freedoms that come with it.

This is the only thing that tips the balance

In the 8th century, 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 Buddha,
a wholesome thought rarely and briefly appears.
Hence virtue is perpetually feeble,*

and the great strength of evil is extremely intense.

Except for a Fully Awakening Mind

(the dedication to help all others)

by what other virtue will it be overcome?

and

This intention to benefit all beings,

which does not arise in others even for their own sake,

is an extraordinary jewel of the mind,

and its birth, an unprecedented wonder...

To which I say, all these centuries later, a hearty ‘a-men brother!’

In these verses, the ‘Fully Awakening Mind’ is the thought of universal benefit.

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 aiming to do so, and that we can also take up this aim and this work. That, for me, is the glory of being alive. Now and forever, 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 trembling fear is the feeling of not being capable, then right here is where resourcefulness, and therefore blazing true confidence, and solidity is found. This one aim, this one intention, tips the balance, in favor of life.

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. A diversity of forms in Buddhism arose out of this motivation to benefit self and others.

What is referred to as creative '*Skillful Means*' develops out of compassionate need, and it is the overriding reason for not to be attached to any one way of doing things, or saying things. As long as we keep to essential principles of wisdom and compassion, then it is Buddhist Dharma. Skillful means, or Upaya, are just what is necessary to help and to reach people.

The Sakya Trinzin, in 'Mo – The Tibetan Divination System' says the following:

“In Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana Tradition, it has been taught that the highest good is to benefit other living beings... Numerous scriptures tell us that a bodhisattva should not hesitate to use any method that would bring relative and ultimate happiness to others. The bodhisattva has been enjoined to assist others by giving them spiritual teachings, material objects such as medicine and food, fearlessness, loving kindness and advice on how to deal with the travails of worldly existence.”

There is a figure in Mahayana Buddhism, in both the Chinese Mahayana, and the Tibetan Tradition, called Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who is sometimes shown with one thousand arms reaching out to help people. Of course 'a thousand' means 'limitless' in Eastern Traditions. Sometimes 'myriad' and sometimes 'Ten-thousand' are used - all these terms have the same meaning.

In the more visible hands in the iconography one can see various implements, a vase, a rosary, The Wheel of Teaching the Dharma, and so on. The meaning is that Avalokiteshvara, which is our own compassionate nature, has the ability to take infinite forms to benefit others.

Here are a few of my favorite quotes from Lama Yeshe, on the motivation to benefit all, the enlightened attitude of a bodhisattva, called bodhicitta:

'Bodhicitta is not partial. Wherever you go with bodhicitta if you meet people, rich people or poor people, black or white, you are comfortable and you can communicate.'

'Bodhicitta is the intoxicant that numbs us to pain and fills us with bliss.'

'Bodhicitta is the cloud that carries the rain of positive energy to nourish growing things.'

'We need the pure innermost thought of bodhicitta; wherever we go that will take care of us.'

Vow

From this point forward,
I dedicate myself to removing the suffering of all living beings,
and to bringing them happiness

I dedicate myself fully to their healing and awakening;
to their all having comfort,
strength of body, mind, and spirit,
most excellent nourishment, health, longevity
every level of protection,
a good home, delicious food, beautiful clothing,
the best of all medicines, education,
leisure, joy, and wisdom

In order to accomplish the needs of living beings
in the most effective way,
I will develop my wisdom and compassion
just as my teachers have done
I aim to become free of all faults, and complete in all qualities
and, day by day, hour by hour
always offer as much help as I can
In this way, I will make a gift of my life
In this way, my own life will be fulfilled

I dedicate myself fully, leaving nothing out,
to the complete healing, fulfillment and enlightenment
of all living beings

No matter how long it takes
no matter how difficult it may be
no matter what it costs

With all my heart and with all my strength,
I vow to always serve all living beings
in every way that is necessary for them
and in every way that will bring each and every one of them
true and lasting health and happiness

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!*

On Self Power and Other Power

At times, we feel that we can use all the help we can get...

If you ask Realized Beings in any tradition what our relationship to the Truth is, or our relationship to God, or to a Higher Power, they will tell you that at first, if it is known by people at all, the two are experienced as completely separate. Then they will add that as we engage these lived realities, this changes to a more enduring relationship, and to deeper realization.

Our Noble Teachers tell us we can do some things that seemingly place more distance between ourselves and the One we have devotion for, the ground of our faith; and others that bring us into a closer communion. This truth is the basis for all teachings on ethics, and how we then live our day to day lives. There is ceaseless change in all this, and there are these patterns we can discern.

At times, we can sense this mysterious power working in our lives, and then we cannot really say that we are here, and that our Beloved, the One who has cared, for us is over there. There is an intimacy, and relationship that is known, that cannot be defined by words or ideas.

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 our Guide, to the one who knows the Way. This can be a teacher, or a Buddha, a Saint, or a Benefactor, such as a Celestial Bodhisattva. Even when everything is falling apart for us, we can find a sense of refuge, comfort and safety, and rest there. We can then have times of leisure, and companionship, and a strength of confidence gathers, that we are upheld.

More is required though, if we are to mature, and find our place in this world. We need to awaken and to understand ourselves more fully. We need to become realized, and that needs patient 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.

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 {of self power and other power, or of our own efforts and what is called grace} are complementary, and not contradictory....

He quotes Colossians, where it says,

To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me....

and points out that Paul is laboring, it is true, but he does so drawing on the Divinity within him...

Elsewhere in the Gospel, Paul affirms this, saying,

I can do all things, through Christ, who strengthens me...

Really, how excellent! A cause for celebration! I rejoice in all those accomplishing these paths!

And then, there is Self power and Other power when there is no apparent progress, or when we fall short of our spiritual aims.

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, that is not as 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 holy 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.

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*

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 where we know and express our own divine nature, with the knowledge that we are living in a sacred world.

* * *

When I lose the thread, and for a time cannot see myself and others and this world as it is, as essentially divine in nature, I go back to the Mahayana view and motivation, call upon my teachers and spiritual ancestors, and take my vows again;

and when I cannot reach that, and have it be real for me for a time, and my view is a samsaric one, I turn again to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, the basis of all practice, with the aim again to live in harmony with all others, with metta and karuna, and with faith in the possibility of liberation.

All these are ever present choices.

What precedes empathy

Everywhere there are thoughtful people, empathy is praised, and cherished as essential for healthy personal and social relationships. If we stop here, however, just recognizing great importance of this quality we call empathy, we can easily find ourselves with an altogether worthwhile aim, but without a way to get there.

If we merely repeat the word, or just intensely desire to be more capable and more responsive, we can find ourselves stuck, frustrated, and possibly even feeling like we are not up to this task of becoming more empathetic human beings. I think many well-intended people have find themselves right there.

“Lord, make me an instrument of Your Peace”, prayed St. Francis, but what, good Sir, is the *way*? Teachers, tell us that! Empathy is praised and its great value is recognized, but I seldom hear it spoken of as *a result* of a set of causes, and as the product of a whole way of life.

Buddhism teaches me to look at all phenomena as the result of causes and conditions coming together. It is exacting that way, and encouraging too, especially when we have a great work in front of us, such as promoting more awareness and kindness in our lives, and in this world we share.

In these times, it's not just criminals and drug addicts who lack empathy. The wealthy, politicians, and ordinary working class people also experience this lack of feeling what others feel, and directly sharing in their joys as well as their suffering and struggles. In our atomized society, work that

over- taxes us, a 21st century education that causes us to drift farther from family, neighbors and community, results in either not knowing, or not caring what others experience. Blind to all but self-interest, it's inevitable that the actions of a person or group without feeling for others will conflict with the greater good.

This lack of empathy is a danger not only to our communal life, but for us personally as well. Without it, we contract, and are estranged from our family and neighbors, seeing others as alien to us. We forget our birthright, our heritage, and organic place in community. How can we then hope to thrive?

What then are the causes that enable empathy to first appear, and to become stable, and increase over time? I would say that empathy arises gradually as a person becomes free from psychological entanglements and lesser, immature motivations.

We can see across cultures and times that it is in the character of all mature people to extend the gifts they've received, and to encourage those they recognize in others. You can see in every instance how empathy is the product of a liberated mind and heart, and of an overall education that is inclusive in its love and concern.

Empathy also comes into being as a stable force as a result of living wisely, nourishing ourselves with the great things we are surrounded by, with art and nature, with our best noble intentions, with rest, and by touching the deep sources of vitality that are available. In wise living, this is something that is not to be done once, but regularly.

I am convinced this is something we can all learn to do, and what's more, it is something we all *need* to do, for all our sakes. Even one person without empathy is a danger to us all.

How can I best encourage others? I myself must walk this talk, live and breathe it, or my words will be nothing more than a flight of imagination, or some cheap ego-adornment, and then, heaven help us all!

My teachers, Thich Nhat Hahn and Lama Zopa Rinpoche smile to me this afternoon, from my desktop. I know that they embody what I am trying to speak of here, that freedom of mind and heart. and that strength, and natural sensitivity and responsiveness we are all capable of. More than anything else, with their presence, this is what they teach.

I would like to encourage whoever finds their way to these few words to investigate two things for themselves: the first is the importance of empathy for our personal and social health and happiness; the second is the idea that empathy arises and remains stable in our lives when we create the right causes and conditions. I trust that we can all find our way to the freedom of mind, inner strength, and the balance that allows our sensitivity to reach far and wide.

As unlikely as it may seem at times, each one of us does have the capacity and the innate intelligence to find our way. If we get a fundamental education about ourselves, and what makes for wise living, and we take up the challenge and use our innate wisdom, I do believe we can all hold the joys and sorrows of being a true human being in these difficult and extraordinary times. Such is my faith.

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*

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.

The Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings

{From a letter to a friend, and included in 'A few thoughts on lay practice – just the gold'}

And now, a few thoughts on Buddhism...

I realize I haven't said much so far that was specific to Buddhism, so maybe I can say something along those lines now. It's not that non-Buddhists wouldn't gain some benefit from what follows, in fact I'm sure they would, but it makes sense to me that the most will be gained by followers of Buddhism in general, and those who follow and aspire to the Mahayana ideals in particular, and I'll try to say why this is so. You'll have to tell me if this makes sense to you, but, from my side, I'll do my best.

I mentioned bodhicitta, 'the mind of enlightenment' in the last section, as the mind of freedom, happiness, and Great Love. A person who has this great heart/mind is called a Bodhisattva – one who lives to serve others with wisdom and compassion. This leads to the Thought Training teachings, that come from dedicated teachers in the past. They are ways to develop in everyday life.

If what are expressed in Mahayana Buddhism as the inclusive, Universal ideals of the Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattva Vow are well understood, then the door opens up to using the Bodhisattva Thought Training Teachings. They all work.

For Buddhists, then, it should be said, the ideal is different in some ways from what the average person on the street would think of as ‘a developed person’, or a good person. A Bodhisattva is something more than that.

For one, from his first talk, the Buddha spoke of the possibility of freedom from the suffering that comes from delusion, from not understanding ourselves or each other. As Buddhists, we all hold this ideal, of a liberated person, as something we can each achieve. It’s what we aim for in our life and practice, as well as the basis for helping others.

In addition, can we aspire to all the qualities that we see most clearly in our teachers, of kindness, insight and strength that come from their realization of the path.

Look at all the Tibetan Buddhist thankas, and statues – artistic representations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as photographs of monks and nuns, and our teachers. Search your recollection of the teachings you’ve studied, and think of the teachers you have met and received teachings from. Think of what they offer, and embody: These are all qualities we can develop – the stable peace, dignity, wisdom, strength, gentleness, joy and love.

Even if we just hold this aim – to go in this direction of developing our Wisdom and Compassion and ability, just as our teachers have done, so we can help others as much as possible, it is a very great thing, the guiding principle in our lives, however far we get with it.

What’s called The Bodhisattva Vow is traditionally described as the vow to become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings. To me, this can

sometimes seem abstract, and such a far goal as to feel - not so helpful. Add to it that we, as ordinary beings, may not have much of an idea of what a fully enlightened Buddha is, and it can all kind of wash out into some vague, high minded idea, but it needn't be this way.

It's true that vows shouldn't come easily, but after much reflection, what we *can* actually connect with ourselves are those qualities of wisdom and compassion we see and remember, and intuit, in the Buddha, in our teachers, and in ourselves in our best moments.

We recognize the need for such wisdom and compassion and health in the world, and in the lives of those we love, and so this is what we vow to develop as much as we can. We vow to just go in this direction as much as we can, and in that way we make a gift of our life.

Thinking that way makes more sense to me. It is approachable. That, to me is bodhicitta, the thought of enlightenment. That, to me, is the Bodhisattva Vow. Others may disagree with me if they like, that's alright – I'm just saying what works for me, to think this way.

I sometimes wonder what a person would think of the thought training teachings, if they *hadn't* taken up the Bodhisattva vow. If someone was living a totally self centered life, they would probably wouldn't make much sense. In fact, they'd probably seem crazy!, but when living our lives to benefit others makes the most sense to us, then these ideas, called Thought Training, are a real treasure.

These practices helped me so much while I was in the City. Together with Thich Nhat Hanh's eminently sane teachings on taking care of ourselves wisely, they can make living with others in a city really fruitful. It can be our bodhisattva training ground.

The most famous thought training texts, and the ones most often commented on by teachers, are The Eight Verses on Training the Mind, The Seven Point Mind Training Teaching, and one called Transforming Suffering and Happiness into the Path.

If you are interested in this subject, Lama Zopa has a couple of books that I know of on thought training – Transforming Problems into Happiness, and The Door to Satisfaction; and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's Enlightened Courage, and The Great Path of Awakening, by Jamgon Kongtrul are commentaries on the Seven Point Mind Training. There are others, but these are a good place to start.

Here is my own working version of the Eight Verses:

Eight Verses On Training The Mind

1. May I always cherish all living beings
with the determination to accomplish for them the highest good,
that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

2. When among others,
I will think of myself as lowest among all,
and will hold others to be supreme,
from the very depths of my heart

3. I will learn to search into my mind,
and as soon as an afflictive emotion arises,
endangering both self and others,
I will firmly face and avert it.

4. When meeting with those who have especially strong sins and suffering,
I will learn to cherish them as if I had found a precious treasure,
very difficult to find

5. When others treat me badly,
with slander, abuse, and so on,
I will accept all loss
and offer the victory to them

6. When one I have benefited hurts me,
I will learn to view that one as my own Supreme Guru

7. In short, I will learn to offer all help and happiness
to all beings,
both directly and indirectly,
and I will remove as much suffering
as these beings may have

8. I will keep these practices undiminished

by the usual worldly preoccupations,
 and by knowing appearances to be
 like illusions,
 I will be without the limitations
 that accompany ego-grasping

As you can see, this is a very complete teaching.

One verse from A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that I've been thinking of goes as follows:

Unlike myself, these beings are not capable, therefore, I shall do it for them

Relating this to practice, and to our whole lives, we can get strength, courage, determination, and clear sightedness from seeing the needs that exist.

When I think of what I saw over the years around where I worked, at 16th St. in the Mission in San Francisco – the struggle and addiction, the violence, the hard-heartedness of people (among other things that were great and uplifting too) then, how could it be any other way?

Of course, there's a limit to how much we can be around, which I can personally attest to. At some point we want and need to step back from all that, for the sake of balance. This dynamic, more than anything else, points up to me the difference between what they call Aspirational and Engaging Bodhicitta.

Bodhicitta is this intention to develop ourselves, our wisdom, compassion and ability in order to benefit others. This kind of - motivation leading to action - was what was demonstrated by you, when you took up the study and practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

In Buddhism, at some point, the motivation tips over into action, which, as they've said it in the Mahayana, translates into the Six Perfections – Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

The good hearted motivations we make, based on what we see in the world, are so important. They are the power behind any practice we do, to get free ourselves, and giving to all others we love!

But aspiration alone doesn't 'cook the rice', if you know what I mean. At some point, naturally, we need to practice in such a way that we improve along the lines we intend. We will need to find and develop what works for us to accomplish our ends.

We can't force it, nor should we. When the time is right, the whole arc of study and practice is like water flowing down a mountain. When our motivation is strong enough, without a doubt, we'll find a way.

I recently mentioned to my sister that what's great about the thought training teachings is that they take the very things we usually try to avoid – unpleasant situations, our own limitations, fears, and so on, and *uses* them to progress on the path.

I remember thinking, when I first came across these teachings, that the only thing 'wrong' with them is that they are not better known, and made use of.

I think that this especially true about one part of the Seven Point Mind Training teaching. Everything else I felt I'd heard before, but when I came to the part called 'transforming adverse circumstances into the path', I knew I had found something special. This is the heart of the Thought Training Teachings, I think.

I was intrigued, relieved, and excited all at once! Relieved, and glad, that such a teaching actually exists, and naturally the door opened.

I could see the point – once we have a determination to use our life to help others, and if we're Buddhist, and have had at least some glimpse of the possibility of the end of confusion and suffering, as proposed from the outset by the Buddha in the Third Noble Truth, then it's natural that seeing suffering and the great needs that exist will make us only more determined to practice, and to share the result of that with others.

Towards the end of *The Great Path of Awakening*, there are some additional verses I remember that compare knowing suffering in ourselves and in the world to being like the wind blowing when there's a fire – it just makes that fire greatly spread and increase. So it is with Thought Training.

When we become aware of some need, instead of being overwhelmed or depressed by that, it can really empower us to work, diligently, and for however long it takes, no matter what it costs, to solve the problem.

What can I say? Such is love... Such is knowing our deep nature in response to the needs of the world...

A few years after first encountering the Thought Training teachings, I read with some surprise a text called 'Transforming Happiness and Suffering into the Path', by the Third Dodrupchen, Tenpe Nyima

(there's an online version now, on the website called Lotsawa House).

I was surprised because, well, we all know that suffering needs transformation, but happiness too? We usually never think of this as something that needs to be brought onto the path, but, for the sake of opposing laziness, and so we don't get distracted by whatever good circumstances we are currently enjoying, such as health, friends, good weather, wealth, or learning, we do need this kind of teaching.

Here is a quote from the text I mentioned:

Whatever happiness and the various things that cause happiness appear, if we slip under their power, then we will grow increasingly conceited, smug and lazy, which will block our spiritual path and progress.

Now, here is a view on practice that is comprehensive, and one that can keep us on an even keel. It says: whatever our circumstances, this is the best time to practice.

Especially regarding our own happiness, we should recognize our great good fortune compared to so many others in this world of ours, and use it to practice Dharma for the benefit of both ourselves and others.

This term – ‘transforming happiness’ – reminds me of the story of the farmer with a hole in the roof of his house. When it was sunny he thought, ‘There’s no need to fix the roof today – it’s sunny!’, and when it was raining he thought, ‘I can’t fix the roof – it’s raining!’, and so it never got done.

This idea, of using whatever circumstances we’re in to practice, helps to make the most of wherever we are now.

The signs of successful practice is that we will have more peace, joy, patience, kindness towards ourselves and others, and glimpses of the ultimate nature of the mind.

It’s said that we can also learn to feel spontaneously happy when some difficult situation appears in our life, because of the opportunity it gives us to practice.

Of course, if these methods don’t work, what can I say, try something else. Really. If you’re not satisfied, try something else...

There is a branch from the Eastern and South Eastern Buddhist Schools, that although it wasn’t presented in this form in the Thought Training teachings, still fits into that category, as encouragement and inspiration to practice. This is what is called ‘The Five Recollections’. They are, of aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, and karma.

The phrasing of them begins,

I am of the nature to age, I cannot escape aging...

and then goes on from there, through the five.

Recollecting impermanence especially is a spur to remove laziness and procrastination, a lack of focus and low energy.

We never think, when things are going well, of morality. Why spoil the party, right?, but in this way we are setting ourselves up, and we don't really live fully awake to that aspect of our life while we are here together on earth, and the preciousness of each day we have with those we love.

I've taken to calling, for my own purpose, the reflections on impermanence, 'a midwife for love', because they help for *all* of our love to be born fully into this world.

This is one part of the Teachings of Don Juan, those writings by Carlos Castaneda, that I have remembered and made good use of over the years. He called it, 'Having death as an advisor'. I use it like this: if I'm ever in doubt about whether I should do something or not do it, I look at it in light of the fact of my impermanence here, in this body, and the uncertainty of the time of my death.

We only get one go round, here, like this. If I can touch that truth, it usually straightens me out right away. Whether it's 'should I get this book', or write

this, or, 'should I give this away', or hold onto, or let go of these thoughts, the effect is almost always immediate. This cuts all doubts...

Now, I may not know much, but I can plainly tell what I would rather have done, or tried to do than have left undone. To me, in the end, loving fully is the only thing that makes it all alright, actually, whatever this life brings. If I can love fully, in fact, there is no place I'd rather be.

I wrote a poem a while back on this subject that you might like. Here it is with a short note introducing it. I usually don't try to explain a poem, but in this case a few words of how it came to be might add something to it.

'I went on a short retreat a couple of months ago (in 2011), and when I came back here to San Francisco, on the first night back I had this dream, of a teenaged girl who went to join her parents in a concentration camp. Her father said to her, 'Why are you here? You could have escaped and saved yourself!' and the girl said, No! If I am here I can offer you some joy, for as long as we are together. I can make the suffering less! There is no place I would rather be...'

I tried to catch what was said and put it in a poem, but I don't know how successful I was... in any case, I had to try... you know the feeling...

No place I'd rather be

In good times,
hard times,
and the worst of times,

there is no place I'd rather be
than *right there*

If you ask me why,
it is because,
by the power of love,
I can share the joy with you, and make it more
I can help to make the pain less,
and I can offer happiness

That is why,
through it all,
and when things get tough,
and even,
or *especially* in the worst of times
in the worst of worlds,
there is no place that I would rather be
If this were the only world
where there is both happiness and suffering,
still, I would choose just this one
to be with you

By being here together,
we can make the way better for one another
Don't you see?
That means more than anything else to me

For this very reason,

it's worth every effort

whatever we need to go through,
it is, all of it, then,
completely worthwhile

Giving of ourselves,
Measured next to this world's
pleasures –
there is no comparison, really

People don't know of this, or else they don't feel capable,
and so they hide
or run to small pleasures
that disappear even in the moment and are gone

But because we can be light for one another,
make each other's trials that much less,
and offer food, and shelter
even for future times,
through love,
there is no place that I would rather be
than right here

This thought
strengthens me in hundreds of ways

If we only get one song,

and that song is our life,
then let this be my song

Let everything else be done, or left undone,
no matter –

but just this, to aim to care for you
in the best of ways -
this brings life,
freshness that does not fade

Every other gain and loss,
no matter -
but just this
of all worlds, of all paths,
to be with you,
and to offer you my hand,
for your whole life
oh, the joy of this!

Tonglen – A quintessential symbol

To sum up this precious Bodhisattva Thought Training of ours, that is a response to this world we live in, to our own limitations and difficulties, and to those of others, and the way to fulfillment in the midst of it all, here are a few words on Tonglen, as a quintessential symbol.

The Bodhisattva practice of what's called tonglen is traditionally set out in a sequence of images, but, just as a story unfolding can carry one message, just so, with this practice. It is a symbol of the great dedicated heart that people know everywhere. This, most simply, represents the essential enlightened activity of removing suffering and giving happiness.

In the traditional sequence of images, we imagine that we breathe in the suffering of ourself or others, and dissolve it completely into our heart, so that nothing of it remains whatsoever, and then we breathe out, from our heart sending happiness, and absolutely whatever is needed.

We can imagine that there is a brilliant jewel at our heart, sending out light like this. We all have this nature in us that is always bright and shining, without ego, and always loving. This is called Ultimate Bodhicitta.

We can speak of these things sequentially, but when one arrives, the other departs, like light dispelling shadow, health displacing discomfort, and wisdom dawning in the mind removing confusion.

It's like the appearance of a friend in times of need, that immediately removes loneliness and brings joy. The very presence of our love and compassion can do the same.

With this in mind, here are a few examples of how tonglen can be practiced:

Again I notice how that characteristic of all thought training practice is there – of not moving away from limitation or difficulty, but *of using it to progress...*

If I'm feeling restless, I can imagine that I'm taking in all restlessness, of myself and others, developing compassion, and I send out peace...

This is love.

The same with sleepiness or dullness or discomfort or pain in meditation or in life. Instead of just lamenting my own inability, of being stuck in a rut or an unproductive state, I can choose to breathe in and out, contemplating how it is this way for *so many* people, and how it holds us *all* back.

This way I can generate a greater resolve than if I felt like I was just practicing for myself alone, or just for this one moment's peace and clarity and well being. I can bring to mind light, and fill myself with it, and then send this out to others on the out breath...

There are as many applications of love and compassion as there are needs in our lives, the lives of others, and in this world.

So often when we feel separate, or limited, a practice like this can help us to reconnect with others, and to tap into the resources of our deeper nature. One way or another, however we approach it, this is what we all need to do.

Amen.

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, in this collection,

and,

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

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty

The following is based on a Traditional Tibetan Buddhist teaching for transforming suffering into the path to freedom and peace.

'When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform this into the path of awakening'

- from the Seven Points of Mind Training, by Geshe Chekawa - 12th Century, Tibet

'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love...' - From the Prayer of Saint Francis

The idea throughout the Tibetan Thought Training teachings is that when things are really painful, these very conditions can motivate us to change things. They can be the fuel that drives us on, making those conditions into a source of constructive action. The teachings call this 'transforming poison into medicine'. When I'm feeling overwhelmed by the news I find this idea to be especially helpful. Even just the thought that there is a way to be strengthened by the perception of suffering, instead of being stopped cold by it is inspiring, and useful to think on.

There's no denying that these are needful times. For all our wealth and technology, education and diversity, there is still war, a tremendous amount of injustice, poverty and violence in our world. We're often in a state of shock, and traumatized by events, but instead of just reacting endlessly, at some point we are going to want to speak of healing, and of finding a

deeper resolution to the continuing threats to both ourselves and our children.

Now, there are basically three ways people respond to suffering and what's tragic: one, they can be overwhelmed by it, or, they can turn away from it and ignore it, and third, they can use that experience to bring something positive out of it. Clearly in these times, in this culture, most people choose one of the first two ways of dealing with what's difficult. When people are overwhelmed, they look for ways to numb out. They self-medicate, drink, use sex, shopping, tv and other mindless entertainments. Or else they live in denial with what is too difficult for them to hold. Isn't this so?

When I first learned about the Thought Training teachings in the early 1990's I thought it was *exactly* what I needed to hear, living as I was then in San Francisco, and seeing so much that I felt I couldn't do anything about at the time, such as homelessness, but that I also felt I had to somehow include in my thoughts and meditations, and way of living.

One of the main texts in this tradition is called *The Seven Points for Training the Mind*, and what drew me most to this set of teachings is the idea that it says we can actually use that suffering we know to eventually bring some greater benefit to our lives, and into the lives of those we love. One of its key phrases is '*When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform these conditions into the path of awakening*'.

There are two direct, pragmatic methods offered in Thought Training. The first makes use of compassion, and the second Wisdom, as it's understood in Buddhism. As for compassion here, there is a practice called 'tonglen' or

'taking and giving' where a person relates whatever they are seeing or experiencing to others having the same or similar problems. They consider this one problem as representative of what others are going through, and then offer prayers, or a visualization that others be free of this pain or difficulty. So, for example, if a person is fatigued, or is lonely and afraid, they can think of others having this same experience now, and breathing in and out, send forth the wish that, by this practice, by this meditation and prayer, all of us be free from this pain and sorrow.

I think something like tonglen happens when there is an event such as a shooting in the national attention for a time. Writers and public figures begin to think and speak of it as representative of all of our gun violence – and of the dangers that we live with in this country, where over 10,000 people a year are killed by deranged people with access to weapons.

Part of the reason we relate one single event to the larger issue is because we tap into a greater purpose, and we get more energy than if we were just dealing with one tragedy alone. Look, for example, at gun violence here. We call to mind again Columbine, the movie theatre in Aroura, and others, and now Sandy Hook elementary school. We ask, how much more do we need to suffer before we uproot the causes of gun violence? How many more grieving parents do there need to be?

We all dream of a just world, and when we can touch that greater motivation then this suffering comes to us as an empowerment to work. We can learn to direct our fully human responses of despair, and anger, and outrage, and compassion into useful channels. Of course, from this point forward, it's all a matter of skill.

We don't have to look far to see that we live in a superficial, materialistic culture. It is also hyper-violent, in its history, in the media, in its militarism, and in its neglect of the poor. How can we hold all this, if we are of a mind to, without being overwhelmed by it? If we just go along with how most people who watch the news absorb whatever is being served up, we won't get very far, and this is why I mention being skillful at this point.

It's not natural that we should be exposed to so much misery. A human being can accommodate only so much trauma, before needing to recover fully. The news, as it is, is out of balance, and this is where we need to exercise not only our best motivation but also our full intelligence to find a balance that works for us. Many people miss this step, but this is so important, for all our sakes.

Turn off the tv and the computer. Listen to some music, or go for a walk. Take breaks and retreat time to restore and fill yourself with the needed strength. Learn to nourish yourself with the arts and with inspiring stories. Connect with Traditions and teachers and healers of this planet, then return to the difficult work that needs to be done.

When we use thought training wisely, the result is that we know the connection between what is healthy, normal, uplifting, inspiring and nourishing, and all that needs our attention and care. We find with thought training that nothing we do is separate – and that the best way to be of service is to care for ourselves wisely and then act to bring help wherever it is needed.

It should go without saying, but a lot so people get stuck here, and so I'll say it plainly: there is nothing selfish about caring for ourselves well. This is just doing what is needed to bring well being to others. Thought Training is then a whole person making art. It enables us to integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole.

The urgent call to wisdom

After the empowerment of compassion, the second essential application of the Thought Training teachings is wisdom. In Buddhism and in other religions, compassion and emotion alone are not enough. We need wisdom to see into the root causes of suffering, and to bring relief. We can say then that developing wisdom to share with others is the ultimate expression of compassion.

Part of what I, and others like me are never satisfied with when it comes to how the media usually treats complex issues is that it's almost all emotion, with little or no deeper, dispassionate thought, about causes, or possibilities for change. If the tragic tells us anything, it's that we urgently need greater understanding of ourselves and others, and that we need to pass along this knowledge to our children. For our grief to be fruitful, it's got to result in more than just our continued suffering. We have to make something positive come from all this.

Where do we start? Do these perennial problems even have solutions? Yes, and they are perennial solutions that need to be actively applied. What is it that all religions and philosophies teach, if not this: that we are more than we know ourselves to be, and that others and this world are more than we

know *them* to be. They tell us that freedom from suffering is possible, and they all teach us the preciousness of life. If our traditions are functional, they offer methods for awakening this knowledge, and grounding it in our lives.

In the Buddhist sense, wisdom means not grasping at concepts as being what's actually here. When we undertake the training in clear seeing, we become able to enter into the fullness of life, not bound by our ideas. In the Seven Point mind training teaching, there is the line, that 'emptiness is the supreme protection', and this the meaning of emptiness in this context, that we're not caught in limited views of how things exist. A world of possibilities opens.

Albert Einstein said something very true that applies here. He said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.' We need to see more in order to deal with things more deeply, and we need to have that sense of greater resources that letting up from contracted thinking and feeling allows. This is exactly what the practice of the Buddhist Wisdom teachings, and the Wisdom teachings of all Traditions are for.

All our Traditions insist that until we know ourselves and others in our true light, there's simply no end to our problems, but with this knowledge, the New Jerusalem, heaven on earth, is always within our reach.

Just look at what our lives together now are when greed, mistrust, fear and aggression are in full swing: it's an endless, oppressive cycle of exploitation and retribution. There's a powerful need for a fresh perspective, something

other than what's taught in soulless materialist philosophy, or in business school, or upheld by the corporate propagandists in the media.

What will we do with all our culture's aggression, with its self-centeredness, indulgence and waste in our world full of human needs; with all the immaturity, corrupt values, vulgarity, cruelty and neglect? Will we be overwhelmed and turn away? Will we blow a fuse trying to hold it all? It should be writ large that these are not only choices for well intended people. If we train ourselves, we can use these very conditions to make this world a more righteous place.

In these times especially, it's truly hard to accomplish any degree of wisdom, but that is only reason to have *even more compassion, and even more dedication*. It takes so many of the right conditions coming together; it takes integrity, and it takes a great deal of work. It's for this very this reason that we must help each other, to this end, to the end of suffering and the fulfillment of our lives here.

With the coming together of wisdom and compassion in this way, Thought Training becomes a complete practice. In fact, we can say it's *a practice that thrives in difficulty*. This is a path for the courageous, and dedicated, and skillful.

Once we see the great need for this and future generations for a spiritual perspective, with its sense of the preciousness of all life, then our vows can only get stronger and more clear. There is no obstacle to such a practice. With commitment and with insight into the awakening of mind and heart that is needed in some form by everyone, and with the dynamic taught in

Thought Training working, then whatever circumstances there are, easy or difficult, over time, there is only progress.

Whenever there's a terrible event such as a school shooting, for a short time we see more clearly than ever the great need to think about, and talk about the present day threat to ourselves and to our children.

We have an opportunity within reach for just this short time while the stories are still vivid in our mind, to gather increased energy and commitment to look more deeply and work to change our present day culture of violence.

We can use this event to change our tremendous ignorance about and neglect of the mentally ill in America, so that, even with the presence of firearms, fewer and fewer would even think of using them. However hard it is to hold, we are empowered for as long as we have the fresh knowledge of what's at stake here. When this feeling begins to fade, we'll again be back in the mode of ignoring the threats to our families, such that future tragedies will be inevitable.

When the world and its contents are filled with evil, this is exactly the time to change these very conditions, into the path of awakening, and into a world we can all be safe in.

The Metta Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on Loving Kindness says:

*Even as a mother loves
and protects with her life*

Her child, her only child,

So with a boundless heart

Should one cherish all living beings...

From what I can tell, the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others, all aim at helping us to awaken our conscience, and then to be as inclusive as we can in our thoughts and responsiveness to those around us. There's a deep logic at work there.

Again and again we can see the consequence of selfishness, or, of what only seems, to misguided people, like the self interest of leaving anyone out, of cutting them off from our society, and our care.

We may feel that the scope of the work that is needed to change the culture of violence is beyond us, but what we can do, personally and in small and larger groups, is to aim, more and more, to go in that direction. The results of not doing so are too many, and are terrible to know. It becomes clear, at last, in caring for each other, and for even the least among us, that it is *our own life* and *our own children* we are protecting.

As Long As There is a Self, Altruism is the Ideal Practice

When we realize the fruition of spiritual practice, we will no longer identify with the false self. Knowing the great value of all of life, and being inseparably connected to all others, we will then spontaneously engage in helpful action.

As the Zen monk Dawu said, kindness and compassion will be,

Like a person in the middle of the night, reaching in search of a pillow...

It will be like DT Suzuki said, when asked about the liberating teachings,

But what about others?,

and replied,

There are no others.

When I was about 14, my sister, who was in a room down the hall in our family home, cried out in the middle of the night, and I remember flying down the hall like I was being energetically pulled by my midsection to be with her, and comfort her. That's simply the way it is when you are connected with someone you care for. Our response to give whatever is needed is immediate, powerful, and beyond words.

They say however that the liberating teachings may take us ages to embody fully, and so, until then, we can make use of all the practices that are relative to what is conventionally called a self.

As long as there is a self, what we call *altruism* or self-less-ness is an outlook and practice that brings us more and more into alignment with our true nature. This goes by different names, in different traditions, but the meaning is the same.

In Christianity, it can be called 'self-effacement', the humility that allows for the Divine to flow through us.

This is a gesture that says,

Thy Will be done...

It is also called *kenosis*, or 'self-emptying', which is taking the lowest place.

In Tibetan Buddhism, this corresponds to verses in the Eight Points of Training the Mind that teach putting others first:

*With a determination to accomplish the greatest good for all others,
more precious than a wish fulfilling jewel,
may I learn to hold them all dear*

and,

When among others, I will think of myself as lowest among all,

and will hold others to be supreme, from the depths of my heart...

This same teaching later encourages us to let go of the Eight Worldly Concerns - about material gain and loss, physical pain and pleasure, praise and criticism, and having a good or bad reputation. This practice reduces the ego, and helps us to see things more clearly.

*I will engage these practices undiminished by the eight worldly preoccupations,
and by knowing the appearances to be like illusion,
I will be without the limitations that accompany ego-grasping...*

While we are on the path, the relative practices are not themselves the ultimate truth, but they bring us to the point where it can most easily be known.

Lama Lodro Rinpoche said that if we practice great loving kindness and compassion for all beings, it will lead us *right up to* the view, which is the wisdom that, without grasping or clinging to anything at all, directly sees the wondrous, luminous, profound, not-separate nature of ourselves and all others. At that point, Buddha Activity happens in a way that is entirely unscripted, as the effortless expression of our true nature.

Most of the time, our compassionate action will be a combination of these two - borne of knowing our connection to others, and the practice of subduing the motivations of the false ego.

In Buddhism it's taught that we have suffered personally and collectively because of ego grasping and the afflictive emotions. We have seized on

wrong concepts, that only seemed to separate us from our depths, our biological and spiritual ancestry, one another and our beautiful natural world. We have not fully known our own preciousness, or that of others, and how the way we engage this world inevitably effects our very own lives.

At its root, all of this has been obscured for us because of our habitually attaching to an ego, which is a fabricated, false sense of self.

To counter this ego grasping, with its selfishness, we can begin to intentionally cultivate the feeling of other's suffering and concerns *as one's own*, and of all other's happiness and freedom as inseparable from the purpose of our own lives here on earth.

Such altruism, giving up the small self, I have to say, is the easiest, most comfortable, and blissful way to live in this world. Loving, and giving, and serving others more and more is in fact a joy we can know the very moment set our mind in that direction.

As the practice of a self, it makes the utmost sense, bringing harmony, and reducing ego attachment as we go through our lives.

In this life, we can approach the development of wisdom in more than one way. We can understand what harmony and concern, kindness and compassion feel like, and what they reveal through our intuition and embodied sense. We can also understand both ourselves and others using our keen, rational discernment.

We find we will need both of these aspects of our spiritual nature to mature and come to fruition: Feeling knowledge without sharp critical awareness can become mired in the sense world, reacting endlessly, and the discriminating aspect also can be functional, but cold and incomplete if it doesn't have heart-knowledge as well.

In every Tradition, our practice of altruism beautifully fulfills both the responsive and the discerning aspects of our path. Over time it removes both the emotional and the conceptual obscurations together with their seeds, revealing the light of our true nature, to be shared with all.

The Prayer of Saint Francis makes reference to both of these meanings of the term self-lessness, first, that of putting others before ourselves, saying:

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love...*

and then, going beyond ego, teaching that:

*... it is in dying to self
that we are born to eternal life.*

Altruism awakens all of a person's best virtues, of patience, humility, warmth, gentleness, generosity, and conscientiousness, and it leads us onward. It brings with it perspective and inner strength, courage and creativity, and serenity.

For some, practicing in the framework of a self for entire lives, altruism can be fulfillment and joy itself, and for those who would see the end of both suffering and its cause, it leads to knowing our fundamental connection to all of life, to understanding our inner, profound nature, transcending concepts, and to the flourishing of our beneficial nature.

Towards Wholeness and Greater Love

A Commentary on Five Lines of Teaching by Padampa Sangye

Pith instructions are like seeds we can take and cultivate in our contemplative lives. When we find a teaching that matches where we are in our lives at a particular time, something stirs in our depths, and another step can be taken towards wholeness, fulfillment, peace, and the realization of our fundamental nature.

The instructions that have come down to us from the eleventh century teacher, Padampa Sangye are known through his main disciple, the eminent Machig Labdron, the founder of the Chod, or 'cutting through' wisdom lineage.

Although the following five or six lines of Padampa Sangye's teaching are short and simple, they are deep practices, and they deserve to be taken up, written about, and shared more widely for reasons that become clear. These teachings lead to healing, and the fulfillment of love and compassion. They have been translated as:

Confess your hidden faults

Turn towards what you find repulsive

*Help those you cannot help,
and those you don't want to help*

Let go of whatever you are attached to

and

Go to the places that scare you

Each of these lines can have different interpretations, and each lead a person inward, to more depth, and greater freedom.

The first

Confess your hidden faults

can be opened up to look at the key words - *confess* - meaning here *open yourself, reveal*. We can ask, to who do we confess? This has such Judeo-Christian connotations, so, in a contemplative practice that is not theistic, it can be turning toward our own Buddha Nature, our own inner truth, one within us we feel to be our Guardian, Avalokiteshvara, Kuan Yin, or any Divine Being we have a beautiful connection with.

The practice here is opening, revealing, not hiding what we have done, out of shame, or the disconnect between how we want to see ourselves, and indeed who we are in better times, and what we feel is flawed, broken, unworthy, or unloveable about ourselves.

What is called *spiritual bypassing* is when we don't look at, or acknowledge those parts of our life that is wounded, or that have fallen short of the ideal. It takes a great deal of psychic energy to avoid or deny what we carry with

us that is painful, and what Jung called *the shadow* presses and calls out for our attention and for great understanding.

The shadow denied wreaks havoc in our lives. Not attended to, it diminishes us. Learning to incorporate these difficult, complexed aspects of ourself into our love and wisdom is part of what the Western Esotericists called the Great Work.

Confession is not the gesture of de-gradation which is why I place this teaching in the category of one that needs to be timely for a person. It is to hold, tenderly, those parts of ourselves that have been and are still hurt, confused, or weak, with the aim of transformation and healing, and strengthening ourselves. This is something we should do joyfully, since the overall aim is fulfillment, more integral peace and well being.

Confession is also an affirmation of our faith in the Power that guides our lives. Here we find a recurring theme in all religions: the intelligence and love we are all part of, and that we have in us can bring about *transformation*.

Confess, open yourself and reveal all the ways you've fallen short, out of limitation, affliction; bring it out into the open so that it can be healed.

Hidden is a significant word here as well, and a key to this set of transformative teachings. As we'll see, they all have the characteristic turning and facing what we usually move away from, and so these elements in our psyche gather great strength, along with such negative emotions as fear, despair, shame, and strong aversion.

When we hide something from ourselves and others we do so out of *shame*. We don't want that part of ourselves to be seen or known about by people we care about and who we respect. We feel *unworthy*. There may be a place for this, but when we open ourselves to wisdom, to our trusted mentor, guardian and protector, we are taking the bandage off, and holding what is painful with tenderness. This is being loved where we need it most.

The word '*faults*' here, is a mild one, but like the rest of these inward turning teachings, it is an invitation. How do we define a fault? It is an error, a negative habit or tendency; it is *the distance we still have to travel*, measured against a standard we know in ourselves.

The Bible says

*Be thou perfect,
even as your Father in heaven is perfect*

and we *do* have something in us that guides us, something to aspire towards. This is our Truth, our Universal Nature, of Love.

Every tradition tells us we are capable of more than the average person believes. Those who would dismiss such an ideal as mere 'councils of perfection' tragically underestimate what we have in us. This is more a path to be taken and known, than talked about, but at least this much should be said.

If we don't acknowledge where and how we've missed the mark, how can we ever turn again to the light? How can we right ourselves? We hold back

from acknowledging our faults because we don't believe we can change. We identify with familiar patterns, solidify and perpetuate needless suffering. We can do so much better.

Reveal your covered over mistakes and limitations, the ways you've hurt. This is difficult to hold, and yet, you have been healed before, and to confess when needed brings out this same power. Bring to mind all the ways you are not yet whole, not yet fully integrated, not yet complete in love; all the irritations, obsessions, the laziness, the self-justification, the pride, the aggression. This is how they're able to gradually transform.

As the writer Paulo Coelho said

*Lead will play its role until the world
has no further need for lead;
and then lead will have to turn itself into gold.
That's what alchemists do. They show that,
when we strive to become better than we are,
everything around us becomes better too...*

We will notice in practice a connection between the instructions, and so the next line

Approach what you find repulsive

can be seen first, as turning *towards* what we previously rejected, sometimes strongly, and with intense aversion. Instead here, we bring *more love, and greater self compassion*, and we move towards greater wholeness.

Approaching, or turning towards can become *embracing* what you find repulsive, what you find most difficult to love.

Repulsive is an interesting word here as well, a juicy word, full of energy and significance. It refers to what we recoil from, spontaneously. We may then add our reasons to what is going on, but the initial response is deeper than reason. Before it manifests there is a turning away, with a strong negative energy of aversion, and we can choose with love to turn towards what we would reject in ourselves, and then in others.

We open to ourselves first, and learn to embrace whatever we felt was deeply unworthy of love and care, even repulsive, or disgusting.

How is a *golum*, a Grendel, or a demon made, after all? This describes the mind and heart of an ugly, frightened, aggressive creature, that has become twisted, and that has long been desperate for love. And how can this fragment become whole, except through understanding, kindness, and compassion?

Approach what you find repulsive then extends to others. I notice that my deep reflex of accusing others in some way corresponds to what I've rejected in myself in the past. In this practice I find that if I gradually change my own self rejection into a deep, warm embrace of all my imperfections and limitations, all my delusions and suffering, then it becomes possible to extend care to those I had projected onto, because of their similarity to my shadow. I can embrace what is difficult in them too, and in others in this whole wild world of ours.

Taking up this practice in full, we can say with Uchiyama Roshi that,
Everything I encounter is my own life....

We come from this meditative practice with more tenderness and understanding, naturally, and with great compassion that is dedicated to alleviating the suffering of others, whatever it takes.

So much of our aggression goes unchecked because it follows the pathways of our self rejection. Turning aversion towards ourselves into acknowledgement, acceptance, and inclusive love causes it to flow outwards as well, naturally, effortlessly, because the roots have been changed.

The third teaching follows:

*Help those you think you cannot help,
and those you don't want to help*

Sometimes these are divided, or only one or the other is named.

We may not believe we *can* offer something to others, but *our goodwill* we can always offer, even if not in words and visible gestures. Their root is wishing another well, and that is *always* to the good.

We also may not believe that what we extend to ourselves or another would make any difference, but we need to be careful here. This teaching is telling us to be attentive, and to look into the profound nature of the love we do have in us. It is redeeming, uplifting, strengthening and healing. We don't

know the full extent of it, or even part of the power we have until we begin to believe in it and make use of it. Then we will see its miraculous effect, I'm sure, more and more.

There are those we may *not want* to help as well, shadow people in our lives, rejected for the same reasons we would abandon aspects of ourselves, seeing them as unworthy. Real love on the other hand calls us to be inclusive, and that is its radical nature. All by itself, it leads to wholeness in a person, and to community.

The truth is that we are *all* worthy of love, in *all* circumstances. All are infinitely precious. It is not just when others are kind that they deserve our care.

In the Gospels it says

*A physician does not come for those who are well,
but those who are suffering*

- and compassion is just this.

The category of *those we don't want to help* needs to be looked into to see where we would offer anything less than the full measure of our love and care, because right there is where we can bring this greater vision to fruition. We can see the fullness of love made manifest by that much more in our own heart first, and then in our world.

This third line

*Help those you think you cannot help,
and those you don't want to help*

encourages both faith and inclusiveness. This is what we all want and need, for ourselves, for each other.

The fourth line then

Let go of whatever you are attached to

contains both relative and wisdom practice.

The relative here is to let go of misguided self interest that closes us down, and that seeks short term pleasure or gain at the expense of greater fulfillment.

The ultimate teaching here is about letting go of the self we grasp, when in truth, there is actually no such ego. The thoughts we have about ourselves and others and this world do not match the profound truth that is here. To *let go of whatever you are attached to* includes ideas that set us at a distance from the vital, dynamic involvement with the way things are here.

Change is possible; growth, transformation, and healing are possible. When we let go of our ideas we come to the fifth and last teaching, that says,

Go to the places that scare you

Fear is an instinctive reaction that has a range to it, from being based on nothing at all, to being a call for attention because of something threatening us, our loved ones, or our world.

Go there. Turn to it, embrace it warmly, cherish it as though it were a dear friend. It calms down and can tell you more.

Excluding nothing, rejecting nothing, as Milarepa taught

*Contemplate all energies without fear or disgust,
find their essence,
for that is the stone that turns base metals into gold*

We can trust more and more in our capacity to be with what is difficult and to transform it with love and understanding, devotion, and the blessings, the help and support of all the Buddhas, and holy ones.

The practice of *Cho*, cutting through illusions, at last, is melting away obscurations, and seeing clearly into the depth of our true nature, and that of all others, excluding none.

Those who do this practice, when they are referred to as exorcists, are called on to cast out troubling spirits, and to correct unbalanced force, and these they transform through love and understanding;

Practitioners of this spiritual path are also called on in times of epidemic, to stop the spread of illness, and damaging psychic conditions, and again, it is

by their courage, commitment, and insight that they skillfully accomplish such healing.

These practices become deeper and more effective the more we engage them. Just as seeds are only valued because of what they can bring to us and future generations, we each have to see for ourselves the truth of what these teachings by Padampa Sangye indicate, the way to health and completion.

*May we all discover our true heritage,
and with great love,
may we heal all suffering in ourselves and others,
and all the world*

*May peace and blessings extend everywhere
and through all times*

Clearing the North-Eastern Field

When there are flowers and fruits, there are seeds...

*and when there are seeds, there will be roots, stems, leaves,
flowers, fruits, and then more seeds*

It continues this way.

Cutting away an external action can be like cutting back a growing plant at the ground level. Nothing is seen then of the plant; all that exists of it at that time is beneath the ground, but it still exists as a potential to grow again, perhaps even more than before.

It's like if someone left a small corner of a field where a plant was growing, and didn't tend to that area for a long time. Perhaps they'd come back in a year or two, and in what before was just a small area where the plant was growing they'd find the whole area covered. It could even over-run what was being cultivated in other places.

So it is necessary to deal with the plant not only on the level that everyone can see, but to go beneath the surface and remove the roots, so the plant does not grow again.

There are levels to this, clearly, and so, if the roots go down twenty feet, and we only remove the first ten feet, the plant can grow again, and resurface. We need to completely remove the root, and to do this we have to go deeper into the ground than the root-system goes, and take all of it out.

This is the work of compassion, *'no matter how long it takes, no matter how difficult it may be, no matter what the cost...'*

This metaphor illustrates the way the mind works in Buddhist psychology, and need for liberating insight practice, in order to free the mind completely.

We may think that it's enough to control our actions on the external level, which is the place for ethics, universally. This right conduct is what is seen above the surface, and it also calms the mind somewhat, and allows us to go deeper, but more is needed, as shown with the analogy of a growing plant.

We can gain a lot from understanding all the effects of our thoughts and actions, as described in traditional teachings.

Just as a plant gives seeds, an action, which is the culmination of that expression also produces the tendency to re-create an experience. Unless those tendencies are completely removed from the mind, the possibility for that type of experience to recur remains.

To take it further, obsessive thought and action is far worse than thinking, speaking, or acting briefly. It creates many more 'seeds' that can surface again as experiences that are as bad as before, and even worse. The mind can degenerate. We can even create hells out of fear, anger, or desire, when don't have control of our mind. This is something that is common, actually.

Learning to free our mind is the only way, and this begins with the external and gradually goes to the source, or we can say, to the very root of our sufferings.

We have to learn to see these in more than their external, manifest form, as an outburst of anger, or one instance of trembling fear, or an out of control desire. Before they exist in these fully tangible physical ways, they have existed as a movement in the mind, or as a mere tendency. That is what we need to first pacify, and then remove.

We calm the mind, and keep looking, intently, courageously. We can develop this skill that is able to see the harmful condition before it manifests, as energy in a very subtle form.

We can very easily underestimate the suffering that is inherent in unskillful states of mind, and their tendencies. They look and feel nothing like the full blown expression, but as we trace their evolution back to their source, we find the deep root of the problem, and also its solution.

*Here is where we especially need to develop the power of introspection, that is able to perceive the presence or absence of causes. We can then remove the causes of suffering completely from our mindstream.

We also need the vivid example of those who have freed themselves, such as the Thai Forest Masters Ajahn Mun, Ajaan Lee, and Ajahn Mahaboowa, Ajahn Chah, Ajaan Pasanno, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Lama Yeshe. We call these saints in the Buddhist Tradition, not only because of their exemplary qualities, but primarily because of the great purity of their mind and heart.

*May we all accomplish complete freedom from every form of suffering,
and bring all others to that very same state*

An Arrow From the Dark Woods

Ideas, or experiences, or impulses at times rise up from depths in our psyche that are unknown to us. They can strike us like an arrow from dark woods, and call us to greater understanding.

There is a parallel between our own psychology, and what we have inherited from our family, or culture. We carry elements in us, unknown to us, that feel foreign when they emerge. These can be shocking, or horrifying, or they can be amusing, but they always carry the feeling of being a mystery. We are left for a time confused.

So often when we see a crime committed by what looked to be an ordinary person living an ordinary life, or, someone in law enforcement, we respond initially with shock, and then bewilderment. It simply doesn't fit our idea of the person.

A 'Freudian slip' has something of this same surprising and incongruous quality. There is truth in it though, if we know how to look.

Again and again the too simple image we hold, of ourselves, or another, or our culture as pure or perfect, or just, is challenged in frightening and demanding ways.

What is required of us at such times is a greater awareness, and an inclusiveness of what they call *the shadow* in Jungian psychology.

The shadow is - all the things that we deny or reject about ourselves, or our ancestry, or culture. These things are still with us though, and have a powerful effect in our lives and relationships and culture.

The scope of this subject is so large that anything we could say about it in truth would just be an introduction. It would be like pointing to the opening of a cave, that we ourselves must enter to understand what is being talked about. This much, at least, I can aim to do here.

Looking at what I wrote out on the subject of the shadow a few years ago, born of hard lessons dealing with my unclaimed self, I stand by the idea that we need to be quite strong and balanced to explore what has been rejected, or hidden away in our lives, and that has power for that very reason.

If we were to begin on page thirty of a book, we will feel the need to fill in what should have come before. Reading and listening to teachers on this subject feels to me a lot like this.

My own sense of it now is that we need self compassion and, after that, courage, and honesty to begin to see and understand what has been done, and not said, or not reflected on and assimilated in our own lives, that of our family, and culture.

Anthony Stevens wrote:

How can we enable the unconscious to realize itself? By granting it freedom of expression, and then examining what it has expressed.

With compassion, we are not rejecting anything, but only wanting to understand, and, naturally to heal what is suffering. With courage and honesty then, we can learn to gradually come to know what has been hidden away.

On a personal level, if we are not aware of our past and our present suffering, we will not learn its lessons. If we forget, that is the ground for repeating the same mistakes, endlessly, or even going further than before from the fullness of life we want for ourselves.

They say also in psychology that *there is gold in the shadow*. The meaning is that sometimes talents not expressed, or dreams not lived, or recognized and appreciated are a part of our inner life, and these act with some amount of force in us, whether we aware of it or not.

An interesting thing happens though when the unconscious becomes known to us, either by intimation or revelation. It changes in some way. It is no longer completely unconscious, although it may recede again into the mist. When we have some clue, some sense of a new awareness then, it is important not to lose it, but to find any way possible to amplify that, and to bring the new understanding more fully into the light.

To make it tangible, I think of how it is between people when the shadow is unclaimed. It can be that neither knows the other, or accepts responsibility for what is conjured and projected outwards. Idealization is followed by disillusion, either quickly, or after some time.

We can reach from the simplest mistake between us in this way to the largest expression of the shadow in a culture, and see the same pattern repeating.

When we don't know our makeup, we mistake what we deny in ourselves to be external. The devil in theistic traditions comes to mind here, as does the self righteousness and brutality in the history of imperialist powers, including my own. They have been barbaric, but people do not see it that way, amazingly, even to this day. Instead, in many cases, they continue to see themselves past and present as saviors, and as civilizing forces. Such is their deep unconscious mania.

In Buddhism it's said that Dharma, the teachings on the path to liberation, are made of non-dharmic elements; wisdom is made of suffering and non wisdom elements, and freedom is made of non-freedom elements, rightly understood.

Dogen also pointed this out when he said that the difference between an ordinary person and a buddha is that an ordinary person is greatly deluded about enlightenment, while a buddha is greatly enlightened about delusion. This is the difference.

I have come again to this study of the shadow to understand as well as I can my own makeup, and what is needed to transform the shadow elements in my psyche. The harm that rises up from the unconscious in me needs this understanding and reconciliation. I feel this keenly.

I have been asking myself recently about *the* central tenet of Buddhism - that suffering can be ended. This is a profoundly different idea than is admitted in our culture or our world. Even in religious traditions, the sense is most often that our pain and sorrows can only be attenuated somewhat, but not brought to a complete cessation, at least not easily or anytime soon.

What we are left with then, I think, is a partial teaching, a partial aim, and much less than the founder of the Buddhist tradition intended, or, I would say what all true spiritual traditions would have us personally know.

We use Buddhist methods then not to practice Buddhism, as Thich Nhat Hanh said.

All the teachings, and prayers of aspiration, say that suffering can be ended, but that this needs deep study and practice. *It needs a knowledge we have not yet embodied.*

They say in psychology that the best thing we can do for our loved ones and our world is to solve the problem of the shadow in our own lives, to integrate and assimilate its lessons.

As a bridge between the personal and the social, I have thought of this as Freedom of mind, the root of the social gospel.

We have a a familial and cultural heritage, as well as our own personal stories, with flaws and profound sorrows, gifts and aims we've not fulfilled. All this can be held in a larger context, one that sees and appreciates all we have been, but it's not at all easy.

It's said that Ajahn Buddhadasa was asked sometime in his latter years if he still suffered, and this was a way to ask the impolitic question of whether he was an arhat, or a liberated person. He answered, wryly, by saying, 'Well, I haven't suffered in a while, but you can never be too sure...' and *that* was his practice, realization, and accomplishment, to be exact.

If we forget the our past, and the potential we continue to have now for ignorance, and suffering, it creates those experiences, the arrow, again. This is as true on a personal level as it is in a family, community, or nation. Such is the shadow as I now understand it.

We must know this fully, and to do that, we have to enter the dark wood, to illumine, and transform it.

From a letter - on wisdom and compassion

From 1998, and revised in 2024

I just wanted to mention one thing you repeated in your short note - about what Goenka said about compassion developing naturally as a result of vipassana or insight. I think that, in all fairness, sometimes this is evident, and sometimes less so...

Actually, this 'wisdom leading to compassion' is the approach in the Zen tradition, as well as in the Theravada, and also, to some extent, it is the approach taken by the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that emphasize wisdom practice more first, on the way to a full, complete realization.

Just a note here: The Tibetan word 'San-gye', 'Buddha', translates to 'completely purified- and fully developed', meaning that all faults have been removed, which is the cessation without remainder, and all positive qualities are brought forth, *actualized*.

So, to get back to my point- if it is so that sometimes liberation, the freedom of mind, leads to the full development of love and compassion, and sometimes not, then *why not?* Why does it sometimes happen and sometimes not? This is so important for us to consider as individuals, and so important for our world, really.

And here's the best answer I can come up with so far. First, there are different temperaments, so that in any one system or approach one person will flourish fully, accomplishing all the different aspects of development,

while another person may need other instruction, and to engage in other practices to achieve the same thing.

Then, I've found the following teaching very useful to explain what is happening in any case:

In the Tibetan tradition, they speak of *the two obscurations* that keep us from seeing the truth of what is here. The first type is what they call *the conceptual obscurations*, or the *obscurations of conceptual thought*, or wrong views. These are corrected, or cleared away by samatha and vipassana- the quieting of the mind and cultivation of the strength of discernment- discriminating between the true and the false.

The Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions that practice non-conceptual meditation clear away this type of obscuration, the obscuration of conceptual thought, very effectively.

But what happens, quite often as it turns out - it's the characteristic possible sidetrack to this approach- is that the other type of obscuration, called *the obscuration of afflictive emotions*, or *the kilesa nivarana* are not always fully removed. Sometimes I've been calling these *the qualitative obscurations*.

And the all too common result is that people end up with a partial experience of the view of emptiness, or egolessness, one with the wrong concepts cleared away, but it is a cold, dark, meaningless, nihilistic experience, one that is lacking in the sense of worth, of the beauty and richness of what is here.

The emotional obscurations are cleared away by the development of all the qualities that we associate with the good heart: the development of love and compassion, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, humility, honesty, gratitude, joy, and generosity. These change the quality of the mind so that when the conceptual obscurations are removed as well, the experience is warm; the mind is bright, appreciative, and loving; and the feeling is one of richness, of the great value of life.

The no-self teachings of the Buddha are further expressed in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and the Middle Way is a further explanation of those teachings. The term 'Middle Way' refers to 'being free of the two extremes', the extreme of eternalism, or ego-grasping, and the extreme of nihilism. According to Middle Way philosophy, all the mistakes that people can have regarding the View fall into one of these two categories.

Right View is accomplished by removing the two obscurations, conceptual and emotional, together with their seeds. So the development of love and the positive qualities of the heart are definitely an essential aspect of vipassana, or wisdom practice, seeing things fully as they actually are.

Whether we arrive at this indirectly, or through our engaging in methods that directly cultivate both discernment and kindness, the need is there for everyone to have these elements present. That said, we should each practice what suits us best, and accomplishes a full result.

A consideration for all that follows...

I believe all of the Buddhist wisdom traditions can accomplish a full result of liberation and enlightenment for a person.

That said, there is a difference between what can be called *provisional teachings*, and those that are *definitive*, describing the result of the practice.

A brief definition

Whatever teachings and practices are in reference to our ordinary conceptual mind, and are based on the idea of a self where there is {in fact} no self are provisional. They are meant to be onward leading, to the liberating, ultimate truth.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo said,

The ego (wrong view) dissolves naturally through deep insight into the nature of mind... until then it is the {apparent} self, {what is we take to be} 'the ego' that walks the path...

In comparison, whatever teachings are reference to the non conceptual, the non dual,

whichever ones teach annata, no self, emptiness, the signless, the wish-less, the unconditioned, the timeless,

Buddha nature, our true nature, our boundless original nature, unconditional love, the nature of mind itself - these are definitive.

It wasn't until reading a text by Thinley Norbu Rinpoche that I found the importance of ultimately taking wisdom as the path *highlighted* as not only another teaching among many, but as absolutely essential.

Orgyen Chowang Rinpoche and Tulku Pema Rigstal emphasize this beautifully as well.

I wrote one essay on The Introduction to Awareness called,

It is only transcendent wisdom that accomplishes the path.

Looking back now in 2024 on the liberating teachings I have studied, including those of Buddhist psychology, in my own case, I found that something was missing in my practice, or was not emphasized as much as I needed it to be to free my mind.

I'm at peace with my understanding of these methods now, in terms of where they all lead.

In retrospect, for me, it was exactly this emphasis is that was needed.

Had I known this sooner, it would have saved me a lot of time and unnecessary struggle and hardship, which is the whole purpose of the teachings.

A little explanation

Conceptual mind is still dualistic, and not final quiescence when it comes to any path of practice;

{this includes the teachings on annata, or shunyata, emptiness, madhyamika, the Middle Way, abhidharma, which is Buddhist psychology, and vajrayana sadhana}

and this - the definitive view, the true nature that transcends concepts needs to be known not only once. At some point it needs to be made central to our practice, and really to our entire lives, if we want to be liberated, free of all samsaric suffering. Without transcendent wisdom being central, we

are still in the realm of concepts, and ego grasping, cycling through the experiences of the six realms;

Further, even positive states, when they are based on a self need to be transcended, the self let go of in regard to them, or the result will be only higher rebirth, in the human or in one of the deva realms.

Attachment even to a spiritual path, or to an identity, as good as it may feel sometimes, still has the cause of continuing samsara, and so this teaching on what Robert Thurman calls 'radical non duality', is actually complete.

It's not only the Great Perfection teachings from the Nyingma Tradition, of course, that arrive there. I can see how each Buddhist path of practice can potentially accomplish a full result, when this transcendent truth is realized. There are teachings in the Nyingma however that make this explicit, and I've not seen this expressed as fully elsewhere.

The sooner we have Right View, and a clear idea of the aim of practice, the better, but how to do this?

Either we begin with a complete view, which seldom happens, or we have a workable view, one that can develop as insight becomes more clear and incisive.

As Orgyen Chowang said

The view is what we're meant to focus on. Everything else is a supporting practice.

It helps every aspect of practice to know this {taking refuge, vows, ethics, meditation, purification, devotion, study, prayer, and mantra.} The more clear we are about the wisdom we are realizing, the easier practice can be.

The provisional teachings arise from this ultimate nature, in response to what is needed. They serve the purpose of all liberating methods, leading to the ultimate goal shared by all Buddhist methods.

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.

Untying the Knot of the Ego

(2023)

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*

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.

I've had this challenge come up with the teachings on purification, especially when it comes to feeling remorse, necessary as that is at times. It can be the wisdom of our feeling nature. If we are not skillful however, we can continue, *and even increase* wrong views about ourselves and others, and continue to suffer needlessly.

The same applies, if in a more pleasant, enjoyable way with positive states, and motivations, and vows. These 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, someone who is both willing and able to help others.

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.

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, compassion, purification, calm abiding, ethics, study, prayer, mantra and visualization, and see for yourself.

Some practices by themselves go only so far, as its said explicitly in the metta and calm abiding teachings {those on quieting and clarifying the mind}. If we do not know this, progress can be blocked, for some indefinite time. We may even go backwards, if they increase ego-grasping. Practice should always be onward leading. They should go in the direction of letting go of ego grasping, that false identification, or be the expression of that realization.

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 by themselves 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, {ethics, meditation, and transcendent wisdom}
the way to peace, nibbana,
true and lasting health and happiness.*

We can see the purpose of the provisional, and that at last what we need is the freedom that is experienced and actualized with wisdom...

Verses for generating the mind of enlightenment

Especially now, may I think 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 all the causes of true happiness flourishing...

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

I celebrate all that is beautiful and right in the world,
I rejoice in all kindness, virtue, positive actions and intentions,
and in all success, happiness, and good fortune...

and abide in impartial love...

Seeing the world of sentient beings,
so full of suffering, I will follow the bodhisattva's way.

May I clearly see that what I and all others so urgently need
is complete 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

May I always cherish all living beings,
with the determination to accomplish for them this highest good
that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

An Awakened One has appeared in this world.
He has taught the way to freedom,
and generations of his followers to this day have realized his teachings.

Homage!

{The Bodhisattva Vow}

Just as all previous Buddhas first awakened the precious bodhimind,
and just as they then carefully followed each of the requisite stages of the
Bodhisattva disciplines,
in the same way, for the sake of living beings,
I will awaken and cultivate the bodhimind,
this all embracing intention,
and then train in every one of the essential disciplines of a Bodhisattva.

I take refuge in the Buddha, the Light of the World,
the Great Compassionate Teacher
I take refuge in the Dharma, in all the Liberating Teachings
and I take refuge in the Noble Sangha, the Accomplished Spiritual
Community, the Great Assembly of Saints and Bodhisattvas

By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity, and other
 Virtues, {Ethics, Patience, Joyful Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom...}
 May I 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.

With my heart going out with great compassion
 in whatever direction these most precious teachings and their result
 have not yet spread,
 or, once spread, have declined,
 there may I bring this treasure of happiness and aid!

Limitless is the extent of space,
 and limitless is the number of sentient beings
 Limitless are the karmas and delusions of beings
 Such then are the limits of my aspirations!

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

May the supreme jewel, bodhicitta,
 arise where it has not yet arisen,
 Where it has arisen, may it not diminish,
 May it ever grow and flourish...

May I accomplish this one path,
and may all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

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 a bodhisattva {someone who is both willing and able to lead others to freedom}

- The Diamond Sutra, verse 3

If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have compassion? To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of both great compassion and wisdom], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings.'

- Shantideva}

On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they see themselves or as they are seen 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.

- Deshung Rinpoche}

So, Subhuti, all the bodhisattva mahasattvas should give rise to a pure and clear intention in this spirit... They should give rise to an intention with their minds not dwelling anywhere...

- The Diamond Sutra, verse 10

The Best Thing I Could Do For Myself and Others

The best thing I could do for myself is to free my mind completely from suffering...

This much is obvious. Everyone understands this. How our mind and heart are determine how much we can enjoy our lives, and how much we are able to care for and support others. We know this naturally, so perhaps there isn't too much more to say about it here, other than, this possibility of inner freedom is something that is taught in every spiritual tradition.

If genuine, Traditions are not just promising and encouraging a temporary comfort, or a pause in hardship and struggle - no. Whether they are theistic or non theistic, what all traditions proclaim, uniformly, is that freedom from suffering is attainable, and, not only that, it is the birthright of every one of us.

So,

The best thing I could do for myself is to free my mind from suffering...

And then, the best thing I could possibly do for you, and for my loved ones also is to free my mind from suffering.

This is a departure from what we often hear - which is something to the effect that, the best thing we could do for another is to lead them to safety, to happiness, and to peace, but, we can only give what we have. If we don't ourselves have this wisdom and freedom, to some extent it's like the blind leading the blind. Think about it.

There are many people of goodwill who are not able to fully help those they care about. They may even burn out trying.

Liberating ourselves, others are helped effortlessly. This is the Nyingma view also, the first Buddhist teachings that were established in Tibet.

Some traditions will say that it's selfish to focus on ourselves, and our own liberation, and while it's true that wanting to help others get free from their suffering can definitely give us great motivation, and be part of our practice, at some point we have to know this freedom and peace ourselves, individually, otherwise, what is the result? And no one else can do that for us.

As Tulku Thondup said,

Just as we cannot neglect the roots of a tree if we want to share in its fruits and flowers, so too we cannot neglect our mind if we want to benefit others...

This is the most important thing, it seems to me.

I imagine a venerable teacher visiting my city. Perhaps for years, he or she was in retreat, where they gained insight and lasting freedom. Then, when they came to teach, I ask you, what was more important - their visit? or the the freedom they found those years before? Clearly, it was their accomplishment that made it possible for them to offer to others what is most useful.

It is this way with us as well. We can give what we know, and embody.

Sometimes it's said of a teacher with insight that 'the blessings are still warm', and that what they offer comes from their accomplishment, which is why I say, *The best thing I could do for others also is to free my own mind completely from suffering...*

When we gain freedom, then everything follows naturally, like water flowing downhill - the responsiveness, the compassionate action, the creativity, resourcefulness, and adaptability, all those happen naturally. They are part of our true nature. Just behold the accomplished sages from any tradition, and you can see.

The best thing I could do for my mother and for my sister, for my dear friends, and my community, is to totally free my own mind from suffering and its causes forever. Then I can offer the best guidance and encouragement. Before that time, whatever I offer will be limited, and we should not be satisfied with that.

We usually think also that we are separate from each other, but I can tell you, *that is an illusion*. It is a mistaken idea, that is so common. We hold the fixed idea that we are separate from our ancestry, from our living environment, from our communities and families, but it is not so. There is interdependence. Thich Nhat Hahn coined the term, *interbeing*. That's the reality.

As Ajahn Passano said in a recent talk,

There is no barrier between ourselves and others...

I have thought before about how to express this. I thought first of the language that is commonly used, of non-duality, but that sounds a little too abstract for me. Then I thought of non-separation, which is more to the point, really, but recently I thought of an even better way to think of it, and that is, that *we are organically connected to each other*, in every moment.

Then, it's like when a plant or a tree somewhere benefits, and flourishes, and everything around it also benefits, right away. Really, this is how it is with us. We can look and see for ourselves.

*Become fresh, like a flower after the rain,
and then share this freshness...*

This is how it is with people, friends, family, communities, our lives on this precious earth, and so, please take really good care of your precious self. This is the best thing we can do for one another.

We are organically connected. Sometimes this is more evident, and very clear to see.

There is no barrier between ourselves and others...

I was thinking about this in the park earlier today. I was thinking, The best thing I could do for these young people... and for the elderly... and for the vulnerable...

The best thing, the most compassionate thing I could possibly do about the problems in our society... the addiction... the violence...

The best thing I could possibly do about the destruction of our living environment, our only home... or about wars, and the threat of wars...

- is to free my own mind, and to realize peace and freedom myself. Then I will be able to care for others in the best possible ways. Isn't it so?

How did we get ourselves into our seemingly intractable problems, these samsaras? And how can we find our way out?

If we really want to help, clearly, we need another way to think about ourselves and each other and our world, another way of being that affirms the best in us.

Who are the true guides these days? You can be one, and I can be one. This is what traditions tell us, and this is what I believe to be true.

On Compassion - Poems - Contents

All the more reason

There really are those

Clashing cymbals

Awake

Hey, fortunate one!

Is there no one now

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How can I help those who have no one

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No place I'd rather be, with an introduction

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There are so many ways to save a life

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To those who are spending this, their first Christmas

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During the night it must have rained

Archeology

All the more reason

Why do we do what we do?
Hungry, we go and make something to eat;
that others are hungry too,
and seeing that they could be fed,
all the more reason to act

Let this guide your steps.

Here and now, there are treasures to be enjoyed
but we must turn and face them,
bask in their light and be filled;

that so many others need this same vital food,
just as we do,
all the more reason to seek out what gives life,
and share that with all our family,
with all the world!

The wilderness
is an uncertain and dangerous place,
never knowing what will come next,
all is a struggle just to survive,
such that,
whatever good maps and True Guides we have
are precious beyond compare;

that to our left and right,
before us and behind, others are lost too,
still struggling and in danger,
all the more reason to gain the stronghold of a view
that all can use to find their way

Let this guide your steps up the mountain,
and back again.

Not knowing life is to be enjoyed,
the young and old despair,
there are addicts and turf wars,
stone-hearted corporatists who exploit others
and desecrate our beautiful earth

militarists who rampage,
and the indifferent,
and it goes on and on, for generations
seeming to promise only more of the same,
and worse -

all the more reason to speak a true word
that cuts through entanglements and confusion,
that restores sight
and gives genuine hope

My own life, passing so swiftly,
with so much of it taken up with meaningless activities,

now is the time to actually accomplish something of benefit for myself and others;

that everywhere I look,
most are distracted,
while this whole body of our family waits
with needs that could be met if we had the aim,

all the more reason for complete clarity
about the need for love and compassion,
and action,
as far as we can reach...

There really are those
who run into a burning building to save others,

There really are those
who jump into dark water after someone,
to save them -

this is on account of their great love.

All of this really happens, everyday,
many times a day,
even if we don't see it,
or talk about it

They don't seek credit
They just walk away before the cameras
and microphones come
They only did what was needed,
and I take shelter under their wing
I take shelter in the cool shade of their kindness

Their memory sustains me
and as I emerge again renewed,
theirs is the vision I follow

Clashing Cymbals

Awaken, Compassion!

How is it you are still asleep,
when so many need what you have to give?

Don't you hear those walking through the bitter cold desert,
in search of rest?

There are children who need clean water,
and there are those that are hungry *now*

There are those who need medicine
and can't afford it

There are those who need a friend *now*

Absent joy and hope,
there are so many who mute their senses...

Visit the hospital wards, and the waiting rooms,
the homeless shelters,
and prisons and the half way houses

Listen!

Hear the burning, the hunger,
the desperate cries
of the refugee,
of the addict,

of the friendless,

of those with a parent,
a child,
or a loved one in need

hear the cries of animals,
and of this earth

Hear how it is,
and then awaken with all you've got

You only have a short time on this earth,
and this is the hour to give what you have

See how it is now
and how many men and women carry with them
the cause of their own, and others' harm,
because of their not knowing how to live,
because of their not knowing what will bring peace,
and what misery

Every day here, every hour,
see how it is
how our own family is captive -
their minds are as those having
a nightmare in paradise

Who will help them wake up, if not you,
oh compassion?

Hey you!, Yes you -
Don't say your own ability is too little -
We must all do what we can now
and aim to become more capable
This is the only work of meaning
in a place and time such as this

I call out to you
and I call out to all those who can help -
How can anyone be even the least bit indifferent,
seeing loss,
seeing mothers and fathers separated from their children?

seeing fear and sadness,
hunger,
isolation,
brutality,
degradation,
addictions,
crass commercial distractions,
seeing false idols worshipped

People hunger for meaning,
for connection,
for something more than this

Are these not desperate times for many?

It seems that few hear the cries of others at all,
but *you*, oh compassion,
you are at least partly awake in me now

Rouse yourself fully!

*Our family,
our loved ones, and this world
need you!*

Awake

Tens of thousands of bright flowers, uplifting to see,
fragrant and delightful

A fresh wind moves through my whole body,
a bracing cold wind
cutting through everything,
invigorating

Crisp, brilliant morning sunlight reaching everywhere,
so clear and joyful

The sound of trumpets and clashing cymbals,
the recollection of my greatly compassionate teachers,
and their powerful exhortations,
hearing the cries of the world

these awaken my own compassion,
my own feeling of responsibility

Knowing the preciousness of this time,
dedicating myself and re-dedicating myself,
renewing my vows,
and practicing

Hey fortunate one! {A song}

Hey fortunate one!

You're alive

You've made it this far - to this day, this hour,
and as long as you are here,
why don't you make the best use of your time?

See how it is just now:

You have this human life,
with your senses intact,
in a place that is relatively at peace -
and long may it be so;

You're not oppressed by any illness,
or overwhelmed by delusions at this time,
no, not today, not this hour,
and long may it be so -

Compared to yourself in the past,
and to so many others in this world right now,
it's amazing, just how fortunate you are!

Think about it...

With these conditions coming together just so,
for this brief time, you have this remarkably precious opportunity -

This very day, this very hour,
you've got the very ground
where all that is excellent can grow,
for yourself, and your loved ones, and community,
and for future generations
Hey!,

and not *only* that,
in this life you have met amazing, noble teachers who were learned,
and who themselves accomplished the teachings...
Now, just think about that!...

How wonderful, and how rare!

and not *only* that,
you've been able to practice and gain some result,
such that your faith is based at least in part on experience,
and that can lead you.

This is something great.

You've heard teachings on benefitting yourself in this lifetime,
and in the future,
on complete liberation from every form of suffering,
and on enlightenment -
now, just think about *that*,

and, you didn't die last night,
with your work for self and others unfinished
That would have been tragic, such a great loss!

And so tell me, fortunate one,
How are you going to live today?

Think about how it is just now, today,
that *so many* in this world don't even have the barest necessities,
of food, shelter, and medicine

and so many have no guide,
and so they are lost and confused,
harming themselves and others, endlessly

In this world, a very few have heard teachings,
on higher rebirth, liberation,
the bodhisattva vow, and wisdom teachings,
and among those, many can't make sense of them -
it's as though those teachings were spoken in a lost language

or else,
they can't convert their understanding into an effective practice
to ease their suffering,
and bring freedom to themselves and their families

What a loss! Truly, what a loss,
to have come just this far, and then to go no further

*So tell me, fortunate one! -
how will you live today, this hour?*

You have methods to accomplish the aims
of yourself and others,
who are all so worthy of your love and care -
All of them!
All of them, I tell you!

Have mercy!
Let your heart be open,
and your mind be clear

Realize this Path,
and share all of this good you have,
with all who are in need,
in whatever form it needs to take for them

Aim to give to others as much as you can,
of light and peace,
health and strength,
and inspiration making the way clear,
for now and for the future...

is there no one now
who can use the strength you have to give?
who might walk with us another mile
because of that leftover food on your plate

you don't need to be a hero
chest puffed
flashing glances

you can be disheveled
broken yourself
it doesn't matter
a look across the gulf can save them
can last for decades even

that someone met them on time,
it goes on in countless ways

be a light, in the gathering light
be a prayer in the ruins

be the pulse quickening
the warm breath,

be that grace handed off in celebration
in confirmation that we still have
the ground of peace with us
and its not forgotten

oh, no its not forgotten
that all this music is waiting

some simple things,
they are not talked about
they go mostly unnoticed

but those gifts we give in secret
they are the lasting power

On the train this week,
looking at a nodding addict, I thought:
That is someone's child, lost to them long ago
Their mother wakes before dawn, worrying and grieving for them
At her kitchen table, helpless, tears roll down her cheeks

They tried everything,
extraordinary means over the years,
but the one they loved the most slipped away from them

And now, their loved one wakes on the hard ground,
or in a prison cell,
in dirty, torn clothing,
They face dangers every day, of being beaten,
or assaulted, or robbed,
They are full of fear, like an animal on the run
and they have great hunger in them, and shame that runs deep

There's a dense curtain drawn across their beautiful mind,
and all the treasures they would have given to us
are lost to the world

Although they are so desperately in need of love and care,
they are being degraded,
ignored, and even scorned -

and now,
only those who are themselves fearless oceans of compassion

can reach them -

Only those who have given up their bodies and fortune,
to get to our precious ones,
and bathe them, and give them essential nourishment

To those great ones,
I bow my head,
and vow to honor
'til the lower realms are completely emptied

And those who are lost,
I vow to bring back to our family,
and make them whole again

I won't refuse sadness I know
this can become something we need
When held close guarded
fed with reason for hope
a pearl may emerge this worth
out of not-abandoned grief

And I will stay with you
loyal no end
My joy grows from this
and seeing too the knowledge of what can be

And I breathe smoothe breath
beneath the ash
of doubt, materialism
on the smoldering sense that can become alive again
as new days dancing in open fields

O, I can look at you
I don't have to run
because you're not just what you say,
what you admit yourself to be
I know your secret
and it's why I can remain
with no fear:

This becoming needs your presence,
and light,

until releasing rain to replenish
all worlds
all bodies and souls

All the lawyers
on both sides
today are pleading for mercy

and the judge
and jury,
the bailiff,
and the defendant,

the court reporter,
those in the gallery,
and those outside
in one voice,
they all cry out
Mercy!

I want a judge who's been where I've been
A doctor who's known sickness
A comforter who once or more had their heart broken
and now has a deep well inside him made of grief

I want a soldier how has experienced the loss he'd cause another
and has not forgotten
who has it clearly in front of him

I want someone I can see is scarred the same ways as me
someone whose words and thoughts are filled with living
whose aims are filled with the knowledge
of what it is to be human

I want a giver who's known poverty
A bringer of light who's stumbled through darkness for ages
and now carefully and completely shows the way for those who need it

I want someone to feed me who has himself known hunger
A Savior who's fallen before lifting up

A True Angel not born that way but one who has also been broken,
who has fallen and risen up many times -
Where else would he get the will and the determination to lift up another?
knowing how much is at stake, reaching out to protect all that life

I want to hear the encouraging voice not only of well-wishers
its not enough

I need to hear the voices of those
who've had their legs go out from under them on the long climb
more times than they can remember

and known shame, fear, self-loathing, helplessness, and despair
so they are now without blaming anyone,
but with infinite mercy and pure longing
for all who struggle and who need

With who can I speak except the full-born human -
who else would have sympathy - that word full with its meaning?

I want a judge who's felt himself to be the worst sinner of all
that one I'd trust with my secrets
anyone else on a high seat is a danger - arrogant, capricious, unworthy

some once tarnished shines more brightly than one never worn,
never tested - it's worth more to us all

I want someone who can spell struggle
someone who's lost more than a few battles
had their hearts broken open never to fully recover
so that they are without pride,
or feeling so different, after all, from those they once scorned
but with infinite sympathy and dedication

rumped, soiled, bloodied, beautiful, turning fully human
having also known humiliation and defeat

having been that too and never forgetting
with gratitude for every small lifting up

If you suffer, friend, let me be with you
This is the ground from where I have grown
the shell I flew out of
the substance I have eaten and transformed

Anguish, turmoil, desperate, unknowing choices
these I have swallowed and known
Craving, anguish, egotism, flavors consistent
everywhere they are found

Instead of sorrow, hurt disabling
A striking clarity moves steady hands to work
for what is needed with no thought of success or failure
hands know only to work ongoing work without
hesitation or pause

This is nature

No place I'd rather be, with an introduction

I usually don't try to explain a poem, but in this case a few words of how it came to be might add something to it.

I went on a short retreat back in 2011, and when I came back to San Francisco, on the first night back I had this dream, of a teenaged girl who went to join her parents in a concentration camp. Her father said to her, 'Why are you here? You could have escaped and saved yourself!' and the girl said, No! If I am here I can offer you some joy, for as long as we are together. I can make the suffering less! There is no place I would rather be...'

I tried to catch what was said and put it in a poem, but I don't know how successful I was... in any case, I had to try... you know the feeling...

No place I'd rather be

In good times,
 hard times,
 and the worst of times,
 there is no place I'd rather be
 than *right there*

If you ask me why,
 it is because,
 by the power of love,
 I can share the joy with you, and make it more

I can help to make the pain less,
and I can offer happiness

That is why,
through it all,
and when things get tough,
and even,
or *especially* in the worst of times
in the worst of worlds,
there is no place that I would rather be

If this were the only world
where there is both happiness and suffering,
still, I would choose just this one
to be with you

By being here together,
we can make the way better for one another
Don't you see?
That means more than anything else to me

For this very reason,
it's worth every effort

whatever we need to go through,
it is, all of it, then,
completely worthwhile

Giving of ourselves,
Measured next to this world's
pleasures –
there is no comparison, really

People don't know of this, or else they don't feel capable,
and so they hide
or run to small pleasures
that disappear even in the moment and are gone

But because we can be light for one another,
make each other's trials that much less,
and offer food, and shelter
even for future times,
through love,
there is no place that I would rather be
than right here

This thought
strengthens me in hundreds of ways

If we only get one song,
and that song is our life,
then let this be my song

Let everything else be done, or left undone,
no matter –

but just this, to aim to care for you
in the best of ways -
this brings life,
freshness that does not fade

Every other gain and loss,
no matter -
but just this

of all worlds, of all paths,
to be with you,
and to offer you my hand,
for your whole life
oh, the joy of this!

It amazes me
how prayer is like a river,
always new, and enlivening

We may write words down,
or carve them in granite, but these fade
and the original impulse alone remains -

building monasteries and temples,
churches, mosques, and synagogues,
crafting statutes and thankas,
and writing scriptures in gold

rousing people from their bed,
lighting their lamp,
cooking their food,
giving us strength for each new day,
and song, and consolation

This is manna, to be trusted in,
sign and substance,
The ground of our faith

Oh, wonder of wonders

It is there in the warmth of every touch that renews,
in every voice crying out,
and in every gentle voice that goes to meet them

{I am amazed to see all this today,
how we are part of it, and it is part of us...}

There are so many ways to save a life

You can
let your friend know you are thinking of them

You can
cut a few flowers from the garden
and give them away

You can
open your window, and play a song,
so someone walking by can hear it

You can
let yourself dream for all of our sake

You can buy ice cream for the local kids,
and relish their satisfied look
because saving ourselves is also what we must do

Alright, I'm broken open tonight,
on account of a madman
plowing into a crowd in Nice,
and the shooting in Baton Rouge,
and the one in St. Paul,
and the one in Dallas,
and this is the best I can do right now,
but there's something to what I say,

if you care to look -

Instead of studying war, and retaliation,
barricading ourselves with thoughts of the enemy
we can stand exposed
like the lions that came before us

There are so many ways to save someone's life
and if you are awake,
it's all you aim to do

A doctor would not ask
about the right or wrong you have done

A doctor would not ask before agreeing to see you
about your gender, age, race, religion or sexual orientation

Simply, if you are in pain, he wants to help

A doctor would not ask how much money you have,
or how you're going to pay,

or what political party you belong to

instead, he welcomes you with open hands,
an attentive heart

You are the reason he wakes in the morning
and leaves his home before dawn

You are the reason he set out on his journey to become capable

Just this alone:
to see you well
to ease the way for you

Volunteers needed
to go to the hell realms -

battlefields,
places of devastation
haunted places

destinations
created by the minds of those
who know only greed,
confusion,
fear, paranoia
violence -

The work
is changing all those minds
and freeing them from suffering

This work will go for eons if needed

The cost to you:
You will suffer while there.
You will be scorned and ridiculed for your choices.
and it will leave you time for little or nothing else.

The advantages:
You will be eternally supported and loved by those who care for the lost
and the abandoned

You will be doing the essential
work.

Apply now.
You are needed.

Why I live by the edge of the river

Darkness approaches,
and with it a cold wind
You struggle to hold the rope,
and listen for the sound of help

This is why I live by the edge of the river
to wrap my arms around you,
and keep you from the dark currents

I was one almost taken,
and would have been
if not for someone reaching out,
so now all that's left
is the will to see you safe
and with your kin,
given the food set out for you

Everyone reached
goes on in some way
feeding our greater family
pulling ashore those who can be taken hold of
and venturing out farther still
to wild places,
to bring them all home

You do not need to ask,

Seeing the stranger, will you let him in?

Seeing the wounded, the outcast,
will you tend to him?

All the hungry families, and children,
our flowing rivers, our breath moving over this earth -

Already I have answered you

Already my decision has been made

Let there be no doubt -

Let the others exclude,
Let them turn their backs,
amuse and indulge themselves endlessly -
no matter

They don't have the eyes to see
or the ears to hear the cries of the world

but some few are here for just that purpose

to carry those too weak to walk, or stand

to shelter the homeless,

to clothe and feed the poor close to them
and however far the need may reach

to lift up the downcast,
and forge a way out of the wilderness

and everyone healed becomes a worker in time

(and everyone healed becomes a worker in time)

These are settled matters for some

They need no convincing

They are the first ones out the door in the morning,
or else they are those

who keep a clear, unwavering lamp burning through the night

Though we've not met face to face,

we delight in each other's company,

we lend strength and encouragement to each other

We partake of the feast together at harvest time,

invisible to some, but including all the world

If you can't take anymore
and you're under your bed, trembling
move over a little, make room, will you,
let me join you, c'mon

And If you've drawn the curtains
and stayed under the covers
as another day has risen and set
I will keep up this song outside your window
of the endless beauty of the world,
inviting you
for as long as it takes

That is my promise

I'll be the one who comes in and cleans and cooks for you
and then leaves with fresh food on your table,
for when you are ready to come out

Like this
A song lingers in the air
the feeling of melody and a dance remains

this embrace, remember

Because I've been this one too,
I set myself to enter those dreams and nightmares
and your visions on waking

I pray I will always be beside
those at the bedside

That I will always be next to those, alone,
in fear of losing their beloved,
praying like never before

My arms are around you, even now,
on this day, the worst day of your life

My heart is with you today,
and will be with you when you wake later,
after small, disordered rest

It's my hands with yours, preparing the food you don't want,
and the drink you take from a million miles away

No words can express your fear, and your grief, I know,
so only these few will be offered, containing worlds

You who are alone,
time is non-existent for you, I know

you're yearning for even one more day together,
for more of this precious life together

Quaking at the shock of it, surrounded by relatives,
holding you upright as you wait for the doctors

I am there too, I am with you,
catching your tears as they fall, breathing with you
one breath at a time

I will always be there with you, in these trials
invisible, except this

To those who are spending this,
their first Christmas without their child
For those alone for the first time without their beloved
or looking into the eyes of your love,
trying to wish back tears as you exchange gifts
knowing this will be your last winter together
Come, let us join hands
gather around this table
and send love around the circle

Come, stranger,
you are not a stranger to me anymore
Come, friend
let us pass our great life giving love around this circle,
love born of understanding grief
born knowing separation
we cannot reach anymore with our hands
we have to do something with the power in this heart
Come, let us heal each other

Come, join the circle
where love finds the full expression of its nature
Let us give all we have in us to give
heal ourselves and each other
touch with a sublime power to caress all the hurt
Compassion
our new family

This ragged commoner,
with a table set up in the rain,
serving soup,
handing off little cuttings from the garden

bleary eyed,
but my hands and feet at least know how to do this much,
and all of it comes from love,
and gratitude to my Noble teachers -
there's no way to say it all

and so, today, just this,

'till frozen hands,
and night falls,
and I stumble my way back home to rest

If I am to pass on from this world before we arrive together,
then let it be on this road, facing this direction

When I've lost all sense, and language,
and even the hope to see the dawn
then let at least this much be said of me -
that I didn't quit
that I never gave up

On my arm is my elder
and to my left and right, lifelong companions,
and new friends,
and I hear the young ones with us

but my breath is short
and my steps heavy now
until all I have left is the image in me
of where we are going
and where we belong, together

I've passed out and re-awakened so many times now on this road
that I've lost count
and always it's with the same phrase on my lips,
even before I can see where I am -

keep going

keep going

keep going...

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 take refuge in the Buddha,
 the Great Compassionate Teacher,
 I take refuge in the Dharma,
 in all the Liberating Teachings,
 and I take refuge in the Noble Sangha,
 the Enlightened Spiritual Community,
 the Great Assembly of Saints and Bodhisattvas

By this practice,
 just as my teachers before me have done,
 May I realize the state of Peace, Perfect Freedom, and Happiness,
 and Great Love, ~ the Mind of Enlightenment,
 and bring all others without a single exception
 to these very same states

{The concerns of all others are my concerns,
 is that not so?

For their sake, then}

May I accomplish this Path,

and,

May all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

Did you go outside today?
The sun triumphant
the wind blowing hard and soft
carrying scents everywhere
the whole world in conversation

new flavors met unexpected
kiss on the mouth
all new dance partners
tap and clap their own rhythm
invite you to rhyme with them

bouquets offered to you at every turn
hand painted plates with delicious
and simple fare too
all manner of hunger filled
giving power for the journey

Did you go outside?
Did you hear the music?
Did you watch the parade?

Did you meet your new love?

Did you snap chains?
birth salve?
give wings?

Did you?

Did you?

Did you carve a flute from a fallen tree
and play it on the spot?

Did you mail out hundreds of love letters?

Did you make life appear out of formless chaos?

Did you start spring rolling?

Did you write long verses on scraps of paper
because you couldn't find anything else to write on
and you couldn't wait anymore?

Did you?

Did you?

Composed and confident,
kissing embracing
holding up the world

Did you?

Did you?

Did you start something that will never end?
kick loose sticks from that river

Did you stand in front of tanks
as the world watched breathlessly
your heart bigger than all of them put together

Did you introduce yourself properly
with some before unimagined flower
because, after all,
what are we waiting for?

a day like this
sweeps by
and if you slept through it
you have my sympathies

but hey listen,
the fields, the sun
and beauties
are in secret conspiring
to outdo themselves with yet another new day

let's go out on the road to meet them
it won't be long now, I assure you

and our meeting it will overflow
reaching to heaven
covering all the earth

Winter dreams

On the cold pavement
I sleep fitfully,
dream of palaces
with fountains and gardens in the sun,
with music and friends
a soft bed to rest in
and more than enough food

buried
but beating on the coffin lid
this is the rrap of my knuckle-blows:

skin and bones
and from my delirium
spreading in space,
a banquet with friends and family

I am a man on fire
such that I am all flame
dreaming of gentle breezes blowing on my skin,
and shining pools beneath a waterfall –
these two halves in me meet like a thunderclap

poor, ugly, frightening,
I dream though of a celestial queen for me
here on earth

What can I do?
it's nature herself that dreams
that speaks
but she does so
in such extravagant terms!
so far from where I am

I am dull as stone
but still, some spark hides in my belly
and dreams of being a fountain of knowledge
for endless generations to come
and quench their thirst

a fading sound,
and from my broken form, a heap -
the sight and sound of me leaping,
running fast and far
heart racing, skin glistening in the sun

outcast, scorned,
in an alley alone
I mutter something about
taking my place at the family table
golden with renown

such dream sounds come from me at times

and then

for a moment
a single-eye sense of what I am
and who I am rises above all this
want and crying out
in me and in the world
and at once
I have many mouths
all calling
calling
calling for rain
with nothing left out

My part of the dream-cry somehow finds
the greater voice
the greater prayer
with no one and nothing left out
a creative word
a vast call

and I am everything not yet born

I am the power of hope

I am the power of prayer

I am the tide in the chest

I am a blazing message

*I am the peace that calls out
right in the midst of wars*

*I am the secret prayers spoken by millions
the sound of rending the shell of earth
for new earth to appear*

I am the will to be born

These things move and turn in me
and such is this world
upheld,
and turning
on the axis of prayer

And so I wait on the still water,
blanketed in clouds
once there was a full day all around me
that reached right to my very breast
and I saw where we are and where we need to go
but it's faded now and I'm back again
emptied of language and sense

and so I mourn
and it's a song I send out on the water
I strain to lift even one sail
frozen hands on the rock hard rope
bracing to remember what's likely to move
my chained and set anchored heart
even a little
I can't move
tho it stirs in me under this heavy night

I raise one sail and try again to see
even a little more of who we are and who we can become
if there will be a vision that breaks through

Like seeing breath, like seeking birth,
I know that we need to move,
and I'm determined, my only sense,
but I find I'm feeble, almost without a voice now,
and left with only prayer

I want an ear to hear the bombs falling
to hear mothers and fathers' anguished cry
to hear the cries of lost children
to hear the prayers of the helpless

My shroud's a weight
but something in me reaches through it all
to hear your secret heartbeat
and to join with you in your flood of tears

I want an arm to raise the banners with you in protest and to
see
how it's the only purposeful action we have among us
the rest of it being only so much idle waste,
fragments of a whole, that resist seeing

I need to recollect that original voice
that told me this story long before the world was born
seeing all the different colors
and knowing them
as one vibrancy,
one movement

Some day soon
the breadth and the depth of it I will know again
and I will sing it out for you
but until then
I lay down in my small boat

and rest in the center of this vast ocean
I set down my oars and struggle
and let the tides and wind carry me
better than I know

dreaming of perfection
has kept me restless
in my misshapen turn

forces incomprehensible speech
from my lips
and has me refusing food
and offers of rides on the darkening road

I'm a stranger in this world
and the next
but intimate with all those who also feel they don't belong

watching this rise and fall
obeying the order that reaches deep
and spreads far
there's power in not getting in the way
of rivers touching many strange and wonderful births

Parents praying for their children
children praying for their parents
brothers praying for their sisters and brothers and in-laws
sisters praying for their brothers

dear friends praying for their dear friends
compassionate helpers praying for another
today, right now

people praying for themselves –
reaching for light, and peace, and safety

saints and kind hearted people with some freedom
praying for the whole world, and all life in it

their cries reach for the heavens themselves
and who would not be moved if they heard them?,
and hearing, who would not give their whole heart
and every breath
to join in their prayers?

for the life and health of their child
parent
sister, brother
friend, loved one
to ease their suffering
to ease their fears
to give them breath

O, may it be so!

If we had eyes to see the raised marks
carried by our neighbors,
by the stranger,
and those on our own body,
the layers of being wounded,
we would turn at once to find a cure for it all

Beneath the rage, and fear
beneath the horror, and grief,
beneath the despair that this will never end,
there is a voice that calls to us...

and right here
is where we will work to see it all
and heal it all...

right here is the ground of all our work

we must all become the full cure now,
if it is named, compassion
that goes to the root of devastation,
right to the buried heart of every tyrant,
and view that gave birth to them
and there marks the beginning
of the world we long to see

A Wednesday poem

Stand -

strength to all my brothers and sisters

How do you stand up to grief?

Grief for loss, for what's going on today in our world,
flushed out remnants of an old order,
and for all the missed chances and failures
compounding

What form does your savior take *today*?

As for myself,

I'm so dense so much of the time
that it the likes of Boccherini and
Beethoven
to lift me out of the mire
and set me dancing again
for no less than Yo Yo Ma to take my hand
and waltz me about the room
to take down the grimy walls
and lead me out into the open again

Protests and border children

blockaded people
militarized police who don't know any other way to act,
my own childish culture

almost completely
wrapped up with itself
burrowing into their little devices

and then I remember like some bolt through an immense night
Ella Baker and what she stood for
a heroine re-discovered
who I find has been with me all along
a human rights activist
blazing clear and strong even now

All my family,
answer every day
how do we keep from becoming
what Rumi called the bits of hair and bone left on the roadside?
He responded like this

*Let me show you one tiny corner
of the beauty
that cannot be spoken*

When I'm weak,
she carries me, this woman almost no one has heard of
she and the all-in young people who came before
who didn't know what they were getting themselves into
but who went South anyway
leading with their hearts

this so-short time cries
for the light of your soul
for the medicine of what is ever new
and ever fresh,
ever effective

because I can't
we can't
afford to be submerged too long

but in making of these ruins
something altogether new
all this beauty that's come before and that will be
reaches it's hand out to you
and says
won't you come dance now?

Bankers run out into the street
and fling handfuls of dollars
shouting, *'There's more where that came from!'*

Merchants kick open the doors to their stores,
arms holding as much as they can carry,
and push what they have through the open windows of
passing cars

People are wandering around with
pieces of delicious cake in their hands, saying,
'Here, take a bite...'

What's going on here? Just for today (or is it?)
nobody's trying to turn a profit- no one's trying to sell
anything

The whole city stayed awake all night
trying to figure out ways to help others

Cabbies and bus drivers won't accept fares
food is served - no bills are due
No checks accepted - no credit cards
Everyone's giving away what they have!
Has the whole world gone sane?!

All the ad-men have found another line of work
and today, all the sponsors will say is,

'Come on down! Free gifts! No strings attached!...'

It's a wonder - Ha!

Everybody's getting rich

You can see it on their faces

and people are saying,

'Why didn't we think of this before?!...'

Sanctuary

night and storm
and desperation outside
brought me to a heavy door

I pressed and it opened
to the feeling of quiet, and safety,
and it is daytime inside

A few steps in,
and the space opens,
and it is greater than the world outside

There is no way to say it, really,
but at least this much has to be said:

how there is beauty in sanctuary,
and what we know outside
is its dim reflection

how we wake and see both sides,
how we are known and held close
with a word, or a glance;

and are invited to the unhurried,
vital work that is going on all the time:
of edifice building,

of symphony shaping,
of restorative transmission
of inspiration
this luminous bond across generations

skrying hand held mirrors,
mountain sages
and underground streams feed
festivals pulsing with healing intent

from the shelter of community,
a declaration of peace

Of necessity, self arisen,
new languages
speak of the light among us

During the night it must have rained
The wells are filled,
the taps that had gone dry,
and covered over with weeds
are suddenly running again with pure, clear water

In all our churches, and temples,
mosques and synagogues,
in all the remote and lonely places,
again there is fresh water
to wash away the anger and the despair,
and to renew ourselves with

Dust off the scriptures,
put on your best clothes,
make your favorite family recipe to carry with you,
to meet

I can hear the streams arriving next door,
flowing down the street,
and to the next town over...

We wander out of our homes this morning, stunned,
and embrace our long lost brother and sister

Word goes out -
the ones we thought lost to us
have returned!

Send out riders to be sure
no one's left out
Carry this up mountains,
and down alleys
Take it into prisons and crowded hospitals -

Let everyone know from your hands
what we have received

Archeology

This work is not like building,
with cranes and back-hoes
and trucks coming and going -

it is more like
unearthing a temple made of light
that has always been here,
right beneath where we are now

A vast edifice,
a pristine refuge,
translucent, imperishable,
thrilling to behold,
and restorative to enter for a time

My part here
is not to add,
or even advertise
There's no need to adorn the bright flowers,
the flowing waters,

or concern myself with when the guests will arrive-
at all times, day and night,
they arrive and depart,

miss it completely,
or see it and exult

Here, the notes of celestial musicians
do not fade,
flowers do not lose their color,
food on the tables is always fresh,

and printed and sung invitations
are going out all the time,
becoming new languages as they travel,
to re-awaken the sense of our first family

to mark the difficult passage
with lamps, and bread,
and trustworthy guides

caretakers who birth salve in their palm,
and new cups of cool water to calm fever,
and return people to themselves

Even seen from afar,
a city of light
moves people to noble actions
that spread across the earth

For further reading and listening

Metta and Readings on the Mahayana

Mahayana Prayers and Poetry, text; and Audio;

On youtube

On the Wisdom Aspect

Opening the Door to Pure Perception

On Devotion and Receiving Blessings

Essays on Buddhist Prayer