

Bodhisattva Training: *Walking the Path of the Precepts*

The aim of Zen is simple and profound: to alleviate suffering by waking up to who we really are. Zen is a living tradition, passed warm heart to warm heart, from teacher to student, over three continents and thousands of years.

At the heart of Zen is the Bodhisattva. The term *bodhi* (enlightening) *sattva* (being) is often mistranslated as an “enlightened being.” But this translation misses the point. Bodhisattvas are beings who specifically forgo their own, personal enlightenment to stay in the world and work for the benefit of others. Bodhisattvas are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. They are devoted to doing whatever it takes to ease the difficulties and confusion in human life.

Bodhisattvas are onto our deep connectedness. They are awake enough to realize that we are all in this together. They know that no one can wake up and be free until everyone wakes up and is free. Bodhisattvas are committed to finding ways to interact with beings that inspire awareness, reduce conflict and reveal the liberating truth of our interdependence and shared humanity.

The secret of Bodhisattva training is this: it’s impossible. Taking Bodhisattva vows is a set up. Aspiring Bodhisattvas declare: “*Beings are numberless. I vow to save them.*” The unrealistic, unreasonableness of this task announces itself right from the start. It’s clear from the get go there is no way we can ever complete or accomplish it.

Yet when we allow ourselves to feel how much we care, and let our longing lead us—regardless of the impossibility of outward success—something happens. Something wakes up in us. In a world brimming with tips and techniques on how to be more efficient and productive, intentionally vowing to do something unattainable is a radical act. Instantly, we enter a world based on values our minds can’t make sense of, but that make our hearts sing.

The precepts are ethical principles and guidelines for walking the Bodhisattva path—offering an architecture for training us in how to be fully human. The Chinese character for “person” is a stick

figure, literally portraying the human predicament of stretching between heaven and earth. Navigating the precepts—not killing, not lying, not stealing, not misusing sexuality or intoxicants—our proud and luminous aspirations bump smack up against our earthy, corporeal nature.

The first precept states: *do not to kill*. Not to kill is to revere all life. It is knowing that, in the entire universe, there is nowhere to spit, that all ground is hallowed ground. At the same time, we are animals. Our biology demands that to stay alive we must consume and digest. So how is it possible not to kill? This precept, like each of the others, generously invites us to enter and investigate the strange, perplexing dilemma of birth and death, connection and separation.

The Indian sage, Nagarjuna, is reputed to have rescued the great non-dual teachings on emptiness from under the sea. Nagarjuna introduced the teaching of the Two Truths. There are two coexistent planes of reality, he said. There is the truth that we are absolutely, inextricably not separate, and the truth that—in our day to day experience—we seem to be.

The rub is that both Truths are equally true. Like two sides of a coin, each one needs and completes the other. Without ultimate, non-dual reality, our lives become shallow and meaningless. But without the relative, dualistic experience of our seeming separateness, we can never realize the sublime truth of our deep connectedness.

Buddhism posits that our felt sense of separation is the ultimate source of suffering. It's the wound at the center wanting to be healed, the rent in the fabric, reaching toward wholeness. We long to return to the organic ooze of merged, infantile oneness. But we cannot go back. Walking the Bodhisattva path means faithfully stepping forward into the evolutionary unknown toward something we can't yet know or see, but that we yearn for.

We live on a round planet. We can drill down or soar up, but we can't escape our interdependence. I eat bananas from Equador, drink water from a mug made in China, cut my nails with clippers from Pakistan. When I flush, though I may not see or smell it, my waste goes somewhere—into the pipes, the sewer, the sea—and

shows up transformed, lapping the shores of some beach I've never heard of.

Scanning the evening news, I watch an Afghani correspondent on CNN, wrapped in her winter coat, wool hat and earphones. Each time the anchorman sitting in the temperature-controlled newsroom in New York fires a question, there is a gap before she responds. As we wait together in the pause, her face, like mine, is blank, open, and vulnerable. Each time this happens, I worry: maybe the communication lines are down. Then the question registers in her face, and she responds.

The gap is a sharp reminder that while I sit in my living room in San Francisco, curled on the couch with fuzzy slippers and a comforter, the correspondent is many continents and time zones away. At the same time, we—the correspondent, the news anchor, and me—are not separate. The news of civilian casualties, of suicide bombers strapping on explosives and blowing themselves away, of food drops and the threat of incoming dust storms, lodges directly in the one body we share. Even after I switch off the news, my cytoplasm reverberates with the impact of violence and grief.

As Bodhisattvas in training, walking the path of the precepts asks us to step into life with both wide-open curiosity and picayune attention to detail. Studying the precepts reveals that the ultimate truth of our joined-at-the-hip, shared humanity does not exist in idea or abstraction. It exists in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives and interactions. The ultimate meaning of the precept *not to kill* unfolds in the quality of care and attention we bring to ourselves, to each other, and to all of life. It is the heart that blooms forth when we catch a spider in a glass, cover it with cardboard and scurry to the door—watching as it scrambles with its strangely jointed limbs out of the door, into the night.