The Bodhisattva & Power of Intention

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:01:18

The day that this hall opened, this bell appeared. It was a gift from Zen Center. We kind of wanted a bell, and then this great big beautiful bell just appeared. "Oh yes, you need this," from your friends at Zen Center. I love it. I could just sit and ring it. In fact, I do.

And the other thing that appeared the day we opened was that beautiful carpet out there. A friend who deals in carpets came up. I said, "Come look at our new space." And he said, "Oh, I've had this carpet for a long time, saved for something. I don't know what. Let me try it out up here." He unrolled it, and it was like people just started to pour in gifts for this place. And now, sixteen or seventeen years later, there have been 2.6 million meditation hours in this room. You added your frequent flyer meditation miles. It's such a marvelous and special thing to have a temple that people can come and learn in the way that you have.

So tonight I want to continue the theme of identity and particularly talk about the identity of the Bodhisattva.

This evening, that kind of mist and the rain—like out of one of those beautiful ancient Chinese watercolors.

The question people have is: How to leave the temple? Going back to work, to family, to relationships, to the society and world and to the elections and all of the madness that's out there—and beauty.

There are just a few simple things to remember. The first: you've learned, as you've sat and walked, to not be so judgmental. Your mind has a mind of its own. It's a little bit mad sometimes, you may have noticed—and not just in the angry way, but in the madness way. It has no pride. And to remember not to judge yourself and not to judge others. It's really a treasure to walk through the world in this way.

During my first year of teaching, a girl named Shay was assigned to my middle school seventh grade class. She was a desperately unhappy child and rebelled against the most basic rules, such as stay in your seat, raise your hand to speak. Shay and I battled for control of the classroom. I tried every technique I knew—behavioral contracts, praise, reprimands—none of them worked. I even called Shay's home every week, but no one answered. She lived with and was being raised by an older sister.

I went to the school counselor, who said I'd done my duty and offered to transfer Shay to another classroom. I declined. Shay was my student, and I wasn't going to pass her on to someone else. In the faculty lounge, the older teachers patted me on the back, thankful they didn't have Shay in their classroom.

June finally came. On the last day of school, Shay was quick to head out the door. As I sat contemplating my failure with her, she walked back in. "Oh great," I thought, "one last act of terrorism." In Shay's hand was a small bowl, the kind that students make in ceramics class. She thrust it into my grasp. "Here," she said, "it's the only thing I could think of to give you." I turned the slightly misshapen bowl over and saw Shay's initials etched on the bottom. "Thanks for trying to like me," she said. And before I could speak, she turned and left.

After several more years of teaching, I went on to become a school principal and now a superintendent. Shea's bowl has never left my desk. "Thanks for trying to like me."

As I believe I said in the first talk, from Nelson Mandela: it never hurts to see the good in someone. They often act the better because of it.

And so there is something that's not even personal. It's something bigger than taking the experiences that we have personally. It's allowing yourself to become a stream of benevolence. "Thanks for trying to like me." You leave with great powers. It's quite wonderful. You leave with the powers of mindfulness and compassion, and with them a particular key—a key that's central to the awakening of the Buddha, to Buddhist psychology—which is the key of wise intention.

Karma, that oft-used word that has all kinds of meanings and mis-meanings. You hear the advertisement on the radio: "Please come to this used car dealer in Berkeley because it's his karma to give you cars at the lowest possible price." Your karmic misfortune if you believe him, or whatever. But what does karma really mean? There are many ways to understand it. But at its simple essence, kamma vipaka—karma, cause and result, action and result—comes down to one simple thing: karma is created by intention.

So if you get in your car in the driveway and you pull out and crash into the next door neighbor's house, through the hedge and into their living room, because you are so furious that they cut down all those beautiful trees along the property line, and also that they called the pound on your dog because it went over and did its duty on their lawn, and they tried to get it confiscated, and they did terrible things—and you're just enraged and you do that—the little blue lights will join you, and the police will take you away, and you'll have to deal with the consequences of that violent act.

But if you do the exact same act—you pull out of your driveway and crash through the hedge and into the living room of your neighbor—because the gas pedal stuck, one of those models where that happens, and you couldn't stop it, instead of arrest for your action, even though the neighbor might be upset, there will also be sympathy. "Are you hurt? Are you okay? What can we do? How do we fix all of this?" Exact same action: car, hedge, crash into the house, you at the wheel. The only difference was the intention. Your intention is that which creates the unfolding of your life and your karma.

If you study all the texts that talk about dying, the moment of death, there's weighty karma and habitual karma and proximate karma and random karma—all these kinds of karma. But the most powerful one, or

the most significant one, is the habitual karma. What we practice becomes who we are next.

Tomorrow morning we'll talk about ways to support mindfulness and compassion in your daily life—daily practice, community, retreat, and so forth. To be able to pay attention to your karma, or your intention if you will, takes mindfulness. It takes care, which is why you practice. There's no such thing as a one-walk dog, right? You have your dog, and every morning you walk your dog, and hopefully every day also you do your mindfulness practice.

So the key in relationship, in work, in action, is intention. There are both short-term and long-term intentions. Short-term intention can be most usefully described, when you work with it as a practice, as the mindful pause. There you are in the middle of a conversation with your beloved, and there comes to be a little bit of friction—which doesn't happen very often, but could happen even with such enlightened people as ourselves. Couldn't it? I suppose.

And when you find yourself in conflict, in relationship, or in work, or in other circumstances, if you can take a single breath or two, make a little space of pause, and ask yourself, "What is my best intention here? What is my highest? What's my best intention?"—all of a sudden, things will change. Because how you respond or speak matters. You can say, "What did you mean?" in a kind of upset, angry way, where you're trying to be right and be strong and defend yourself. Or you can say, "What did you mean? I want to understand."

You want to listen. You want to learn. There's a caring in it. The tone of voice and the intention to understand versus to barricade and be right takes the conversation in entirely different directions.

Or you're about to answer that email or that text where someone sent you something and there's some concern, some conflict. You look and you take a breath, a mindful pause, and you read it and say, "What's my best intention?" Oh, I want to get along, I want to solve this, I care about this person. Usually it's true—even "I love this person." Then you really say, "I think I'll change a couple of words there. I'll soften the language. Make it a little more connecting before I press send."

Do you understand this? It's not so complicated. To have a mindful pause is making space in which you can then see with the heart and not with the habit of reactivity.

You know when you build a fire—there's this beautiful poem about it: "What makes a fire burn is the space between the logs, the breathing space. Too much of a good thing, too many logs packed in too tight, can squelch the fire as quickly as water." So there's something about making space. It makes a huge amount of difference.

When I was in the middle of what was a painful divorce—there are apparently some divorces that aren't painful, but they're in the minority—dealing with the lawyers and things after a long marriage, it was quite difficult. I was very devoted. But it became clear that we had different needs, and my ex really didn't want to stay married. I'm quite loyal and I would have, but she didn't want to. When it came to dividing

everything and various other things, it was pretty painful. Meeting with lawyers was not easy. She was very concerned and worried, which fueled things more.

I would go in, and I would take a breath—or two, or ten. Then I would envision that on one arm was Quan Yin, compassion, and on the other was the Buddha, great equanimity and wisdom, and we would go in together. I would sit down, and by taking the breath and bringing in the Buddha and Quan Yin, I was so much better off than if I'd gone in alone.

It was all because I took the breath and asked, "What is my best intention?" and let me get support for this. You can imagine some difficulty in your life. What would happen if you brought the goddess of compassion and the Buddha—or whoever it is—in with you? Makes it easier, it turns out. They handle it better. They have both concern and listening and tenderness. There's a lot of equanimity. And also a kind of courage—a courage to be present without reactivity.

There's a line I love: "To me, there's no greater act of courage than being the one who kisses first." I'd call it the courage to forgive. There's something really brave about saying, "Alright, I'm here and I'm present and I will tend to what needs to be done, but I'll do it with an open heart." All that comes with a simple pause and asking, "What's my best intention? What's my highest intention?"

Now the other dimension of intention, cetanā, is long-term intention. Long-term intention is a way of setting the compass of the heart, setting the direction of your life toward some north star that really matters to you.

Star is a good image for me to use because when I was a kid, one of the things I liked to do was go out and lie on the grass on a clear night and look at the stars. But what was fun for me was to imagine that I was on the bottom of the earth. Because there really isn't a top and bottom, you know. The maps were made by certain people who thought they should be on top—mostly European white folks who put themselves there.

But there isn't, actually. There's no top or bottom. And I would imagine I was at the bottom, stuck onto the earth by the magnet of gravity, holding on so I didn't fall down. Then I would look down into the sea of stars. There was this kind of little thrill that would come because I'm holding on and I'm not going to fall down into it. But it was marvelous to do.

And there's something about long-term intention in which you sense the vastness of time—not an election cycle, not the rise and fall of a business, not concerns for individuals and people that you love, though all those matter. But they're all taking place in the turning of the seasons and the vastness of the solar system and the galaxies and the enormity of space and time unfolding.

Long-term vows. When you sit in Zen, when you go to a Zen center, or before you do your meditation, you put your hands together in some way or other. "Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to save them all." It's the first of these four vows. "Desires are endless. I vow to master them"—or overcome them, or

whatever you want to do with them. And so forth. There are these extraordinary vows of the Bodhisattva. Beings are numberless. I vow to save them all.

Now there's a little problem with this that I've often mentioned when I talk about it. And that is that the beings that you know personally don't want to be saved by you. You might notice that in your family and in your community. So it has to have some other kind of meaning. And it does.

Listen to this bodhisattva vow from Shantideva that the Dalai Lama recites every morning when he wakes up: "May I be a bridge, a boat, a raft to ferry those across the flood. May I be food for the hungry. May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be a lamp in the darkness for all who are lost. May I be medicine for those who are ill. May I be the light that brings awakening to beings. For as long as beings exist, time and space, beyond all that, until all beings are awakened together, may I carry on this work of serving all beings."

Some little vow like that, something like that in the morning. But what's beautiful, if you listen to it, is it's not about saving the person next to you in some kind of misguided way. It's saying, "I set my heart in the direction of compassion for myself and all beings, no matter what happens." The sun can rise in the west, the bodhisattva has only one way, which is the way of compassion, no matter what happens.

One of my favorite examples—and a story I like to tell about this—Trudy and I got to see him this last year when we were teaching together in Singapore. There's a wonderful elder in Sri Lanka named A.T. Ariyaratne. He came to this wisdom conference in Singapore. There were all kinds of great speakers, both spiritual and corporate heads and government people. And then there was Ari, who was like having the Dalai Lama arrive—just a different energy.

Ariyaratne, who's now eighty-four or eighty-five, started a movement called Sarvodaya in which he became the master of service and community development in Sri Lanka. Digging wells, building schools, creating roads, making community for more than half the villages in the entire country. And he said, "We're not in it to build schools or dig wells or make roads. We're in it to make people love one another." That's really why we're doing this. And that intention underneath is what made it work.

But in the middle of a peace accord that was faltering during their recent civil war, Ari called all his followers together to the great temple at Anuradhapura, and 650,000 people came. This is in a country of only eighteen million people. They all gathered there. And he said, "We need to support peace in our country after the civil war. And so what I would like to present to you is the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan."

He said, "In Buddhist teachings we understand that we should look not just to the results, but to the causes and conditions. And if we look deeply, we can see that it's taken 500 years to create our suffering. Four hundred years of colonial oppression from the British, 500 years of conflict between Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists, 200 years of economic disparity between the rich wet parts and the poor dry parts."

So he said, it took 500 years to get into this conflict. And what I propose is the 500-year peace plan, because that's how long it will take us to undo it. Five years of ceasefire. Ten years of rebuilding roads and schools. Twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religions. Fifty years of an economic program to develop the poorest parts from the richest parts. And every hundred years we'll have a grand council to see if we're going in the right direction, tune it, and then we'll do it again for another hundred years. Within 500 years, we can solve this problem.

I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama at one point when I was giving some teachings at a place where he was. And I partly did it because I thought he would like it, because he's in the same position with Tibet—all kinds of terrible things have happened—and to have the long view. Here was somebody who didn't care about the next election cycle, or what was going to happen between one faction or another. He said, this is the direction we go. Ceasefire, peace, caring for one another, even if it takes 500 years. The Dalai Lama, of course, was very happy to hear it, and they're buddies anyway.

So the bodhisattva is a being who is committed to compassion and tending life in all its forms, no matter what—compassion and freedom. And there are all kinds of modern bodhisattva vows. "May I put down the guns, bandage the wounds, carry the water, and share the bread." There's a modern bodhisattva vow.

Or Diane Ackerman—I have always loved this poem: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, and an architect of peace."

So you set your heart in a direction, the compass of your heart, with your own bodhisattva vows. And then—the important and interesting thing, and the secret; you've sat all these days and now you get the secret—the secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of your actions. To plant beautiful seeds in the world and trust that sooner or later those seeds will bear fruit.

This is Thomas Merton again, Christian mystic. "Do not depend on the hope of results," he writes to a disillusioned activist. "You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all—if not, perhaps at times bring about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And you don't get to choose how it's going to come out. I have this card that I got when we were traveling in Asia, in some pretty remote and not terribly modernized place. They put this card on our bed in this particular hotel. It said, "Dear Guests, it is our pleasure to provide you with a stamped postcard for sending out to your loved ones around the world. Please leave card at the desk or receptionist after filling up the address and your greetings. We will gladly mail for you. Note: due to poor postage system, your postcard may take some time to reach, or even may not always reach to your address. Hotel management."

So you fill it out and you put it in the mail and it gets somewhere—who knows where it gets, right? But the secret of it, and it turns out, is that you don't know what the results will be. That's not what's given to you.

I saw this documentary that the BBC had done on the siege of Leningrad at the end of World War II—three years in which more than half a million people died. Just horrendous. And there was an old woman they were interviewing who lived in Leningrad. She'd been a child during the siege. She described how terrible it was. And as she talked, she said, "Here, I have something else to show you." And she walked down this narrow corridor in her apartment.

She had this sort of railroad apartment. And she said, "When I was seven or eight, during the siege, and the food was so scarce, we would stand in a bread line once a week and they'd give us a piece of bread. It was a rainy day and there was ice on the streets, kind of slippery. I came out carrying the bread and I fell into the mud, and the bread fell with me and got all muddy. I was sitting there in the rain with the bread in the mud. And a woman walked out, an older woman, and she came over to me, helped me up, and she tore her bread in half and gave me half of her bread."

And she said, "Here, look." She opened her cabinet and took out this ceramic bowl and opened it. Inside, wrapped in a blue napkin, was a little piece of that bread. She said that gift, that act from that woman, is what kept them alive. And it wasn't the bread. It was that spirit that kept them alive through all those years.

So it doesn't have to be big things. It's the moment of your intention and your action. And what you start to feel—and you have been empowered to know this—is a shift of identity. Many of you have been rather loyal to your suffering. You know what I mean? And that's okay. You have to suffer it and grieve it and experience it. But my mother would say something in Yiddish: "Enough already." It's time to let go and not to live your life or your meditation as a grim duty.

The dark of the night has its purpose. Know that you are not alone and that this darkness has its purpose. Gradually it will school your eyes to find the gift your life requires hidden in this night corner, illuminating your heart. That's from a poem by John O'Donohue.

You have suffered. Everybody's suffered. Use it well. Instead of being loyal to it, go through it and let it empower you to care for yourself and others in a deeper and more beautiful way. For its true purpose is to open the great heart of compassion in you.

And then you can do what my friend Malidoma Somé, a West African shaman and medicine man, describes in this beautiful West African metaphor: then you can deliver your cargo. He says among the Dagara people, they believe that every being who is born is given a certain cargo to deliver to the earth—your particular gift, your art, your love, your voice, your connection, whatever it is. And the only thing that satisfies you in the fulfillment of your human incarnation is to deliver your cargo.

I love the metaphor. It's very West African—cargo ships and canoes on the river, all of that water culture.

So to deliver your cargo, there are a few things that are important if you're not so caught in your own suffering.

One is—and there's a beautiful new book by the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu called *The Book of Joy*. A friend of ours helped bring them together in Dharamsala. Bishop Tutu flew there, and they spent a week together talking about how they could be happy even amidst the sufferings of their lives. It's really fun to read parts of it because they tease each other constantly. Tutu is eighty-five, I think, and the Dalai Lama is eighty. They're really good buddies.

When Tutu arrived from the airport, there were all these people with flags and banners. And Tutu said, "Oh, thank you for getting all your people out to welcome me." And the Dalai Lama says, "No, no—they were out for me." Then they start bickering. And Tutu says, "Stop it! We're supposed to be holy men. Look, the camera's on."

So the Dalai Lama is saying, "The problem is that our world and our education remain focused on external, materialistic values. We're not concerned enough with the inner values of the heart." And Tutu responds, "It's difficult to follow your profound pronouncements."

I thought you were going to say that in fact when you're pursuing happiness you're not going to find it. It's very elusive. You don't find it by saying, I'm going to forget about everything else and just pursue happiness. There's the title of a book by C.S. Lewis called *Surprised by Joy*, which I think expresses how it works.

Many people look at you, Tutu continues, and they think of all the awful things that have happened to you. Nothing can be more devastating than being exiled from your home, from the things precious to you, and having the families and people you knew imprisoned or killed. And yet when people come to you, they experience someone who has a wonderful serenity, a beautiful compassion, a mischievousness.

That's the right word, the Dalai Lama says. I don't like too much formality.

Don't interrupt me, Tutu says. Stop that, you know.

Oh, the Dalai Lama says, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, you know.

It's wonderful to discover that what we want is not actually happiness, Tutu goes on. It's not what I would speak of. I would speak of joy. Joy is a far greater thing. Think of a mother who's going to give birth. Almost all of us want to escape pain, and mothers know they're going to have great pain of giving birth, but they accept it. And even after the most painful labor, once the baby is out, you can't measure the mother's joy. A mother can be dead tired from work, worn down by all of the things that have worried her, and then her child is ill. That mother will not remember her exhaustion. She sits by the bedside of her child the night through, and when the child gets better, you see that joy.

So the Dalai Lama says, so much has been taken from me—my home, the temples. They've burned our

texts, they've locked up the lamas, and so forth. Why should I also let them take my happiness?

To become a bodhisattva doesn't mean that it's a grim duty. In fact, your gift, what you offer, your cargo, is best offered with joy, best offered with a smile. Even if you go to work in the worst places—and the bodhisattvas sometimes willingly put themselves in the realms that are most difficult, saying, "I'll go there"—it doesn't help to be morose when you do it. It doesn't help anybody. It helps when you're able to be there and express a love that is not limited by the circumstances themselves.

Also, it can't be done by imitation. In this vast universe which now, as Wes was describing, has been recently found to have two trillion galaxies—they added a trillion or more recently to their count—there's never been anyone like you. Ever. Isn't that far out? Life created something completely different and unique in yourself.

Puanani Burgess, an educator in Hawaii, tells this story. One of the practices I like to use, I call "building the beloved community," like Martin Luther King's phrase. And there's an exercise to do this that requires people to tell three stories. The first is the story of your name. The second, the story of your community. And the third is to tell the story of your gift.

Once I did this process with a group in our local high school. We went around the circle and got to this young man, Kele. He told the story of his name well. He told the class the story of his community well. But when it came time to tell the story of his gift, he asked, "What, miss? What kind of gift you think I get, eh? I stay in the special ed class. I get a hard time read. I can't do no math. Why you make me shame for? Asked that kind of question. What kind gift you think I have? If I had gift, you think I'd be here?"

Kele had shut down and shut up, and I felt really ashamed. All the time I've done this, I've never shamed anyone before.

Two weeks later, I'm in our local grocery store and I see him down one of those aisles. I see his back and I turn around. Nope, I'm not going there.

And I start to back away, trying to get away from him. Then he turns around and sees me and throws his arms open and says, "Auntie, Auntie, I've been thinking about you, you know. Two weeks I've been thinking, what my gift, what my gift."

I say, "Okay, brother, what your gift?"

He says, "You know, I've been thinking, thinking. I cannot do the math stuff and I cannot read good, Auntie. But when I stay in the ocean, I can call the fish. And the fish, he come every time. Every time I can put food on my family table. Every time. And sometime I stay in the ocean and the shark, he comes. And he look at me and I look at him and I tell him, Uncle, I'm not going to take plenty fish. I just take one, two fish just for my family. All the rest I leave for you. And so the shark, he say, oh, you cool, brother. And I tell the shark, Uncle, you cool. And the shark, he go his way and I go my way."

I look at this boy Kaylee, and I know what a genius he is. But in our society, the way the schools and education are run, he's rubbish. He's destroyed, not appreciated. So when I talked to his teacher and the principal, I asked them all: What would his life have been? What would our life be if our curriculum, if our education, if our community were based on the gifts that we can give to one another?

You each have this. You are unique. And you have to trust that you have something beautiful to offer. Somerset Maugham said there are three rules for writing the great English novel—unfortunately, no one knows what they are. No one can tell you how to do this, but you set your heart in the right direction, and moment by moment, being present, you plant the seeds of beauty.

And you can't be idealistic about it. In my industry, I get to be with lots of swamis and mamas and lamas and gurus and things like that. They have marvelous teachings and all kinds of benefits. And because they're human, they all have their foibles. Wes tells a story about a great Dzogchen master who's a friend of mine, really afraid to fly in airplanes. He can sit there and tell you to make your mind like sky, but when he's in the airplane in the sky, it's much harder for him. We talked about trauma work for him.

Even the Dalai Lama—Wes tells a story of riding in this little plane from Dharamsala back to Delhi on the edge of the Himalayas. It's bumpy, and the Dalai Lama says he's afraid of flying. Behind Wes is the Dalai Lama with his robe over his head and his people looking up. We're just human.

So the idea isn't to be somebody else. As I said in the first talk, the point isn't to perfect yourself—it's to perfect your love. And trust. Trust that you have the great powers of mindfulness, compassion, loving awareness, and forgiveness. You have them now. They are yours. And you've learned to trust that the heart is big enough to hold the whole world—to hold your tears and sorrow and love and longing and joy and expressions. All of it. And your neurosis. Oh, what a great example of neurosis that is. Thank you. Yes.

The bodhisattva is unafraid to love. There's been so much anti-Muslim rhetoric, so much prejudice and hatred. The greatest peace army the modern world has ever seen was in the 1930s in what was known as the Northwest Frontier Province, which is now part of Pakistan and Afghanistan, organized by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Over one hundred thousand men, warriors, all devout Muslims, vowed to resist British rule without weapons in their hands or violence in their hearts.

They kept their vow despite great provocation and many killings. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was a good friend of Gandhi's. It's an amazing thing to think that what we see as this dangerous place, and people upon whom we project our fears—but really, what that speaks to is the dignity of the human spirit. If you give human beings something that is great and beautiful to do, they will rise to it.

So being unafraid to love as the bodhisattva, no matter what.

Wes also went to interview Gary Snyder, a great environmentalist now in his mid-eighties, Pulitzer Prize winner, author of *Earth Household* and many other works as an environmental visionary. He asked, "Gary, now that you see global warming, climate change, loss of species, what message do you have for us

at this time?"

And Gary said, "Don't feel guilty. If you're going to save it, don't save it out of guilt or anger. Too many burned-out activists. Save it because you love it." The other energies—guilt, anger—all those are part of the problem itself in consciousness. If you're going to save it, save it because you love it.

And that's the power of the bodhisattva, the power of love that lets mothers lift cars off their children.

I remember going to see Dipa Ma, this wonderful meditation master, a teacher of mine and Sharon's and Joseph's, in India. I visited her in Calcutta. I was having a hard time. I was a youngish teacher—I suppose I'd been teaching for six or seven years—and I was going through a period of some self-doubt and other kinds of struggles. I went to see her and get some teachings. After a couple of days with her—I'd been in Bodh Gaya before that and then visited her in her little apartment in Calcutta—she said, "Well, let Ma bless you before you go."

She was this tiny little person. And Bengalis hug—it's really great. She threw her arms around me. Then she began to bless me using her hands, whispering metta phrases and patting me all over my body for what must have been five or ten minutes. A long, long blessing. Metta, metta, metta, metta, metta. She was also a yogi with great concentration, deep meditation, and an amazing kind of presence. Then she said, "Okay, go with Ma's blessings."

So I walk out of the apartment and it's a hot day in Calcutta, and the streets are filled with honking taxis and ox carts, people pulling man-pulled rickshaws, people selling things. I go into this traffic jam, and it takes me two hours to get to Dum Dum Airport, which is the name of the Calcutta airport. Then I wait in line for two or three hours—the plane is always delayed, there's no air conditioning, it's sweltering—and finally I get on the plane. I fly to Bangkok, where I was going, and I get out and stand in long lines through Thai customs, and then it's a really hot season there, and the taxi's stuck in traffic.

And the whole time, I am just grinning. For three days, I couldn't stop smiling. Go with Ma's blessing. I was stoned on love.

The power of the bodhisattva is to take that love wherever you are. When we see suffering, we respond. That is the bodhisattva.

Barbara Widener, who founded Grandmothers for Peace, describes it this way: "I began to question what kind of world I'm leaving for my grandchildren. So I got a sign, 'A Grandmother for Peace,' and stood on a street corner. Then I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory"—because the U.S. is the largest exporter of weapons in the world. And then we worry that we're not safe. Crazy. "I joined others kneeling as a human barrier at a munitions factory. I was taken to prison, strip-searched, thrown into a cell. Something happened to me. I realized they couldn't do anything more to me. I was free."

And now Barbara and her organization, Grandmothers for Peace, works in dozens of countries around the

world.

So the bodhisattva is not afraid to love—both in the vast way, in politics, in the environment, in social justice, in Black Lives Matter, in care for global warming, and all the things that are on our collective conscience and weigh on our heart. And in the most personal way as well.

A man was talking to Nisargadatta, my teacher in Bombay, complaining about his mother who was abusive, not a very good mother, not caring. He goes on and on, and finally Nisargadatta just stops him and says, "Love your mother. Love her anyway."

The man looks at Nisargadatta and says, "She wouldn't let me."

And Nisargadatta just rests for a moment and says, "She couldn't stop you. No one can stop you. No one can stop your love."

And it's never too late. That's the beautiful thing. It's never too late to be a bodhisattva. It's never too late to love. You can start today—and right on the money. Perfect timing.

So in the face of racism and war and violence and fundamentalism, the bodhisattva has one direction, like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan—a kind of dignity and compassion and presence that will not harm yourself and will not harm another. And not only unafraid to love, but unafraid to be happy.

That's harder for some of you, I know that. Oh my God, is it okay to be happy? But I see in each one of you the child of the spirit. And if you do mudita, joy practice, one of the best ways to open the heart of joy is to vision people and see their happiest moment as a child, their best adventure. I mean, look around for a moment. Just take a peek at your fellow yogis. And when you look at somebody, imagine their best adventure as a girl or a boy—laughing, running, playing tag, doing whatever, some great adventure. That child of the spirit is there in every single one, just like the Dalai Lama and Tutu. They still have it.

I'm about to leave this retreat and go back to Boston to be with my twin brother who is back in the hospital with very difficult cancer treatment. And he's been really an inspiration for me. When we were eight years old and lived in Buffalo, where there's lots of snow, it was one winter day, freezing cold. We went out with our mittens and hats and coats. And I'm shivering—I was skinny as a rail and really shivering. He's much stockier and stronger and played football. I was in the orchestra and he played football. That just tells you how it was.

He watches me shake and shiver. And then he says, "It's not cold." And he takes his hat off. "It's not cold." He takes his scarf off. "It's not cold." He starts dancing. He takes his jacket off. Then he takes his shirt off. He strips to the waist. And he's dancing around in the snow with the wind blowing, saying, "Cold? It's just in your mind. It's not cold."

That's his spirit.

So a couple of years ago when my mom was ninety-one and she was dying, she was kind of drifting in and out of coma, in bed here in San Francisco, and my twin brother and my other two brothers were all there. And sometimes when she'd come back, we'd say, "Mom, what do you think about this? It looks like you're dying or you're letting go."

She said, "I wish I could be around more. I know people are going to go to Mars. They're going to go to other planets."

I wish I could see it. She had that little sense of adventure. So there she is, close to dying in the next day or two, and she's making little noises. Herb goes over and says, "Mom! You're going to go to the planets! You're on a rocket ship!" And he starts shaking her bed. "Come on, we're taking off! You're going to go!" Our mouths are hanging open—what are you doing? "Come on, Mom, you're going to go for a big ride!" He just has this irrepressible spirit. And there's something so compelling about carrying this as a bodhisattva.

This is a story of a woman who took her husband to the Mayo Clinic for an evaluation after he was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, which usually means just a couple of years until you die. "We heard a pianist playing in the crowded atrium and realized as we walked in that it was the first song we had ever danced to, and the song we chose to dance to at our wedding years and years before. Randall put down his briefcase filled with the doctor's reports and test results and took me in his arms and danced me all over that floor. And when it was over and folks were applauding, we became aware of how many people gathered around were in wheelchairs and walkers. We suddenly realized that in that spontaneous moment of celebration, we'd been dancing on behalf of the life and love that lived in each person gathered together in that place. We looked around the room, lined with those waiting in wheelchairs, and we found ourselves thinking of the pool of Bethesda. We imagined Jesus asking, 'Do you want to be healed?' We thought we heard him say, 'Then pick up your feet and dance.'"

So there's something that the bodhisattva also brings to the world—a kind of joy. "Now and then," writes Guillermo Pollaner, "it's good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

And Laurie Chapman gives this meditation instruction for when you go home. She says, "I like nothing more in the world than sitting on my ass doing nothing. And it's not my fault that I have this attitude because I happen to have an amazingly comfortable ass. It may not look like much, but if you could sit on this baby for two minutes, you'd realize that getting up off this ass would be a crime against nature."

So close your eyes for a little bit and do a reflection. If you were to create your own bodhisattva vow to guide your life, to set the direction of your heart through all the many seasons and changes that human incarnation brings, make it simple. If you were to set your heart and make a vow, it could be as simple as, "I vow to be kind." What would it be on this beautiful rainy evening at the end of a silent retreat? Listen to your heart.

Let your eyes open. And if you are inclined—not at this moment, but this evening—write it down. And if

you want to take it a step further, show it to someone else that you love. It's a very shy, tender thing to do, but you can say, "Oh, Jack told me I should do it." That gives you a little excuse. It's a beautiful thing because when you show it to someone, it's almost like you're saying out loud this, the heart of your bodhisattva intention.

From Mary Oliver, a poem called "The Buddha's Last Instruction." I think of this every morning. I think of the Buddha every morning as the east begins to tear off its many clouds of darkness, to send up the first signal—a white fan streaked with pink and violet, even green. An old man, he lay down between two sal trees, and he might have said anything knowing it was his final hour. Around him the villagers gathered and stretched forward to listen. No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head. He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd. "Make of yourself a light," he said. "Make of yourself a light."

That's it.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.