Active Hope

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 49:30

I love that song. It's my favorite, and Dave Carter wrote it—starting with that single cell, "This Is My Home," all the way through. And Donald, thank you for bringing in the Bodhisattva. When Paul said we can choose whether this is happening to us or for us, my response from deep within, without even thinking, is that it's for us. It's showing us what the Bodhisattva means.

We now have before us this work called *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy*. My favorite part is actually the subtitle. But I need to explain the "active hope" part, because if anybody here was working with me ten or twenty years ago—and I've been around quite a while—you might well remember me saying, "Hope is a killer. Hope is wishful thinking. Don't go there." I never would have imagined that I would write a book with hope in the title.

What I discovered in writing this is that hope is not something you have—it's something you do. It's not a noun; it's a verb. When you see it that way, then you can be doing hope even when you're not hopeful. I have found that this country, built as it is on dreams of manifest destiny and its own exceptionalism, has enshrined optimism to the point where you feel as if there's something wrong with you if you're not hopeful. Being hopeful and smiling becomes the sign of a successful, competent person. It's how you sell politicians and cars and anything. There's a tendency for us to be taking our pulse constantly: "Am I optimistic? Am I hopeful yet?" Thinking that you need to be hopeful in order to step forward for the sake of all beings.

Let me say right away that hope is loving, caring about your world, caring about it enough to step forward whatever you think of your competencies or whether you have a fail-proof plan or not. You probably have a better chance of going somewhere if you don't have a fail-proof plan—if you're just ready to take this next step, and after that, the next step afterwards.

This book was co-authored by Chris Johnstone, who is a physician in the United Kingdom, living in Bristol and now up in northern Scotland. He's not a Buddhist—not in Buddhist practice by any means. He's an addiction specialist, which is appropriate, don't you think? But he's been in the work. We've been working together in group work for helping people tell the truth about what it's like to be alive in the world today, to tell the truth about what they see and feel and know is happening to our world. In that process, they discover huge reservoirs of their own caring and learn to trust that. Really, it's Bodhisattva training, because it involves, as Donald just said, not being afraid of the suffering of our people or of our world. When you're not afraid of that, then nothing can stop you.

Though he's not in Buddhist practice, there are two terms in this book that are in Buddhist Sanskrit. One

was Bodhisattva, simply because we couldn't find a term in English that says it. If you have a term, tell me. You can explain it with a phrase—a person who is animated by a lively caring for all beings, a being who knows that we are so interwoven, interconnected, that there's no private salvation, and that the one with the boundless heart... So we said, well, we're just going to keep it in the book.

The other phrase we kept was what's enshrined in the Bodhisattva's heart-mind, which is an intention, an impulse for taking part in the healing of our world, for being in service for all beings. There isn't a word for that either in English. So that word *bodhicitta* becomes more and more powerful for us, certainly for me, in being alive in this time and also as we look together at what helps us.

Let me scroll back thirty-six years to a turning point in my life. I walked into the Boston Coliseum with my second son, who was a freshman in college, and my daughter, who was still in high school. We were going to a Cousteau Society Day. How many of you remember Jacques-Yves Cousteau? I walked in and heard Cousteau say, "We have, in another thirty years, the plankton in our oceans will be insufficient to provide sufficient oxygen for us."

Somehow—you never know, I could have been looking at what my daughter was wearing or thinking about something else—but that just landed. He only said it once, and it just went right through me.

And it opened me up to a vast anguish of uncertainty. I took Cousteau at his word—he was an oceanographer who had sailed the oceans for decades, one of my heroes. We wouldn't have sufficient oxygen, he said. And now we know we have lost 40% of the plankton we had when he made that statement. I felt as if I'd lost some ground to stand on.

That phrase—"no ground to stand on"—was almost word for word what I was encountering in my studies. I had gone back to school in my forties and was studying the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, the Prajnaparamita, which first describe the Bodhisattva. I was deeply interested in the descriptions and metaphors because, without needing to explain it to myself, I needed to understand this human capacity.

This was the dawn of the Mahayana, some 500 years after the Buddha's life, when his central teaching of our interdependence had circled around to be perceived with extraordinary power. People realized through meditation and every aspect of Buddhist study and practice that the Bodhisattva was not merely the Buddha's earlier lives, as had been understood before. As practitioners went deeper into the teaching of interdependence—even more than interdependence, inter-existence—they recognized that the Bodhisattva is the one in us that knows there is no private salvation, that we are inextricably part of each other and of Earth, part of this world.

These scriptures made a clarion call: "Wait a minute! We're all bodhisattvas. How can we say we're interdependent, interconnected, and claim it's only the Buddha and his early lives? We're all bodhisattvas."

Among the many descriptors of the bodhisattva, one stood out: the bodhisattva has no place to stand.

That's what came to me immediately when I heard about the plankton, when I confronted the incredible uncertainty we're facing as a result of what we have been doing in our culture, our technology, our political economy.

Since then, I have been turning to the bodhisattva teachings to understand how you can be okay and hang in there—hang out deeply, as Malcolm said—when you don't have sure ground, when the situation we're in is so uncertain.

One way the bodhisattva functions without solid ground is by flying. And you fly on two wings. You know what they are: compassion and wisdom. You fly in the deep space of wisdom—a wisdom of our interbeing known as the perfection of wisdom, the mother of all Buddhas.

That Cousteau Day changed my life. After hearing about the plankton, I went to different booths and panels addressing every stress point on our planet. This was 1977, thirty-six years ago. Whether it was oil spills, nuclear weapons, nuclear power, deforestation—climate change wasn't yet prominent in public discourse—the total effect after that word about plankton was to feel in my body-mind that maybe we might not make it.

Not that we were doomed. I wasn't convinced we were doomed. But simply realizing that we might not make it was enough to completely change the frame and feel of the ground under me and to transform my sense of life's purpose.

I could see that our people faced—and what became my chief preoccupation—nuclear radioactive materials from both nuclear power and weapons production, along with an awful lot of other terrifying news. The big question became: how to be open to this, how to be with what we're learning and not go crazy.

This surfaced directly in the book I brought out last year: how to be with what we're doing to the world, how to be fully present to it without panic or paralysis.

I began to see the path we would walk—the Bodhisattva path—as a road with two ditches. On one side, panic and social hysteria; on the other, paralysis. Both are grounded in fear, are they not?

And so how to be with, not caught in fear, is to me the defining journey of my life since then. What I've written and the work I've done, and the help that the Buddha Dharma and the Bodhisattva Yana has been, is how do we be present to a situation in a beloved world that might be going under and not check out. How can we bring our full presence?

Because certainly, you know, in your own life, if your mother or your spouse or your lover or a dear person—your sister, your brother—were there with a terminal disease, you're not going to walk out the door. You're going to be right there. I want us to be with our world with that kind of presence, and I know that we're capable—just absolutely know that we're capable of that. And it became clear to me that this

presence, full presence of heart and mind, is the biggest gift we can give our world.

But there was a point right after that plankton moment in my life, after that realization that we might not make it, that there wasn't a ground to stand on, when I really went into despair. I didn't want to tell my family how I felt because I didn't want them to worry about me. I loved them too much. And I didn't tell my friends because I didn't want them to try to cheer me up. That was the last thing I needed—like Job's comforters. I wanted to be with it. But then it was hard to sustain.

So what I did was—God bless whoever did it, maybe it was you, but somebody inside my head told me—get out there and you've got to work with other people. So I joined a team under Ralph Nader's critical mass movement. I got busy in a legal intervention, a kind of lawsuit against the Virginia Electric Power Company.

And boy, that was amazing. These young people were twenty years younger than I was. They were law students. They were sharp. They were full of zest, and they were like ten times smarter than I was, so they wanted to keep me busy. They thought I was very dear, and they sent me to work looking up the health effects around nuclear power plants.

I went into the library of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission—this was before the national security state; under Obama you could do things like that—and I learned a lot. I remember going back to them and saying, "Oh, what I'm learning! I'm learning about miscarriages and tumors and stillbirths and birth deformities. The closer you get to a reactor—it doesn't need to have an accident." And I said, "Oh boy, when we tell people that and we tell the judge, it'll be over for the nuclear power industry."

They looked at me and said, "Uh-huh, yeah, Joanna."

But at any rate, I grew up a lot on that. And what I learned was more important. By the way, we lost. We lost the lawsuit. And it still was one of the most valuable things of my life because I realized the utter joy of working with a group of people whom you automatically love and admire because you're pouring it out and doing something for the larger web of life. And you respect them so.

Don't you love respecting people? Oh, this is the best thing—admiring them. I love admiring people, and here when you start working on a cause like this.

So lesson number one—or maybe three, maybe I gave you some lessons already—but one is: if you want to do something in the world, don't you dare try to do it alone. This is for working with people. And you find out so much when you link arms with them. And it means going to where you can see the problem. Don't just read about it. Go down and look at it. Look at the fact that it's right there on an earthquake fault, that reactor.

I felt the same thing about the tar sands sometime later. It was beginning to worry me, and I thought, "I've heard about this. I need to see it. How do I see it?" Oh, I just got an invitation to give a talk in Alberta. Oh,

there's Jennifer Berezan—she's from Alberta. So I said, "Jennifer, will you go with me to see the tar sands?" What we did was organize an event in her hometown at the time of her family in Edmonton, and we took the money that we'd earned by our event, and we went up to Fort McMurray, and we hired an airplane, and we flew out over the tar sands.

I saw hundreds of miles of hell—stinking horror with machines three times the size of this house—and we witnessed it with our own eyes. I just knew I had to see it.

That's another lesson. You may be like me and need to be present to your world, to actually see something. What I didn't know was that Jennifer would turn it into art, and she's ready to sing you her song about the tar sands that resulted from this. That's my lesson number five.

"Joanna, I loved what you said about not doing things alone and the kind of joy that comes from being together, even in the most difficult circumstances. Because I remember getting off that airplane—there were five of us on this little plane. We got off, and it was such a mixed feeling of horror and distress and love. To be there, especially with Joanna, and to witness that together and feel the combination of just rage, really, and the love for the land—that very potent combination—and the feeling of connection to the other people that we were on the plane with that I'll never, ever forget my whole life. So this is a song called 'My Memory Forever.'"

[Jennifer performs her song about the tar sands, accompanied by Eveli Posch and Barbara Borden]

Remember when we got to the airport, Jennifer, before we got on the little plane, there was a First Nations woman going upstream to the settlement there on the Athabasca. The water's poisoned, and the air's poisoned. There are these big ponds, and if geese and ducks fly over—if the ducks land, they're dead. So these big corporations, Suncor and others—it's American money, American corporations up there—they put cannons by them. *Boom!* They shoot the cannons so that the wildfowl in migration don't land.

Now the Native people—and it's wonderful to see them moving—what they can teach us. Among the things they can teach us is how to mourn. We don't have in our culture funerals for our brother-sister species that are just tipping into extinction, that don't have enough habitat left to survive another generation or two. We have no ways, but we need to develop them. Let's do that here at Spirit Rock, so that we can water our souls in being able to be fully present. Just as you greet the beauty of a child and the wonders or gifts of life, so too can we be washed by those tears. I think Malcolm mentioned that, didn't he, about what tears can do to you.

So this is what climate change can do to you—or for you. Last week there was a conference in the Bay Area on renewable energy, and there was the mayor of a town in Kansas, Greensburg—Bob Dixon. His whole town was wiped out by a tornado. He was telling how the town is completely rebuilt, one hundred percent renewable. He said, "We took the wind that destroyed our town and turned it and built it up to restore our town." This is almost like a tantric flip, isn't it? It's just wonderful.

So we're asked to be inventive like that. We're asked to go totally beyond what we think is going to show us off as a really canny activist. And how not to even try to compute your chances of success.

I brought along my favorite quote from Paul Williams for when feelings of personal futility come over me. He said, "How dare I be discouraged by anything so trivial as fear of personal failure?" Because what you're doing is letting a much larger purpose move through you. That's what uncertainty can do for you. It can acquaint you with this bodhicitta, with the intention of the bodhisattva.

And you can feel it, I've discovered, all the more powerfully because of the uncertainty. Because there's no one—no one can tell us whether we're going to pull through or not. And if they try to, don't believe them. Because it's the not knowing that sharpens our presence and makes us alert, makes us be there, opens us up to the courage and risk-taking that can reveal our true nature.

So you can't count on anything out there. The one thing you can count on is your own caring, your own yearning, because you really give a shit. That you can count on. That's one way to translate bodhicitta.

This is from a climate scientist telling us what we will learn to do in this time, even if we survive, because of the changes already in store for us—the huge changes that climate change will inevitably bring. We might pull through it, but there's going to be very hard slogging.

And so this scientist, Suzanne Mosier, writes: "What then is asked of someone who chooses to be of service in this time? I think it's to be a steward, a shepherd, an arbiter, a crisis manager, a grief counselor, a future builder. You must be capable of helping people face new, more difficult, more pervasive challenges than ever before."

This person—that's you—must be capable of holding that which is happening to and in our world. We will need to mentor, guide, and assist people in processing enormous losses, human distress, constant crises, and seemingly endless need to maintain, restore, and rebuild.

This is made to order. Are we up to it at this point of our evolution to blossom into capacities of wisdom, moral strength? You know you have it in you. You know we're capable of that. We just have to be honest with ourselves. We have so much going for us.

That wasn't a bodhisattva scholar writing that.

What has made the biggest difference for me is expanding my temporal context and working with other people—the time span, the timescape that we're living in, beyond our separate lifetimes. Because the causes of climate change are so far beyond what we brought about, so far beyond our personal culpability. Come on, that could just shut us down. How can I feel responsible for that? How can you?

If you look to the causes and then if you look to the consequences—oh my word—how can one claim to be responsible for something so vast? So what do you do with your own sense of agency and responsibility? You have this life in which to act with your hands, mind, mouth, heart, brain. But you also need, it seems

to me, grounding in something so much wider than your lifetime. Because our karma now—the consequences of our actions—extends into geological time spans.

So we can learn what the bodhisattva in Buddhist literature, and particularly in that wonderful school of Mahayana Buddhism conveyed in the Flower Garland Sutra and the Avatamsaka, understands: that on the one hand we are just in this moment, faced with this situation, but on the other hand we've been here since the beginning of time.

Look at your hand. That hand—really, well, look at it. The hand that we can act with now to reach out, to grasp, to lead, to comfort, to guide. Every atom and every molecule and every cell of that hand, of that body, goes back to the first splitting and spinning of the galaxies.

And as one of my teachers, radiologist Sister Rosalie Bertel, says: every being who will ever live in the future is here now. Where? In our ovaries and in our gonads and in our DNA. And the decisions that we make now, pertaining to our policies and how we live in our civilization, will have everything to do with whether future beings a thousand generations from now will be able to be born sound of mind and body.

So they're here, the future ones. And the ancestors are here. They're wanting to help us, but they only have our bodies to work through.

The Avatamsaka Sutra says the bodhisattva knows that there's one body—this body here—but also all the bodies of all the beings. You're working with both. It's as if all of creation, all of that exquisitely interconnected web of life, holds time as well as space.

And I'm imagining that as we face climate change—the causes so distant and the consequences so vast—we are up for a transformation in how we experience space-time.

And to just give you a clue to that, I would like to end with your listening to what's called the Ten Enterings of the Bodhisattva from the Avatamsaka Sutra. I will read it first, and then you'll hear it sung by an anti-nuclear sister of mine.

How does the Bodhisattva—that's you, that's me—how do we perform the ten universal enterings? What are they?

They are to bring all the universes into one hair, and one hair into all the universes. You will see that this is a holographic vision of reality. There are many thinkers in this time—Stan Grof, David Bohm, Karl Pribram, systems theorists—and there you see in science the showing that the whole is in the part. We know about the part being in the whole, but the whole story is also within each part.

To bring all sentient beings' bodies into one body and one body into all sentient beings' bodies. With the radioactivity from Fukushima that is here on the West Coast now and has been for two years, what's happening to the children in Tohoku and northern Japan isn't just there. It's here. It's as if we're in all bodies. Do you follow me? This transformation of our relation to space-time where we are in this moment

and at the same time, by this extraordinary development of our karma, we are in intimate interconnection with all that is.

When a Bodhisattva attains the ten wisdoms, she can then perform the ten universal enterings. What are they?

To bring all the universes into one hair, and one hair into all the universes.

To bring all sentient beings' bodies into one body, and one body into all sentient beings' bodies.

To bring inconceivable kalpas into one moment and one moment into inconceivable kalpas.

To bring all the Buddha's dharmas into one dharma and one dharma into all the Buddha's dharmas.

To bring an inconceivable number of places into one place and one place into an inconceivable number of places.

To bring an inconceivable number of organs into one organ and one organ into an inconceivable number of organs.

To make all thoughts into one thought and one thought into all thoughts.

To bring all voices and languages into one voice and language and one voice and language into all voices and languages.

To make all the three times into one time and one time into all the three times.

This is the supreme samadhi.

Thank you for listening.

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